

# Teaching Languages: Complaints Activity



REAL LIFE LANGUAGE

In this Complaints Activity for teaching languages, I share a classroom-ready approach for advanced learners that focuses on practising complaints through short dramatizations. The activity is designed for teachers who want students to practise tactful language — how to express a problem, seek resolution and respond politely when complaints arise. The activity is flexible enough for a hotel, restaurant or any public setting scenario.

## Why teach complaints?

Complaints are real-life communicative tasks. Students rarely get explicit practice in how to raise an issue without sounding rude, or how to defuse a complaint as a service worker. Developing this competence helps learners navigate everyday interactions with confidence and politeness.

“to be able to tactfully Express and get a problem resolved is an important skill”

## Activity overview

The core Complaints Activity uses short role plays that involve a complaint and a resolution. Typical contexts include a restaurant in a hotel, where something has gone wrong — a crying baby at a neighbouring table, loud noise outside, or an unsatisfactory dish. Each roleplay lasts a few minutes and includes a stage of complaint, negotiation and resolution.

### Steps

1. Warm-up: Brainstorm examples of complaints students have experienced while travelling or dining out.
2. Language focus: Teach useful phrases for making complaints, softening statements (e.g. “I’m afraid there’s a problem...”, “Would you mind...?”), and for responding (e.g. apologies, offers of compensation, fixes).
3. Role cards: Give students roles — complainant, staff member, manager, bystander — with objectives and constraints.
4. Dramatisation: Students perform the complaint scene, aiming to solve the problem tactfully.
5. Feedback: Classmates and teacher provide focused feedback on language, tone and effectiveness.

## Variations and examples

You can adapt the Complaints Activity in many ways:

- Change setting: hotel lobby, restaurant, train carriage, shop.
- Adjust stakes: small inconvenience vs. major problem to teach different registers.
- Add complexity: include a bystander who escalates, or a language limitation (e.g. only use conditional forms).
- Turn it into a written task: students draft complaint emails or social media reviews after the role play.

## Tips for advanced learners

When working with advanced groups, push beyond formulaic phrases. Encourage students to:

- Practise subtle hedging and mitigation strategies.
- Roleplay both sides — complainant and resolver — to understand perspective.
- Experiment with different tones: firm, polite, humorous, formal.
- Reflect on cultural norms around complaining and service responses.

## **Sample role card (restaurant)**

- Complainant: Your main course is cold and you have an important meeting in 20 minutes. Goal: get a quick replacement or an apology.
- Server: You're busy and have a strict restaurant policy. Goal: resolve the issue while keeping other customers happy.
- Manager (optional): Decide whether to offer compensation.

## **Conclusion**

Complaints can become lively, meaningful practice that builds pragmatic skills. Complaints Activity for teaching languages helps students learn not just what to say, but how to say it — tactfully and effectively. Try the variations above in your next lesson and adapt the scenarios to your learners' needs.