IDEAS FOR ENGLISH DISCUSSION GROUP

Michael Knapp

 You want to improve your oral English and you know this requires practice. You can sit in your room for the next three years waiting for a chance to study abroad, but that won’t help. You don’t know what to do. Congratulations, you aren’t alone. Millions of other Chinese people are in the same situation as you. They *wish* they could speak English more fluently.

 Nothing comes to us through wishing. We have to take action. And since you probably aren’t reading this on a flight to another country you are going to have to figure out how to improve your spoken English right here in China. You must not procrastinate. You must begin today looking for Chinese friends who also want to improve their oral English. Decide now that you will start an English discussion group.

 How to start is easy. Once you have three or more friends interested in practicing English set a weekly, semi-weekly or daily, and decide on a place to meet. It may be your home or dorm. Perhaps you would prefer meeting in a coffee shop, a restaurant or even a park. Time and place are the easy part. Now you have to decide on your content.

 There is no limit to the topics you can talk about. But, in case you can’t think of any, here are some topics you can begin with.

* SPORTS: Discuss your favorite sports to play or watch, favorite teams, and which teams you think will win this year. Talk about sports you played in your childhood.
* NEWS: This one is always fresh because every day the news is new. Pick a story from today’s newspaper, preferably an English newspaper. If you only have a Chinese paper, then retell the story in English. Discuss the *where, what, why, when* and *who* of the story. Give your opinions about the story.
* FUTURE DREAMS: Share each other’s dreams for the future. You can talk about either realistic dreams (goals) or imaginary dreams.
* GUYS / GIRLS: Depending on your gender, ask each other “what kind of girls/guys do you like?” “Describe your ideal future wife/husband.”
* FOOD: Ask each other your favorite foods. This may require a dictionary to translate names of Chinese dishes into English. Talk about cooking or ordering in a restaurant. Talk about what foods are most/least healthy.
* ECONOMICS: Discuss your financial future. Talk about how to succeed. Ask each other’s opinions on what makes a country economically strong/weak.
* TRAVEL: Plan an imaginary overseas trip. Where would you go? How long would you stay there? Who would you go there with? What would you do there? How much would your trip cost?
* FAMILY: Tell each other about your families. Describe each member of your family. Talk about favorite or least favorite childhood memories. Tell about your parents’ jobs. Describe your ideal family life.
* MILLION DOLLARS: Each person in your group imagines you win one million dollars. Tell what you would do with the money.
* WALKING TOUR: Your group walks around talking about and describing everything they see. This can be done in a park, walking along city streets, on a campus or even in a shopping mall.
* GAMES: Use any kind of game. Buy and play a table game, but only speak English during the game. Play ping pong but only talk about the score, etc. in English. No Chinese!
* RETELL STORIES: Read stories, either in English or Chinese, and retell them. You can choose short stories from the internet, newspaper or magazines. The important thing is to retell the story using only English. Don’t try to memorize, but each person retell the whole story, or part, in his or her own words.
* WATCH PEOPLE: Your small group stands or sits in a place where people are passing by. Spot a passerby and try to guess what he or she is doing. Of course there is no way to really know, but you’ll have fun guessing, making up stories and practicing English. For example, you are standing in a shopping mall and a nicely dressed girl walks by. You could say, “I think she just came here in her BMW and she’s going to spend a lot of money. She will shop all day and eat in a ABC restaurant.” Another member may say, “No, I don’t think so. I think she’s a famous actress and she was sent her by a movie company to pick out something to wear for her next movie. She will go to that store over there and wait for her director. He will come later and pay for whatever she buys.” Each person, using only English, will make up stories about the people walking by.