

Toolbox for teachers

Tool 4: Interviewing an expert – how to collect information

In EDC/HRE there are many situations when students need to acquire information by interviewing people who come from outside the classroom.

These interviews may take place within class, or the class or a group of students can visit them outside.

The interview partners may be experts in the strict sense of the word, such as a member of national or local parliament, a representative of an administrative board or a scientist. But interview partners could also be people who have a specific background of social or professional experience, such as a shiftworker, a single mother, a migrant or an unemployed person.

Here we will leave aside the question of who contacts the expert. In most cases this will be the teacher, but of course this task could be delegated to students, particularly at secondary level. Rather, we will focus on the question of how the students can prepare and carry out the interview.

Clearly a scenario should be avoided in which the teacher or a handful of students interview an expert, with the rest of the class looking on, not understanding why certain questions are being asked. An interview involves competences that are useful in any kind of project work, field studies or more advanced work in science or the media.

A standard model procedure for the preparation of an interview with an expert includes the following steps:

1. The students identify an important issue that deserves more detailed study.
2. The teacher suggests that the students interview an expert. He or she contacts the expert and arranges a date for the interview, either in the classroom or at a place outside school.
3. The teacher explains to the students what their task will be: in the time available for the interview (45-90 minutes), the students can raise a number of key questions. As each of these key questions will need some time to be answered, and the answers will prompt some follow-up questions, the students will have to decide which questions and issues to focus on. The students will form groups, each of which will be responsible for one key question. Each group will be assigned a time slot (10-15 minutes) to interview the experts. It is important for the students to understand this framework and its purpose, so the teacher should answer any questions patiently and carefully.
4. In the plenary round, the students engage in a brainstorming session. They write all the questions they would like to ask and that they can think of on cards or slips of paper, using a new card for each question. To avoid consuming too much time, the teacher can limit the number of cards for each student to two or three. After five to eight minutes, these questions are collected on the blackboard or flipchart, with the students coming forward and presenting their ideas.
5. Questions referring to one topic are clustered under a key question. The students then decide which key questions will be used in the interview and in which order they will be addressed. In a session of 60 minutes, not more than four key questions should be asked. As a rule, the first one should be about the person himself so that the students have an idea of who they are talking to. The last 10 minutes should be left to a round of open discussion or additional questions by individual students.
6. The students enter groups. They take the cards with the students' suggestions from the board or flipchart, and they decide whether to include them in the interview.
7. If the students have no experience of interviewing, the teacher should give a brief instruction on the basic technique of interviewing. The opening question should be broad in scope, allowing the partner to offer a lot of information and keywords. The students can then ask follow-up questions that are tighter in focus. Generally questions that can be answered by yes or no should

be avoided, as a new question has to follow immediately after. The students should also make sure not to mix discussion and interview (“Don’t you agree with me that ...?”).

8. In the end, the students should have a list of four to six questions which they have ordered and ranked. To build confidence, the class can rehearse the interview in a role play, with the teacher acting as the expert.
9. It is important to clarify the roles of the team members during the interview. Who will ask which question? Who will record the answers? Who replaces a team member who is absent on the day of the interview? The interviewers should be able to maintain eye contact with the partner, so they should be supported by one or two note-takers (see the model questionnaire below). It is not advisable to use a cassette recorder, as the transcription is too time-consuming for the students. Rather, they should concentrate on the essentials and translate their notes into a full text from memory immediately after the interview.
10. After the interview, the teams report in class, orally and/or in writing. Depending on the media available, this could be by handout, wall newspaper or electronic document. Now is the time to refer to the context that gave rise to the interview. Have we received the information we needed? What have we learned? What new questions have arisen?
11. The students should also review the process and the skills they have acquired, and the problems they have incurred. This will give the teacher important feedback for planning future tasks.

Planning sheet for an interview team

Interview with _____

Date: _____ Place: _____

Time available per group: _____ minutes.

Team no _____ Topic: _____

Team members:

No.	Key question	Interviewer	Note-taker
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			