ESL LAB

Work Conversation Cards

Thirty work questions, ordered by how hard the conversation is: from describing what you do to saying the difficult thing. Each set has its own page: six cut-out cards, each with a follow-up question for the partner, and the worksheet for its activity. The numbers match the blog post on esllaboratory.com.

LEVEL	STUDENTS	GROUPING	TIME
A2 to C1	Adults	Pairs, 1-to-1, self-study	10 to 15 minutes a set

What's inside, in the order of the blog post

+	**Borrow a Job** Eight job cards	A role for every student, used with any set	**Page 2**
1	**Describing the Work** No Job Titles	A2-B1 · Pairs · 10 min	**Page 3**
2	**Talking to the People There** Work Word Explainer	A2-B1 · Pairs · 10 min	**Page 4**
3	**Putting It in Writing** Direct / Polite	B1-B2 · Pairs · 10 min	**Page 5**
4	**Asking for Something** First Sentence	B2-C1 · Pairs · 15 min	**Page 6**
5	**Saying the Difficult Thing** Keep It Going	B2-C1 · Pairs · 15 min	**Page 7**

How to use the cards

Print only the set you need. Every page stands alone. Cut out the six cards, put them face down and take turns.

The green strip is for the partner. When the speaker finishes, the partner reads the *Ask next* question. One-line answers stop there.

The worksheet is the activity. The box under the cards turns six answers into practice: a verb log, a word list, two drafts, a first sentence, a reply to a bad reaction.

One-to-one or alone. You and your student both answer every card. A student working alone answers in writing, asks themselves the *Ask next* question, and follows the *Alone* line on each worksheet.

For the teacher

> Work can be a hard topic for adults who have lost a job or are looking for one. Hand out the Borrow a Job cards (page 2) to the whole class, so nobody has to explain why they are using one, and let any student say **Pass** to a card without giving a reason. Answer the first card of each set yourself: the class copies your tone.

USE WITH EVERY SET

Borrow a Job

A2-C1 · any grouping
Cut out, shuffle, draw one

Not everybody in a class has a job right now, or wants to talk about it. Draw a card and answer every set as this person. Make up any details you need. You can also swap cards with a partner between sets. Card 30 asks about the hardest thing you have said at work: answer it as your borrowed job if you prefer.

Nurse — JOB 1

WHERE A children's hospital, mostly night shifts
WITH Doctors, parents, two other nurses
PROBLEM The new booking system keeps losing patient notes.

Hotel receptionist — JOB 2

WHERE A busy hotel near the train station
WITH Guests, cleaners, the hotel manager
PROBLEM Three guests were booked into the same room.

Software developer — JOB 3

WHERE At home three days, in the office two
WITH A designer, a tester, a client in another country
PROBLEM The client changed the plan the day before the deadline.

Café owner — JOB 4

WHERE Your own small café, open seven days
WITH Two baristas, suppliers, regular customers
PROBLEM Your best barista wants every Saturday off.

Bus driver — JOB 5

WHERE Route 14, from the city center to the airport
WITH Passengers, the depot manager, other drivers
PROBLEM Your bus was late four times because of roadworks.

Accountant — JOB 6

WHERE A team of six in a large company
WITH Your manager, the sales team, outside auditors
PROBLEM A report you sent last week had a wrong number in it.

Primary school teacher — JOB 7

WHERE A class of 26 eight-year-olds
WITH Children, parents, the head teacher
PROBLEM A parent emails you every evening after ten.

Warehouse team leader — JOB 8

WHERE A warehouse that ships online orders
WITH Eight pickers, drivers, the office team
PROBLEM Half the team is new and the busy season starts soon.

SET 1 · QUESTIONS 1 TO 6

Describing the Work

A2-B1 · Pairs · 10 min
Activity: No Job Titles

No job titles. Answer without saying what your job is called. Your partner writes down every work verb you use. No job right now? Answer as your Borrow a Job card (page 2), or say **Pass**.

SET 1 Q1
What is the first thing you do when you start work?
ASK NEXT
And what do you do right after that?

SET 1 Q2
What takes up more of your week than it should?
ASK NEXT
About how many hours does it take?

SET 1 Q3
What part of your job would surprise a person outside it?
ASK NEXT
Why would it surprise them?

SET 1 Q4
What do you do that nobody else sees?
ASK NEXT
What would happen if you stopped doing it?

SET 1 Q5
Which job would you like to try for one week, and what would you do on day one?
ASK NEXT
Don't name it yet. Can I guess it?

SET 1 Q6
What did you think the job was before you started it?
ASK NEXT
When did you find out it was different?

No Job Titles

Listen and write. Every time your partner uses a work verb, write it in the log, with how often they do it. At the end, read the verbs back as a list. Your partner circles the one that takes most of the week. **Alone:** log your own verbs from yesterday.

answer · check · chase · fix · plan · order · serve · call · sort · train · deliver · approve · write · drive

VERB I HEARD	WHAT THEY SAID	HOW OFTEN
chase EXAMPLE	I chase suppliers who haven't sent the invoice.	☐ Daily ☑ Weekly ☐ Sometimes
		☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Sometimes
		☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Sometimes
		☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Sometimes
		☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Sometimes

Their job, in five verbs:

DESCRIBING TASKS
A big part of my job is ...-ing.
I'm in charge of ...
I deal with ...

SAYING HOW OFTEN
Every morning I ...
Once a week I have to ...
Now and then I ...

GUESSING THE JOB
So you're a kind of ...?
Do you work with ...?
I think you're a ...

SET 2 · QUESTIONS 7 TO 12

Talking to the People There

A2-B1 · Pairs · 10 min
Activity: Work Word Explainer

Explain your work words. When your partner uses a word or phrase from their job, stop them and ask what it means. They explain it in simple English. No job right now? Answer as your Borrow a Job card (page 2), or say **Pass**.

SET 2 Q7
Who do you speak to most in a working day?
ASK NEXT
What do you usually talk about?

SET 2 Q8
What gets talked about before a meeting actually starts?
ASK NEXT
Who usually starts that conversation?

SET 2 Q9
Do you prefer to work next to people or from home, and why?
ASK NEXT
What do you miss when you work the other way?

SET 2 Q10
What do people say where you work that would confuse an outsider?
ASK NEXT
What does it mean in simple English?

SET 2 Q11
Who is easiest to work with, and what makes them easy?
ASK NEXT
What could the rest of the team learn from them?

SET 2 Q12
What did you once have to learn quickly in front of other people?
ASK NEXT
How did it go?

Work Word Explainer

Collect three work words from your partner. Write the word, then their explanation in simple English. If the explanation still needs another work word, tick *Not yet* and ask again. **Alone:** explain three words from your own job, or your borrowed one.

WORK WORD	WHAT IT MEANS, IN SIMPLE ENGLISH	CLEAR?
touch base EXAMPLE	Talk for a short time to check how something is going.	☑ Clear ☐ Not yet
		☐ Clear ☐ Not yet
		☐ Clear ☐ Not yet
		☐ Clear ☐ Not yet

EXPLAINING
It's when you ...
It's a kind of ...
Basically, it means ...

CHECKING
Do you mean ...?
So it's like ...?
Can you give me an example?

HEARD AT WORK
touch base: talk briefly
look into: find out more
sign off: give final approval
follow up: check again later

SET 3 · QUESTIONS 13 TO 18

Putting It in Writing

B1-B2 · Pairs · 10 min
Activity: Direct / Polite

Answer twice. First say the direct version, with no softening. Then say the polite version you would really send. No job right now? Answer as your Borrow a Job card (page 2), or say **Pass**.

SET 3 Q13
What would you write to a colleague who has ignored two of your messages?
ASK NEXT
What subject line would you use?

SET 3 Q14
What would you write to ask for something you were already promised?
ASK NEXT
How long would you wait before you write?

SET 3 Q15
What would you write to say a deadline is not possible?
ASK NEXT
What new date would you offer?

SET 3 Q16
What would you write to ask for feedback you suspect will be bad?
ASK NEXT
Would you rather hear it in person? Why?

SET 3 Q17
What would you write to say no to extra work?
ASK NEXT
What could you offer instead?

SET 3 Q18
What would you write to correct a mistake that was yours?
ASK NEXT
Would you write it or say it? Why?

Direct / Polite

Pick three cards. Write the direct version first, the one you would never send. Then write the polite version you would. Your partner reads both and ticks the one that gets a faster reply. **Alone:** do the same, then read both out loud.

CARD	DIRECT VERSION	POLITE VERSION I WOULD SEND	FASTER REPLY?
13	Answer my messages.	Just checking you saw my last two messages. Could you let me know by Thursday?	☐ D ☑ P
			☐ D ☐ P
			☐ D ☐ P
			☐ D ☐ P

SOFTENING
Could you possibly …?
I was wondering if …
Just a quick reminder that …

SAYING NO
I'm afraid I can't take this on.
I'd love to help, but …
What I can do is …

OWNING A MISTAKE
I made a mistake in …
The correct figure is …
Thanks for your patience.

SET 4 · QUESTIONS 19 TO 24

Asking for Something

B2-C1 · Pairs · 15 min
Activity: First Sentence

Say the exact words. Not *I would ask about money*, but the first sentence itself, out loud, as you would say it. No job right now? Answer as your Borrow a Job card (page 2), or say **Pass**.

SET 4 Q19
How would you open a conversation asking for more money?
ASK NEXT
What would you say if your manager said "not now"?

SET 4 Q20
How would you ask for time off that is inconvenient for the team?
ASK NEXT
What would you offer the team in return?

SET 4 Q21
How would you ask a manager to change the way they hand you work?
ASK NEXT
What example would you give?

SET 4 Q22
How would you ask to leave at five when the team often stays late?
ASK NEXT
What would you say if a colleague made a joke about it?

SET 4 Q23
How would you ask for help without appearing unable to cope?
ASK NEXT
Who would you ask first, and why them?

SET 4 Q24
What have you never asked for at work, and what stopped you?
ASK NEXT
How would you ask for it now?

First Sentence

Build the first sentence before you say it. Choose three cards. Write one sentence with all three parts. Say it to your partner, who answers like the manager or colleague and ticks *Lands* or *Bounces*. **Alone:** build the sentence, then record yourself saying it.

CONTEXT What has happened + REQUEST What you want + REASON Why it makes sense for them too

CARD	MY FIRST SENTENCE	PARTNER
19	Since I took over the client reports in March, I'd like to talk about my salary, because the role has grown.	☑ Lands ☐ Bounces
		☐ Lands ☐ Bounces
		☐ Lands ☐ Bounces
		☐ Lands ☐ Bounces

CONTEXT	REQUEST	REASON
Since I took over ...,	I'd like to talk about ...	..., because ...
Over the last six months, ...	Would it be possible to ...?	..., given that ...
As you know, ...	I was hoping we could ...	..., so that the team ...

SET 5 · QUESTIONS 25 TO 30

Saying the Difficult Thing

B2-C1 · Pairs · 15 min
Activity: Keep It Going

Your partner reacts badly. After your first answer, your partner reads a reaction slip out loud. You keep the conversation going. No job right now? Answer as your Borrow a Job card (page 2), or say **Pass**.

SET 5 Q25
How would you tell a colleague their work is holding up yours?
ASK NEXT
What would you suggest to fix it?

SET 5 Q26
How would you tell a manager their instructions were unclear?
ASK NEXT
How would you check you understand them now?

SET 5 Q27
How would you respond to feedback you believe is unfair?
ASK NEXT
Which part of it might be fair?

SET 5 Q28
How would you tell a team that a project is being stopped?
ASK NEXT
What would you say about the work they already did?

SET 5 Q29
How would you tell a person they did not get something they expected?
ASK NEXT
What would you say if they got upset?

SET 5 Q30
What is the hardest thing you have had to say at work?
ASK NEXT
What would you say differently now?

Keep It Going

Cut out the six slips and put them face down. After your partner's first answer, take a slip and read it out, a little defensively. Your partner has to keep going without giving up or getting angry. **Alone:** pick a slip and write your next two sentences.

REACTION A
That's not my fault.

REACTION B
Nobody told me that.

REACTION C
Why are you only saying this now?

REACTION D
So you think I'm bad at my job?

REACTION E
Everybody else is fine with it.

REACTION F
I don't have time for this.

CARD	SLIP	WHAT I SAID NEXT
25	B	That's fair, and I should have said it earlier. What I'm asking is that we agree a date for your part.

TAKING IT IN
I can see why you'd feel that way.
That's fair, and ...
I'm not saying ...

BRINGING IT BACK
What I'm asking is ...
Can we focus on what happens next?
Let's look at ...

CLOSING
So we agree that ...
Shall we check in on Friday?
Thanks for hearing me out.