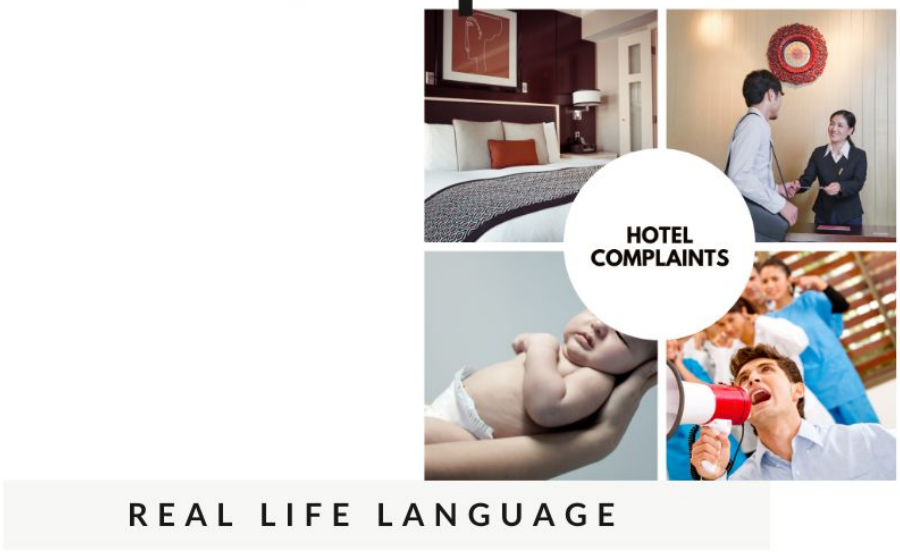
Teaching Languages: Complaints Activity



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.