

How to write a short “minimalist” dialogue with cultural flavour

A simple recipe for ESOL-teachers

This activity helps you create **very short, playful dialogues** in which the situation, emotions, and cultural behaviour emerge from what is said and not said. It is inspired by the observation that many English learners find it **intriguing and enjoyable** to experiment with:

- very **short lines**
- very **short English words** (e.g. *bit, hit, cold, sharp, late, now, right*)
- sound formation, making sounds that may feel **unusual, daring, exploratory**

Note on origins:

The idea of using very short, elliptical dialogues in the language classroom is inspired by Scott Thornbury’s well-known teaching text “*The Train to Oxford*”, originally designed to illustrate ellipsis. The approach presented here develops this idea further towards embodied speaking, performance, and cultural behaviour.

ESOL-learners generally like playing with sounds. In addition, several European languages (e.g. German, Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian) often produce longer word forms than English, through compounding or inflected word endings. For learners whose first language often uses longer words or longer sentence structures, speaking the dialogue can be a new, physical and

emotional experience. Playing with sound formation, very short words, gesture, and prosody (rhythm, stress, and intonation - *the music of speech*) can make the language feel more immediate and expressive. This embodied experiencing means that language is not only processed in the head but is felt and shaped through the body: through voice, breath, mouth, face, posture, movement, and physical presence. Spontaneous, often unconscious physical responses can shape speech. In this sense, an embodied reaction emerges through the interaction between words, body, and other people. The body is thus continuously responding to language as well as to itself and its environment, and shaping its expression at the same time.

ESOL-teachers can use this guide in two ways:

- to write short dialogues themselves for classroom use
- to guide students to write their own minimalist dialogues

These texts work both as **creative writing** and as **short performance pieces**.

Why this works well for language learning

This kind of writing and acting:

- trains students to **think about context and ellipsis** (leaving out what is obvious)
- encourages students to **search for simple, short, everyday words** in a dictionary
- encourages experimenting with language for **effect & affect** (tone, pause, rhythm)
- shows that very short lexis can be **subtle, funny, and expressive**
- has the potential to be **highly engaging** as students fill in details from the context
- leads to **performance** where gesture, distance, and voice do much of the work
- international students may show different forms of **prosody and body language**

Because the situation is open to interpretation, students will play the same text in different ways. This is ideal for discussion and reflection. It also allows the audience to intervene and suggest changes to the performance, or step in and try it out themselves (in the spirit of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre).

Stage 1: Pre-writing / Brainstorming

1) Choose one everyday situation (and place)

Pick something ordinary that shows typical cultural behaviour, for example:

- waiting in a queue
- talking to a stranger
- feelings of social discomfort such as being uncomfortable, embarrassed, or tense
- being in a shop, at a bus stop, in a café, in a shared kitchen
- small talk about something trivial like talking about the weather

Also decide:

- **where** does it happen?
- **who** is the character with?
- **when?** (morning, evening, late, rush hour, etc.)
- **what are the conditions?** (noise, stress, hurry, embarrassment, etc., not just weather)
- **what is a character doing right now?** (waiting, leaving, arriving, cleaning up, deciding something, etc.)

2) Decide what the characters are coping with (and a small “conflict”)

Choose:

- what they are **feeling or enduring**, for example: *waiting impatiently for something, feeling embarrassed about a small mistake, trying to hide awkwardness by smiling, or wanting to leave but staying out of politeness*
- what is a **tiny conflict or tension?**
(stay or go, speak or stay silent, be polite or be honest, endure or escape, etc.)

The dialogue should **show this, not explain it.**

Stage 2: Writing

3) Write only 1–2 words per line (3 words max.)

Force yourself to cut.

Instead of: *“My hands are very cold”* → write: *“Hands?”*

The interest comes from what is missing.

4) Use only simple, everyday words

Use words your learners already know: *late, now, cold, inside, tea, wait, sorry, right, always.*

Tip: let learners research perhaps infrequent or unusual sounding short English lexis like:

dud, git, kip, nag, nap, grit, fuss, and ta.

5) Let the situation appear bit by bit

Do not explain where they are or what they are doing.

Let the reader or audience **reconstruct the scene** from small clues.

6) Let the circumstances bring out the behaviour

Think in simple cause → response terms: the *situation* creates a *pressure*, and the characters respond to it in a culturally typical or human way. For example:

- awkwardness → politeness
- embarrassment → understatement
- waiting → small talk
- discomfort → humour or avoidance

Stage 3: Post-writing

7) Read the dialogue aloud and cut more

Shorten lines. Remove words. Make the rhythm quicker and sharper.

Listen to how it **sounds and feels** in the mouth. Where do the tongue, lips, and breath have to work? Where does a line feel heavy or light, fast or slow. Let the body help you edit the text.

8) Check: can it be played in many ways?

A good minimalist dialogue should allow different:

- moods
- gestures
- distances between speakers
- degrees of politeness, warmth, irony, or tension

Using these texts in class

- students must **imagine the situation and fill in the gaps**.
- students naturally start to explore **voice, pause, rhythm, space, and gesture**.
- the same text can be played **several times in different ways**.
- the teacher can stop the action at times and ask the actors to hold a **freeze frame (tableau)**. This makes body posture, distance, facial expression, and tension visible and discussable. It helps students become aware of how much meaning is carried not only by words, but through the body, space, and relationships between speakers.
- the class can discuss:
 - what is happening?
 - where the characters are?
 - what kind of relationship the characters have?
 - what feels “cultural” about the characters' behaviour?

Because a minimalist dialogue is **short, simple, and open**:

- it is quick to read
- it can be rich in performance, useful for discussion

The two example dialogues below show how easily the same structure can be reused:

- change the setting (bus stop or ice-cream queue)
- change the circumstances (“cold”, “late”, “sun”, “melting”)
- change the characters' needs and desires (“café?”, “worth it”)

Try it yourself!

Short minimalist dialogues:

Waiting

A: Long.

B: Always.

A: Cold.

B: Freezing.

A: Bus?

B: Late.

A: Typical.

B: Mm.

A: Café?

B: Warm.

A: Queue...

B: Or coffee.

A: Five minutes?

B: You decide.

Alternative beach / heat / ice-cream version with changed setting and character needs:

Ice Cream

A: Long.

B: Always.

A: Hot.

B: Melting.

A: Sun.

B: Brutal.

A: Queue?

B: Worth it.

A: Flavours...

B: Any.

A: Hurry.

B: Nearly.

A: Mine first?

B: You're dreaming.

A worked example: from idea to finished dialogue (step by step)

This short walk-through shows how a minimalist dialogue can be created using the method above.

Step 1 – Choose the situation and place

Situation: Two people are **waiting in a queue for a bus**.

Place: A bus stop.

Conditions: It is **cold** and uncomfortable.

What's happening right now? They are waiting, the bus is late.

This is a very ordinary situation, but one that often produces **small talk, understatement, and polite coping behaviour**.

Step 2 – Decide what they are coping with (and the small conflict)

- They are **cold** and **impatient**.
- Small conflict: **keep waiting** or **escape somewhere warm**.

So the tension is not dramatic, just very everyday: *endure or leave*.

Step 3 – Start writing with very short lines

Now write using only **1–2 words per line**, with **simple everyday words**, and **no explanations**:

A: Long.

B: Always.

A: Cold.

B: Freezing.

A: Bus?

B: Late.

At this point:

- “Long”, “Bus?”, “Late” already suggest **waiting**.
- “Cold”, “Freezing” suggest the **conditions**.
- Nothing has been explained directly.

Step 4 – Let the situation and behaviour emerge

Now let the **cause** → **response** logic do the work:

- waiting → small talk
- discomfort → understatement / coping
- cold → desire for warmth

So the dialogue can grow like this:

A: Typical.

B: Mm.

A: Café?

B: Warm. Now a **possible escape** has appeared, without being explained.

Step 5 – Keep cutting and sharpening

Add a few more lines, then **read it aloud and cut** anything unnecessary:

A: Queue...

B: Or coffee.

A: Five minutes?

B: You decide.

At this point:

- The **whole situation is clear**, but never stated.
- The **relationship** (polite, undecided, slightly resigned) comes through the tone.
- The text is **short, open, and playable in many ways**.

Step 6 – The finished version

Waiting

A: Long.

B: Always.

A: Cold.

B: Freezing.

A: Bus?

B: Late.

A: Typical.

B: Mm.

A: Café?

B: Warm.

A: Queue...

B: Or coffee.

A: Five minutes?

B: You decide.

Step 7 – Final tips for the classroom

- Different students will **play this differently**: more humorous, more irritated, more tired, more polite.
- You can stop the action and use **freeze frames (tableaux)** to look at posture, distance, and facial expression.
- The class can discuss:
 - What's happening?
 - Where are they?
 - What kind of relationship do the characters have?
 - What cultural behaviours do the actors give away (un)intentionally?

The examples show how a very simple method (short lines, simple words, no explanation) can produce a text that is **rich in performance, interpretation, and discussion**.