

Meetings (4): Brainstorming and evaluating

Topic: Brainstorming and evaluating at meetings

Aims:

- To discuss the advantages and disadvantages of brainstorming as a technique for generating ideas;
- To teach some useful phrases for making suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing;
- To provide practice and feedback of the situations of brainstorming and evaluating ideas.

Level: Intermediate (B2) and above

Introduction

Since its development in the 1950s, brainstorming has become one of the most common techniques used in meetings to generate ideas. However, despite its clear benefits, the technique has its faults and many improvements have been suggested and analysed. This lesson aims to provide practice of brainstorming at the same time as exploring possible improvements. The second half of the lesson focuses on the necessary follow-up to brainstorming: evaluating ideas. This means the lesson covers two of the key language functions of meetings: making suggestions and agreeing/disagreeing.

1. Lead-in

Write the following questions on the board. Students discuss the questions in pairs and then share their ideas with the class.

- Have you ever taken part in a brainstorming meeting?
- How does brainstorming work? What are the rules?
- When is brainstorming most effective? When would it be the wrong technique to use?
- Are there any problems with brainstorming as a technique?

Suggested answers

- See Reading.
- It is most effective when there is a single, specific problem to solve, and creative thinking is required. It would be less effective when there are many problems to solve. It would be inappropriate when simple decisions are needed: there is a time to come up with creative ideas, and there is a time to stop creating and start deciding and implementing.
- See Reading. See also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brainstorming>.

2. Reading

Students discuss the ten phrases in pairs. You could also discuss the phrases with the class, to make sure they fully understand all the words (e.g. *apprehension*, *an illusion*, *a contribution*, *to withhold sth*) but be careful to avoid confirming or rejecting students' ideas until after they have read the text.

Students then read the text to write the phrases in the gaps. They compare answers in pairs before feeding back to the class. Use this opportunity to check for vocabulary problems with the text (e.g. *to prevent sb from doing sth*, *to challenge sth*, *an assumption*, *to work in practice*, *to bother to do sth*, *selfish*, *praise*, *demotivating*, *sensible*, *to encourage sth*, *to contribute*, *to judge sth*, *to avoid doing sth*, *judgement*, *a facial expression*, *slight*, *to express an idea*, *to get distracted*, *to meet objectives*, *random*, *concrete criteria*, *to assess sth*).

Finally, students cover the text and discuss what they remember about the ten phrases. After a few minutes, open up the discussion to include the whole class.

Answers

1 focus on quantity 2 withhold criticism 3 welcome unusual ideas 4 combine and improve ideas 5 free rider problem 6 social matching effect 7 personal contribution 8 evaluation apprehension 9 blocking 10 illusion of group productivity

3. Useful phrases for making suggestions

Students work through the first two tasks in pairs. Go through the answers with the class before students try task 3 alone. Monitor carefully while students are writing, but don't ask them to read their sentences aloud at this stage. If they are struggling, encourage students to think of one solution to each of the problems identified in the reading text, or simply to suggest breaking one of the rules of brainstorming.

Suggested answers

1.

- Very unusual ideas: This might sound crazy, but ...; Just thinking aloud for a moment, but ...; It probably wouldn't work in practice, but ...; I haven't thought this through yet, but ...; In an ideal world, ...
- Relating ideas to previous suggestions: You've just reminded me of something.; Just to build on that idea, ...; I wonder if we could combine your idea with something that was said earlier.

2.

- Infinitive: Why don't we ...?; I suppose we could ...; I think we should ...; We could always ...; I don't suppose we could ...; I wonder if it would be possible to ...; It might be possible to ...; Could we ...?
- *-ing* form: How about ...?
- Past tense: Wouldn't it be nice if we ...; What if we ...?
- More confident: Why don't we ...?; I suppose we could ...; I think we should ...; How about ...?; We could always ...; Could we ...?
- Less confident: I don't suppose we could ...; Wouldn't it be nice if we ...; What if we ...?; I wonder if it would be possible to ...; It might be possible to ...

4. Practice

Ideally, the brainstorming session should take place with the whole class, but if you have a very large class, you may decide to split into groups of 6–8.

Make sure everyone understands the instructions, and encourage them to use the language from the worksheet when presenting their ideas. Try to avoid setting up the brainstorming sessions too carefully: by now, students should know that they will need a facilitator to run the session and a scribe to write down ideas, so hopefully they will organise themselves. They may even find a better way of organising themselves.

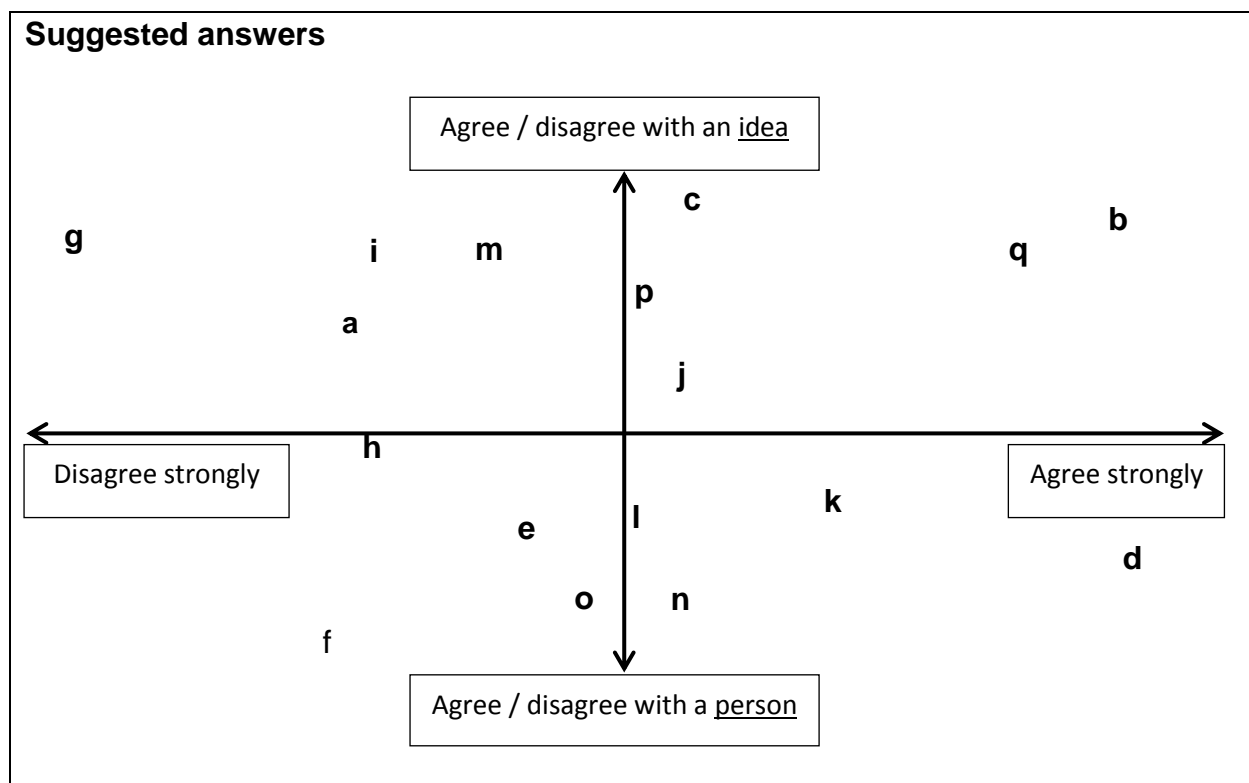
Monitor carefully, and give and elicit feedback at the end on the effectiveness of the language and techniques from this lesson.

At the end, make sure all the ideas are recorded somewhere visible, as these will be necessary for the next stage of the lesson.

5. Useful phrases for evaluating ideas

Go through the instructions with the class. Point out that the vertical and horizontal axes are intended to show that there are no absolute answers: some answers may be on the borderline between two possibilities.

Students work in pairs to complete the graph. Make a copy of the graph on the board, and elicit the best position for each phrase at the end.



6. Practice (1)

Students work in the same groups as before to work through the list of ideas they generated in the brainstorming session. Make sure they use the 'ideas' phrases to go through the list, and the 'people' phrases to respond to other people's comments.

Monitor carefully, and be ready to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the techniques and language from this lesson.

7. Practice (2)

Students work in groups of 4–6 students. They choose one of the problems (or use their own idea) and spend ten minutes brainstorming and ten minutes evaluating their ideas. At the end, they present their best ideas to the class.

Monitor carefully, paying particular attention to the techniques and language from this lesson. At the end, give and elicit feedback.