Engaging students in language learning

• **At the beginning of each new unit of work**, tell the students what they will be learning and what they will be able to know and do at the end of it.

• **At the beginning of each lesson**, tell them what they’ll be doing that day and what you hope to achieve.

• **During each lesson**
  - Try to do most activities in a variety of ways, groups, pairs, at desks, in a learning circle
  - Use the circle for listening, speaking and responding activities – teacher(s) sit in the circle too.
  - Keep desks for getting started, writing, settling, consolidation, word games with cards.
  - Games should be seen as fun ways of learning, not competitions. No-one gets ‘out’.

• **Establish a routine** that includes activities students enjoy and that gets them moving, to break up the lesson and as a reward. For example,
  1. Start each lesson moving around the class distributing their name cards, greeting them in language. Call the roll.
  2. Write on the board very simply what will be done in the lesson, eg practise greetings, finish greeting dialogue, revising body parts.
  3. Break each lesson into an ‘at desk’ activity, a circle activity or game, a consolidation activity, oral or written.
    - 20 minutes is about the longest an activity should last; for some, the maximum should be 15 minutes
    - the game can come last if it’s seen as a reward.

• **When the students are organising, they should know what they’re doing**
Have an organisational pattern for the students to follow. So, for example, if they know in each lesson they are going into the circle format once the desk work is done and then back to their desks, have recognised signals and routine positions to which each student moves his/her desk, and for setting up the chair circle.

**Talking circle**
The circle is a great way to encourage students to participate, to focus on particular students, to keep unruly students in check, to ‘engineer’ who is asked questions first to support weaker students, to ‘use’ brighter/more advanced students, and to focus on spoken language. And everyone, including the teacher, is a participant.

In the circle the students can work in pairs and small groups, still under the teacher’s eye.

**Examples of circle activities**
1. **To learn new words and get the stress right**
   - As a group, the students repeat the new word after the teacher, hitting their fist in their palm or clapping on the stress point.
   - One by one, around the circle, students repeat the word.
2 ‘Fruit salad’ or ‘Salad bowl’ game

The students sit in a circle, with one in the middle. Each student is given a word from a small selection of words. For example, using four fruit words for 20 students will mean that each fruit will be ‘owned’ by five students.

The student in the middle says one of the words and those who ‘own’ that word must get up and change seats. They can’t take either seat next to them. The student in the middle also competes for one of the vacated seats in the circle. Therefore, one student will miss out on a set in the circle and must take the one in the middle. He or she then calls out another word from the selection. It must be different from the preceding word. The teacher participates and students must ‘walk not run’. Keep going until everyone has had one or two goes in the middle.

Initially, students have cards with the word on them, and then picture cards. The words can be fruit, animals, verbs, adjectives etc. In this way, students learn new words and practise pronunciation.

The game is also a fun way of practising sentence structures. In this case, the student in the middle has to use whole sentences; for example, ‘Who has a sore foot?’ All students with a foot picture (or bandaged foot) have to change seats.

3 Throw the ball

The teacher says a word, and throws ball to a student who repeats it, and then throws the ball back to the teacher, who throws it to another student with another word. Or students throw the ball to each other, asking a question as they throw, and giving an answer when they catch it.

4 Class discussions

The circle format facilitates these.

5 ‘Musical’ chairs

Cards with pictures, words, sounds, sentences are passed around the circle. When the music (can be teacher clapping, singing, banging something) stops, the student with the card has to say the word, or answer the question, ask the question, do the action etc.

5 Team games

Students in a team go to the blackboard, and each member of the team picks up one or more cards with a word (or syllable or phrase, etc) written on each. The team then puts the cards together to make sentences or stories.

6 Jigsaw puzzles

- For prewriting and copy writing
- Picture jigsaws, eg body parts.

Interactive whiteboard-based activities also engage students and provide a central focus, and also allow them to participate actively in creating and using resources.