When a teacher is unexpectedly absent or you simply need a low-prep class that still moves learning forward, strong sub plans can make the difference between wasted time and meaningful practice. These ready-to-run activities are built around the principles of **communicative language teaching** so students keep producing language, interacting with peers, and deepening their vocabulary and structures without constant teacher input.

Why sub plans should support communicative language teaching

Good sub plans assume the substitute might not speak the target language and that students need clear instructions and opportunities to interact. The focus is on learner independence, practical use, and easy execution. Each activity below encourages students to speak, listen, write, or create in the target language while staying manageable for a substitute or for self-study situations.

The five pillars for effective sub plans

1. **Assume minimal target-language support** — instructions must be clear and scaffolded.
2. **Encourage interaction** — pair and group work helps students produce language naturally.
3. **Show the power of independent study** — activities that build self-correction and review skills.
4. **Make it practical** — target useful vocabulary and real-life situations.
5. **Keep it easy to run** — low prep for the substitute, high payoff for learners.

Flashcards: more than memorisation

Flashcards are a flexible, low-tech tool that fit every pillar above. Use them in three classroom-ready ways:

- **Traditional quiz**: one side in the target language, one side in the native language or a picture. Students quiz each other: “How do you say this?”
- **Memory/concentration**: place cards face down and match words to pictures or translations. This is great for pair work and gets learners speaking as they search for matches.

- **Go Fish style**: combine both sets so students draw and ask, “Do you have…?” This creates natural question-and-answer exchanges that last an entire class period.

Drawings and journals: deepen vocabulary through creation

Drawing scenes and labelling them forces learners to think about context and word relationships. The activity is not about artistic talent. As one useful way to frame it:

A nature scene, a restaurant interior, or a hotel lobby gives students multiple prompts for speaking and writing. Journals work similarly. Give a short prompt (for example, “Write five sentences about your family” or “Write a dialogue at a shop”) and ask pairs to write, memorise, and optionally record or perform their pieces.

Role plays and mini-scripts: controlled production that builds confidence

Ask students to produce short dialogues related to familiar tasks: meeting and greeting, ordering food, complaining at a hotel, or describing a past activity. Tasks can be adjusted by ability: two novices might write three six-line dialogues together, while more advanced learners can write and perform longer simulations. If devices are available, recording gives additional practice and assessment data.

Practical tips for creating sub plans

- Provide a clear one-page instruction sheet saved in your drive that a substitute can follow easily.
- Include time targets (20 minutes flashcards, 15 minutes journal, 10 minutes performance) so class flow is predictable.
- Prepare simple templates: flashcard templates, dialogue prompts, and rubric for performances.
- Encourage peer feedback: ask students to check each other’s work and give two strengths plus one suggestion.

Bringing it together

Sub plans can be opportunities for productive, communicative practice rather than filler. By centring activities on interaction, independent learning, practicality, and ease of execution, teachers create meaningful class time even in their absence. These same strategies work for independent learners who want structured, communication-focused practice without a teacher present. Thoughtfully designed sub plans are simply another way to put **communicative language teaching** into daily practice.

Ready-made resources

Keep a small folder of templates and prompts: flashcard sets, journal prompts, dialogue frames, and a short rubric for performances. With these on hand you can quickly assemble a sub plan that prioritises meaningful language use and keeps students engaged.

Use these ideas to make absence days count and to model activities that foster autonomy and continuous speaking practice. Strong sub plans are a chance to reinforce classroom routines, keep momentum, and let students experience the power of **communicative language teaching** in every session.

Looking for more ideas?

Building Proficiency for World Language Learners: 100+ High-Interest Activities
Discover over 100 dynamic activities to make world language learning interactive and fun. I wrote this book with some of my favorite activities for educators aiming to build proficiency with high-impact strategies.
Learn more and get your copy here.

5 Weeks of No and Low Prep Fun
Need quick, engaging activities for your class? This free guide includes **25 no-prep and low-prep ideas** to save time while keeping students excited about learning.
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