

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AND LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

FILLING THE SOFT SKILLS GAP

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ABSTRACT

Soft skills, the interpersonal skills that demonstrate the ability to work with others, are essential for job attainment and advancement. However, as noted in current research and as echoed by employers, a significant soft skills gap exists in communication (oral and written), teamwork, and critical thinking that can prevent workers from advancing on the job. How can adult education professionals help students bridge this soft skills gap? Detailed in this article are teaching strategies and activities that can be used in both face-to-face and online adult education classes to develop the soft skills of communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. These skills can be taught in the context of any lesson; they do not need to be contextualized in workplace-related lessons. By integrating these instructional practices in the curriculum, adult education professionals can help adult students acquire the transferable skills essential to thriving in the workplace and moving forward in educational and community environments.

Keywords: soft skills gap, communication, teamwork, critical thinking

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Soft skills, also called *people skills*, *interpersonal skills*, *transferable skills*, *workplace readiness skills*, and *employability skills*, are necessary for success at all employment levels and in all sectors of the labor market. Employability frameworks and current research conclude that oral and written communication, teamwork, and critical thinking are some of the soft skills essential for workers to succeed and thrive in the workplace.

Employability frameworks, such as the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (1991), Framework for 21st Century Learning (Partnership for the 21st Century, 2000), Employability Skills Framework (Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, 2013), and SkillsUSA (2019), identify soft skills as necessary for success in today's world. In the past decade, there has been renewed interest in integrating these workplace readiness skills in adult education programs as a result of legislation—specifically, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (2014), augmented by the rigor of the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS) (Pimental, 2013).

Recent research (Berger, 2016; Hart, 2017; Hellman et al., 2019; Reimagine Education, 2017; Wonderlic, 2016) shows that although there are gaps in both hard (technical) skills required for a job and soft skills in the workplace, gaps in soft skills are more prevalent and the most problematic for workers trying to succeed and advance in a job. In a 2017 Reimagine Education report, *The Global Skills Gap: Student Misperceptions and Institutional Solutions*, the authors noted that a “review of multiple sources has allowed us to identify patterns in the most valued and most sought-after skills wanted by hiring managers. The results vary from survey to survey, but the general message is clear: employers value communication skills, critical-thinking capabilities, and teamwork-related skills” (p. 4). This report goes on to explain that although core subject skills are taught in higher education, “these softer skills are found to be lacking” (p. 4). In fact, according to Indeed.com (2020), “employers may prefer to select candidates who have a stronger set of soft skills over hard skills, as soft skills are at times more difficult to develop” (p. 3).

Two studies illustrate the importance of soft skills in job attainment and job advancement. In *Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways*, a brief that describes program models designed to strengthen the alignment of adult education, employment, and skills training, Heide Wrigley writes that basic skills and technical knowledge may not be enough for employees in today’s world: “Employers have also consistently stressed the need for soft skills—skills often used in team participation, problem solving, and decision making” (Wrigley, 2015, p. 3). In *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work*, two parallel national surveys of business executives and hiring managers found that although college students entering the workforce were prepared for entry-level jobs, many did not have the soft skills necessary for job advancement (Hart Research Associates, 2018).

In the context of adult education, Hellman et al. (2019) in *The Six Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners: Adult Education and Workforce Development*, cite Wonderlic (2016) in identifying verbal and written communication; critical-thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and teamwork skills; and professional manners as the top-rated soft skills managers seek in employees, remarking that these soft skills are “suitable instructional targets for adult English language classes” (p. 2). Parrish and Johnson (2010) cite research from a National Center on Education and Economy (2009) report, which argues that adult education programs should promote postsecondary and workplace readiness for all learners. They write that, “the skills that learners need in order to transition successfully to higher levels of education or employment should be integrated into every level of instruction, including ESL classes that are focused primarily on language instruction” (p. 1). In the same article, Parrish and Johnson, building on research from Kaspar and Weiss (2005), identify critical thinking as an important set of skills to be taught, skills that allow a user to understand, evaluate, and take informed action.

This article focuses on the most important soft skills needed for workplace success as identified in current research and echoed by employers across the U.S.: communication (both oral and written), teamwork, and critical-thinking skills, and examines the existing soft skills gap in these areas. Listed below are instructional practices that can be used in adult education classes to develop these soft skills that employers have stated future employees will require

to succeed and advance on the job. These soft skills can be taught in the context of any lesson; they do not need to be contextualized in workplace-related lessons. They can be integrated and practiced in both face-to-face and online classrooms and transferred to the workplace, other classes, or everyday life. While the activities described are applicable to a variety of adult education students, some are more specific to adult English language learners (ELLs).

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Part I: Communication: Oral and Written

Oral Communication

One of the most highly valued soft skills (cited as deficient by employers) is oral communication. On the job, employees are expected to make small talk, clarify oral instructions from a boss, and communicate with coworkers about workplace procedures. Students at all levels can practice oral communication if provided with classroom opportunities. The following oral communication activities can be taught in the classroom. The skills developed in these classroom activities can be transferred to the workplace.

- **Conversation cards:** In face-to-face classes, students are given conversation question cards that reinforce the content or grammar of lessons they are studying in class. Students mingle with each other to get answers from classmates. They are encouraged to not show their cards to classmates, which forces them to actively listen to each other, rather than read. Conversation cards can be used to promote meaningful, interactive communication. For example, *What are your skills?* (see Table 1). This activity is one way for students to practice oral communication, one of the essential soft skills required at work. To practice with conversation cards online, students ask and answer the questions together in a chain drill or ask each other the same questions in breakout rooms.
- **Student interview:** Students interview each other to find someone who can give an affirmative answer to a question about a lesson-related topic. This activity is another way for students to enhance the oral communication skills they may need to use at work. For example, *Did you organize things at work? Did you clean things at work?* The activity reinforces the content and grammar of the lesson studied and builds a social network. As with conversation cards online, students ask and answer the questions together in a chain drill or ask each other the same questions in breakout rooms (see Table 2).
- **Useful language phrases:** Students practice using useful language phrases for different functions. For example, after a short conversation in class or on the job, students use phrases for leave-taking, such as, *It was nice talking to you,* or *Thank you for your time.* When students do problem-solving activities, they use useful phrases such as, *I think she should...because...* Kinsella (2014) discusses the importance of using different language functions for multiple purposes in her research. Heide Wrigley states in her brief, *Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways*, “There is a great need for functional language associated with asking for information, making requests, providing explanations, discussing problems, or making amends when things go wrong” (2015, p. 4).

In online classes, students can refer to these useful phrases in the chat box as they work in breakout rooms.

- **One-question research interview:** In face-to-face classes, students collect data on a specific topic by asking questions of several classmates. For example, *How many hours did you work yesterday?* They return to home groups to report their findings. In online classes, students interview their classmates in breakout rooms and record the answers. Class findings may be graphed. Several transferable skills are practiced in this activity: oral communication, teamwork, research, and interpreting workplace documents (see Figure 1). Or, in both face-to-face and online classes, students may interview several classmates asking about job duties and then record classmate responses in a chart (see Table 3).
- **Oral language frames:** Students, working in pairs or groups in both face-to-face and online classrooms, can be taught to use scaffolded language to talk about real-life situations. For example, a conversation between a prospective tenant and a building manager or a worker seeking information from a boss. They use the scaffolded grammar and sentence stems studied in the lesson to construct the dialogue. Classmates observe and discuss the conversation based on their own life experiences. In the online classroom, the teacher posts the dialogue in the chat box and models the conversation with a few students. After, in breakout rooms, students practice the dialogue with partners (see Figure 2).

Written Communication

Employers cite written communication as another notable skills gap. On the job, employees may be expected to communicate by email or make written reports. In the face-to-face and online classroom, students should be given multiple opportunities to communicate in writing in different genres, such as emails, letters, and paragraphs.

For many adult learners, writing instruction often needs to be scaffolded. Scaffolding is a “temporary support that enables the learner to perform a task with help” (Hellman et al., 2019, p. 58). As indicated in the English Language Proficiency Standards (2016), “Scaffolding is an essential tool to facilitate ELLs’ acquisition of language and content” (p. 8). These same standards add, “The goal of scaffolding is to enable a student to independently complete a similar task in the future” (p. 11). Following are examples of scaffolding in written communication that can be taught in the classroom and transferred to the workplace.

- **Analyze and write from a model:** In both face-to-face and online classes, students analyze a writing model guided by a set of questions. This model could be an email, letter, or paragraph. After that, they begin to compose their own piece of writing by answering questions, filling in an outline, or completing sentence or paragraph frames, all scaffolding techniques that give students the assistance they need in the process of writing (see Figure 3).
- **Writing frames:** Students are provided with sentence and paragraph frames to assist them in the writing process. According to Zwiers (2014) in *Building Academic Language*, sentence and paragraph frames can be used to guide student writers in clarifying what they are

trying to say. For example, a beginning high level student would write about the steps in a study routine using specific sentence frames (see Figure 4). Online, working with the whole class, the teacher posts the writing frame in the chat box. Students fill in the writing frame and post their responses in the chat. They read their answers aloud.

- **Peer revision:** Students work in pairs or small groups to revise their own and their classmates' writing. Peer revision is a way to support students as they begin to analyze and strengthen their writing. Providing student pairs or groups with a checklist of what to look for guides learners in the revision and editing process. The objective of peer revision is self-sufficiency in writing. When students practice revising each other's writing in class, the goal is that the skills they learn will transfer to the workplace. In the peer revision process, first, students work in pairs (either face-to-face or in breakout rooms) and share their writing. When students read their writing aloud to a partner, they often hear their mistakes and self-correct (Zamel, 1985). After reading their work aloud, students use a set of questions to guide them in the revision and editing process (see Figure 5).
- **Exit tickets:** Employees are frequently required to record information in writing, either in longhand or by email. For example, employees keep log books to record events and observations during their shift. Accident reports and work/repair orders are examples of documents employees use to record information. Employees sometimes have to email workers on the next shift informing them about what tasks have been completed and what work needs to be done. In each of these cases, the past tense is used. In the face-to-face classroom, teachers can simulate the skill of recording information at work by asking students to turn in "exit tickets" before they leave class. Teachers give a prompt, such as *Write one thing you learned today. Or, Name one positive thing that happened today.* Teachers can provide scaffolded phrases such as, *Today I learned __.* In the online classroom, using scaffolded phrasing, students can post their responses in the chat and read them aloud. Students can also share what they learned and what they want to know more about in breakout rooms.

Part 2: Teamwork

Teamwork is another soft skill frequently identified by employers. Working in teams is an essential part of the 21st century workplace. In the classroom, teachers can provide opportunities for students to cooperate, collaborate, and work in teams. It's important for students to be able to tell potential employers that they can work in a team and get along with people from other countries and different backgrounds.

- **Data compilation and analysis activities:** Both in face-to-face classes and in online breakout rooms, students interview each other about a topic, compile information, and make a bar graph, pie chart, or timeline of the results. They compare their results with other groups (similar to the "one-question research interview"). This activity serves several purposes: students work in teams to complete a task and at the same time use critical thinking to interpret, analyze, and evaluate their results in a graph illustrating the results (see Figure 6).

- **Team projects:** Students in both online and face-to-face classes work together to complete a project. Each student is given a specific task to complete. For example, a student team investigates the wages, hours, working conditions, and training required for a job in hospitality. Students use a note-taking frame to record their findings and report their findings back to the class. The investigation is done individually, online, and asynchronously. The group presentation is given synchronously, either online or face to face (see Table 4).
- **Trainers:** Students are given jobs that simulate the workplace. For example, at work, team members are expected to train new employees. Assigning more experienced students to train new students, students who were absent, or students who arrive late is excellent preparation for the workplace. Trainers use language such as, *Hi. Welcome to the class. The agenda is on the board every day so you can see what we are doing. Now we are on page 8. If you have any questions, please ask me. I can help you.* Trainers are especially important in online classes. Teachers can assign a new trainer every week to help classmates with the technology, such as how to use the annotation tools in Zoom or how to access a document in Canvas.
- **Jigsaw:** One characteristic of effective teamwork is that students cannot complete a task without the help of teammates. For example, when employees go to a safety meeting, they are tasked with reporting the information back to their work team. In a jigsaw reading/listening lesson, each student in a small group reads or listens to one portion of a text or piece of information. They report back to their team and summarize what they read or heard. Learners share responsibility for each other's learning by using communication, critical thinking, and social skills to complete the assignment. To practice with Jigsaw online, assign students to small groups in breakout rooms. Give each a short reading or listening task they are responsible to summarize/report back about to their group (see Figure 7).

Part 3: Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is another soft skill that is vital for workers to succeed and thrive in the workplace. According to Parrish, both adult native speakers and “adult ELLs need to engage in classroom tasks that promote critical thinking in school and work settings, such as recognizing and solving problems, analyzing relationships between ideas, evaluating evidence, or applying ideas to a new situation” (2015, p. 4). Parrish and Johnson (2010) include the following skills in describing critical-thinking skills: organizing, categorizing, predicting, interpreting, analyzing and evaluating, summarizing, and decision making. Following are examples of strategies and activities where students practice some of the critical-thinking skills described by Parrish and Johnson.

- **Agenda and end-of-class wrap up:** The teacher models organizational skills by starting each class with an agenda on the board. From the agenda, students know what they are going to study that day. At the end of class, the teacher focuses students' attention on what they learned that day and how it relates to their lives. One way to highlight the agenda is for teachers to review agenda items on the board at each part of the lesson and at the end

of class and ask, *Did we work in teams? Will you ever have to do this at work? In school?* In online classes, teachers can write the agenda in a Word document or on the whiteboard in Zoom and save it to refer to at the end of class (see Figure 8).

- **Binder:** Students categorize and organize their classroom materials in a binder. If a student is asked at a job interview, *Why should I hire you?* or *What can you offer us that is different from other applicants?* Students will be ready with the answer: *I'm organized. I'm efficient. I can find what I need quickly.* Teachers can use a binder checklist on a regular basis to be sure students are maintaining an organized binder. Students check each other's binders using the "binder checklist." Some of the questions students ask each other include the following: *Is there a name on the binder? How many dividers are there? What are the categories? Are the papers in the correct category?* In online classes, students can do a "show and tell" and display their binders to their teacher and classmates or take a picture of the binder and email it to the teacher. In both face-to-face and online classes, a checklist should be provided for guidance and accountability.
- **Problem solving:** Students are provided with illustrations or scenarios that show or describe a problem situation. Using critical-thinking skills, students work together in groups or pairs to determine the best solutions to real-life problems. Problem solving can be practiced at all levels, including low literacy levels. To practice with problem solving online, have students discuss what they think is the best solution to the problem in breakout groups. Afterwards, they reconvene to present their ideas to the class. A group leader guides the breakout room discussion and a group reporter reports the group decision to the class (see Figure 9). A problem-solving template can be used for student groups to write the problem, discuss solutions and consequences, and negotiate and make a group decision about the best solution. The template keeps students on task and includes the following questions: 1) *What is the problem?* 2) *What can he/she do?* 3) *What will happen (good and bad consequences)?* 4) *What will he/she do? Why?* Using the problem-solving template, the groups suggest ways for the student to solve the problem. In online classes, students can download the template from a learning management system or from an email from the teacher. In breakout rooms, one student can share their screen and students can fill out the template together.
- **Problem box:** Students write about a problem they are having at work or at school and anonymously put it in a box on the teacher's desk. In online classes, students can email or text the teacher a problem. The teacher reads the problem aloud and puts students in groups. In an intermediate ESL class, a student wrote about this problem she was having at work and put it in the problem box: *I work at a donut shop. My coworker has been leaving early a lot lately and I have to clean everything and close up by myself. What should I do?* The teacher read the scenario and classmates sat in groups discussing the problem and writing responses on the template. They gave possible solutions and consequences for each solution. The students came up with several excellent ideas for the first student to try, such as talking to her coworker and making a checklist of duties and initialing them when completed.

CONCLUSION

Often the long-term goals of adult students are to find better paying jobs and obtain economic self-sufficiency (Hellman et al., 2019). The work of adult educators is to help learners develop the language, basic skills, content knowledge, and soft skills that will help them thrive in workplace, educational, and community environments. The essential soft skills (oral and written communication, teamwork, and critical thinking) that students need for workplace success and job advancement remain constant. Regardless of their career and life paths, students must learn to be good communicators, effective team players, and creative problem solvers. This article examined current research on the soft skills gap and proven instructional practices for teaching transferable soft skills in face-to-face and online classes in adult education. ☞

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Table 1**What Are Your Skills?**

What are your skills?	What's your occupation now?	Where do you work?	What can you fix?
What languages can you speak?	What languages can you write?	What can you do on a computer?	Do you work or study?

Note. From *Ventures Online Resources, Collaborative Activity, Student's Book 1, Unit 8, p. 68, ©2018 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.*

Table 2**Student Interview**

Find a student who:	Names
1. organized things at work	Elena
2. cleaned things at work	
3. prepared things at work	

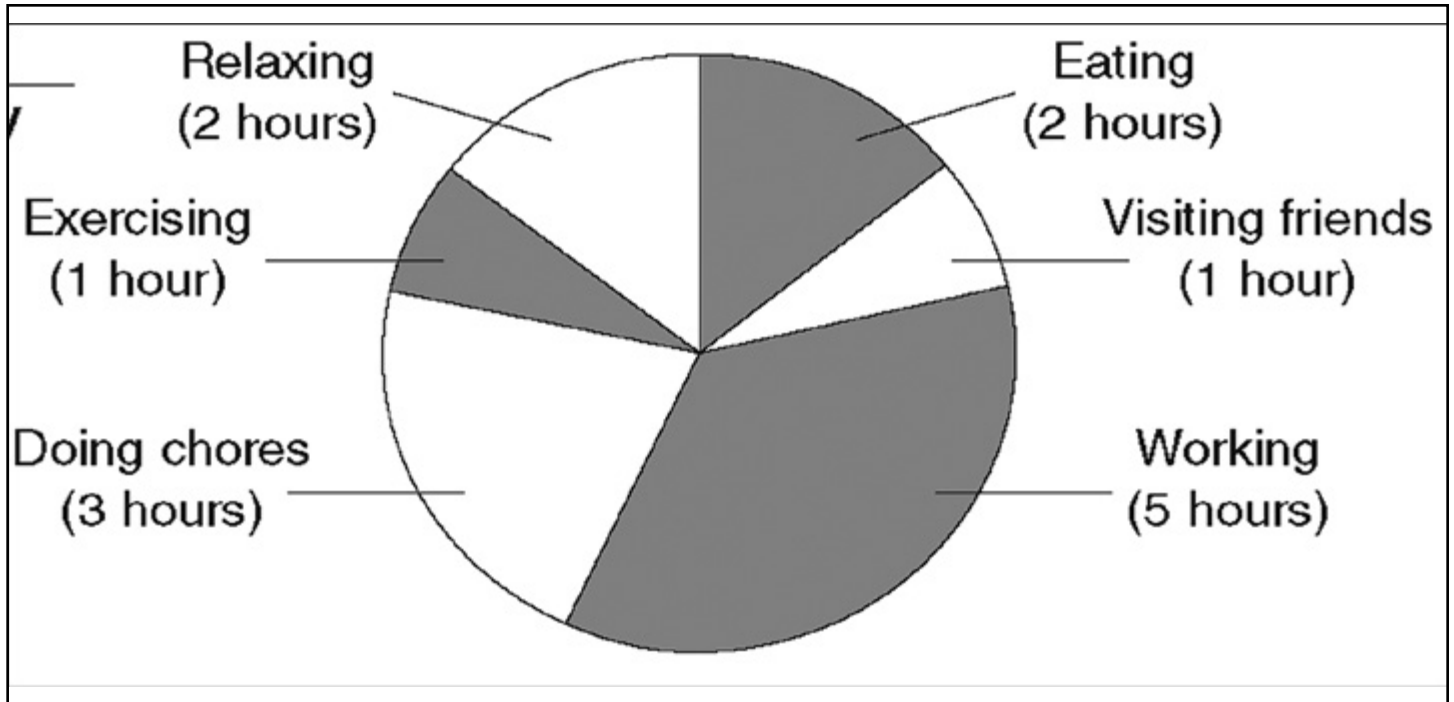
Table 3**What Do You Do?**

Name	Duty	Place
Min	drives a truck	at work

Note. From *Future Student Book 1: English for Work, Life, and Academic Success (2nd ed.)*, p. 227, ©2019 Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Table 4**Note-Taking Frame**

1. Name of job	
2. Job description	
3. Working conditions	
4. Hourly wage/salary	
5. Education required	
6. Training required	
7. Why I want this job	

Figure 1**One-Question Research Interview**

Note. From *Ventures Online Resources, Collaborative Activity*, Book 3, Unit 6, p. 53, ©2018 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2**Oral Language Frames**

A. Excuse me, is there an apartment for rent in this building?

B. Yes, there is. There is an _____ on the _____ floor.

A. Is it _____, or unfurnished?

B. It's _____.

A. How much is the rent?

B. It's _____ a month.

Note. From *Future Student Book 1: English for Work, Life, and Academic Success* (2nd ed.), p. 115, ©2019 Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3**Analyze and Write From a Model****A) Read and analyze a model of an email.**

From: Maria Martinez
 To: Mrs. Jackson
 Subject: Luis Martinez

May 20, 2019

Dear Mrs. Jackson,

Luis Martinez is my son. He is at home today. He is sick. He has a sore throat. Please excuse him. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Maria Martinez

Analyze the model

1. What is the date? _____
2. What is the teacher's name? _____
3. Who is sick? _____

B) Write from a paragraph frame.

Imagine your son or daughter is sick today. Complete the email to the teacher.

From:

To:

Subject:

_____ is my _____. _____ is at home today.

_____ has a fever. Please excuse _____

Thank you.

Note. From *Ventures Student's Book 1*, pp. 52–53, ©2018 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 4

Writing Frames

This is my study routine.

First, I _____.

Then, I _____.

After that, I _____.

Note. From *Future Student Book 2: English for Work, Life, and Academic Success* (2nd ed.) and *Future Teacher's Edition, Book 2*, p. 23, ©2019 Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 5

Peer Revision

Peer revision: Share your writing with a partner. Take turns.

Student A: Read your email to a partner.

Student B: Comment on your partner's email.

Guiding questions:

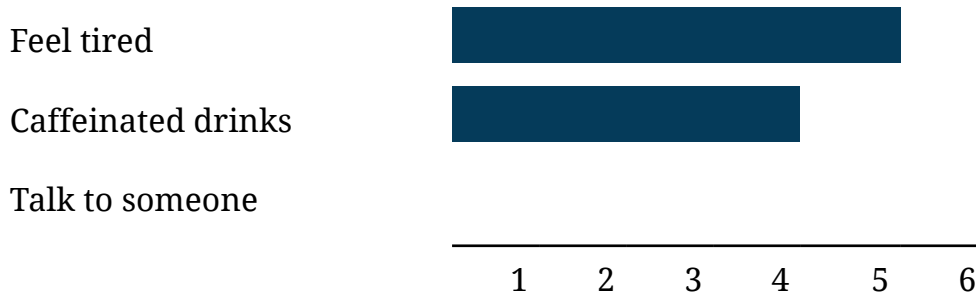
1. What is the main idea of your partner's email?
2. What is the greeting?
3. How does your partner end the message?

Figure 6**Data Compilation and Analysis Activities**

A. Work in a group. Ask questions. Write the number of students on the chart.

Do you....	Number of students	
	YES	NO
1. get tired often?		
2. drink more than 3 caffeinated drinks a day?		
3. talk to someone when you have a personal problem?		

B. Work with your group. Look at Exercise A. Complete the bar graph. Draw a bar to show the number of yes answers for each question.



C. Compare your chart with the chart of another group. How are the charts similar? How are the charts different?

Note. From *Ventures Collaborative Activity, Student's Book 4, Unit 4*, p. 34, ©2018 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 7**Jigsaw****Three candidates are applying for a job as customer service clerk.**

- 1) In teams of 3, students number 1–3. Each student reads about the background and experience of a different candidate.
- 2) Students tell their teammates about their candidate. Students listen to learn about the other candidates.
- 3) Students collectively decide who is the best candidate for the job and why.

Note. From *Ventures Online Resources, Collaborative Activity, Book 4, Unit 8*, pp. 67–68, ©2018 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 8**Agenda and End-of-Class Wrap Up****Agenda, Monday, September 18**

- | | |
|------------|---|
| 8:30-8:45: | Oral communication: Ask two classmates what they did over the weekend
Report back to the class. |
| 8:45-9:00: | Oral communication: Conversation card mingle |
| 9:00-9:45: | Teamwork
Sit with 3 other students. Number 1–4 in your group.
Read the passage alone or aloud in your group.
Students # 1 & 2, write the answer to questions 1–3.
Students # 3 & 4, write the answer to questions 4–6.
Share your answers in your group. |

Figure 9**Problem Solving****Example from a beginning low ESL text:**

Solve the problem. Which solution is best? Circle your opinion.

Carla is filling out a job application. She had two jobs before, but she can't remember the dates. What should she do?

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Leave it blank. | 3. Call her old employer. |
| 2. Take the application home. | 4. Other: _____ |

Note. From *Ventures Student's Book 1, Unit 8*, p. 106, ©2018 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

Example from an intermediate level ESL text:**Problem:**

Mateo is a reliable worker. He does a lot of different jobs. He runs errands, cleans job sites, makes deliveries, and sets up materials and tools.

After a major storm, Mateo has to check on a site that is near his house. His supervisor calls and asks him to check for flooding, downed power lines, or other damage. The phone connection is bad, and it's hard for Mateo to hear everything his supervisor is saying. What should he do?

Solutions:

- Mateo says, "I can't hear what you are saying. But don't worry, I'll figure it out."
- Mateo says, "I can't hear you very well. I would feel more comfortable if you asked someone else to do this."
- Mateo says, "We have a bad connection. Let me repeat what you want me to do. You want me to check if there has been any flooding and if any power lines are down. Is that right?"
- Mateo _____

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