My favourite scenario (by Ian Lebeau)

My favourite scenario? Hmmm. If you ask me about my favourite city, that’s easy. Venice. And I was lucky enough - for three years - to have St. Mark’s Square just an hour and a half from my front door. My favourite food? That’s easy, too. Sashimi. And for another three years I had the good fortune to live in Japan! But my favourite scenario?

If you’re familiar with the Language Leader series of General English coursebooks, you’ll know that the scenario is the extended speaking skills lesson that features in every unit. But it’s not easy to choose just one from the 60 that are found across all the different levels of the course, from Elementary to Advanced.

Still, if I had to choose one, I’d probably go for Upper-Intermediate Unit 7.4. The topic of this unit is ‘Architecture’; the first three lessons deal with favourite buildings, hotels in space, and bridges.

What we do in the scenario that follows is ask students to work in groups to design the ground floor of a new hotel/conference centre in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. This scenario, like all the others in the course, aims to give students extended speaking practice in real life situations. The students process information, exchange ideas, consider options, make a case with reasons. They have in-depth discussions, practise teamwork, solve problems and reach a final decision. There’s no right or wrong answer – it depends what they come up with.

We wanted to help students develop speaking skills that will be useful in their 21st century lives. Things like the ability to take part in meetings and negotiations, and to present their ideas effectively. We felt students needed to be able to do more than just engage in conversation.

Of course, we don’t simply throw them in at the deep end. There’s a structured approach. We recycle the language from earlier lessons in the unit (and coursebook) and introduce some new vocabulary, functions and phrases that will enable them to successfully complete the task.

One of the tricks to get the scenarios to work really well is to set them up in a way that builds interest and whets students’ appetite for the topic before they even look at the coursebook material. Here’s what I do when I teach this scenario myself. First of all, we talk through a small vocabulary set of different types of ‘hotel’, looking at words such as ‘motel’, ‘inn’, bed and breakfast’, ‘youth hostel’. This gives us a chance to discuss the connotations of words like ‘inn’; why, for instance, might the
well-known hotel chain have decided to call itself ‘Holiday Inn’, rather than ‘Holiday Hotel’?

Perhaps surprisingly, given the ubiquity of American cinema, many of the students I’ve taught have a rather hazy understanding of the word ‘motel’. Explaining this also gives me a chance to tell the class about the time my wife and I were on holiday in the United States and stayed in a motel in Harrisonburg, Virginia. It looked a completely normal place until we were leaving our room for dinner. It just so happened the man in the next room was also leaving his room at exactly the same time. ‘Good evening’ he said, in the most natural way in the world, and moved off along the corridor. It was then that we noticed that he had a huge samurai sword strapped across his back! Later, once we’d returned to our room, we listened carefully, expecting to hear blood-curdling screams in the night, or even a knock at our own door. But everything was silent, and we never saw him again.

Anyway, after dealing with this vocabulary, I get the class to discuss their own experiences of hotels. As with many other aspects of ELT, a personalised way into the topic or activity will increase relevance and interest for the students. I give them a worksheet with about a dozen questions, to be discussed in small groups. Here’s a sample of the questions:

* ‘What’s the best/worst hotel you’ve ever stayed in? Why?’

* ‘Is there a hotel you’d really like to stay in, but haven’t done so?’

* ‘Have you ever worked in a hotel?’

This usually results in quite a long and animated discussion. The last time I did this, the students started talking about cockroaches in hotels, and how they weren’t such a problem in the UK; instead, the big problem was mice!

Then we begin the material in the book. The first exercise asks students to: ‘Discuss what facilities you would expect to find in a top-class hotel and conference centre’. Students know a lot of these words - many are the same in their own language(s) - but they usually need help with the pronunciation. If you’re teaching a multi-lingual group, see how many varieties of pronunciation students suggest for the word ‘jacuzzi’!

A further question asks students to consider why the new hotel is being built in Dubai. Some are usually quick to point out its geographically advantageous position, between Europe and Asia. And most students, I’ve found, have an opinion about the place, even if they’ve never been there. A class I recently taught had several Saudis in it, and they were able to add a lot of really interesting information at this point: they observed that Dubai is multi-lingual (Arabic, English, French, Hindi), that it’s easy to
get a visa, and there are incentives to investment like cheap land. But they also commented on how they felt there was a limit to how much the place could grow, and that it was expensive. Locals were being forced out of the centre, and were having to move to the suburbs or other towns.

Perhaps you’re thinking: the construction boom is over in Dubai – and many other places, for that matter. But new hotels will continue to be built. Moreover, if you want, you can change the location entirely, and the students’ plan can be for a hotel in their own town or city. Many of the scenarios lend themselves to this kind of localisation.

Students are introduced to key functional language through a listening activity. They focus on talking about requirements, and distinguishing between stronger needs and less crucial ones (‘It’s vital that...’ and ‘It might be a good idea to......’). In my courses, I always encourage students to look at the audioscript after the class – though we do have to point out the disadvantages of doing that in advance! This listening is actually very rich in idiomatic language (‘chill out’, ‘off the top of my head’, ‘to let your hair down’, etc). If you wanted, you could pick up on this in a subsequent class. Recently, one student loved the expression ‘off the top of my head’ so much that he went round repeating it for several days! We also had a good class discussion once about whether you need alcohol to let your hair down!

I usually try to spread the scenario over a couple of lessons, doing all the preparatory work, including the key language, in the first lesson, so that the final speaking activity happens at the start of the second lesson. My only bad experiences with scenarios have been when I’ve tried to squeeze that final speaking task into the last 15 minutes of a lesson. Starting the second lesson with the task means you can let it run as long as you want, and then give the students immediate feedback on their performance.

In the final task, two rival architectural firms (i.e. groups of students) make their plan for the ground floor of the new hotel. They’re only allowed to put six facilities there. Another group of students represent the hotel chain and they also decide how they would like to see the ground floor.

What’s great here is that you often get students who are not the best speakers in the group, but who turn out to have good drawing skills. Whereas in a normal group discussion situation, they might be a little bit marginalised, sitting on the periphery of the group, listening intently but not making too many contributions, here they can become the focus of the group. All the other students crowd round, offering suggestions.

Don’t worry if the students don’t actually use much of the key language (talking about requirements). Hopefully, that will happen when they do the task, but that language might not appear until a much later lesson when suddenly it pops out! The main
focus is really on successful task completion, so any language they use to do that is fine. Also, don’t worry if you don’t seem to have much to do for long periods! I often just monitor and answer the occasional question. But keep an eye out in case there’s any serious disagreement about the choice of facilities – it can happen!

Once they’ve made their plan, the rival firms can then present their ideas to the reps of the hotel chain. Sometimes, groups have chosen to do this using a Powerpoint presentation. On another occasion, a Pakistani lady got her daughter – who is an architect – to draw up an extremely professional plan on a large sheet of A3 paper! Before they start, ask them to think how they will explain the advantages of their plan to the others, and to anticipate any criticisms and develop counterarguments.

The students tend to be really interested in the rival plans, and are constantly on the lookout for flaws! The presenters have to work hard to persuade others of the validity of their plans. Make sure every student gets a chance to speak. For many students, it might be their first experience of defending their ideas in such a sustained manner. But it’s normally all done with good humour, and raises quite a few laughs along the way.

Feedback should be an important part of the scenario. While they’re working, I make notes (mentally or physically) of the points I want to get over to them in the feedback afterwards. The feedback is an opportunity to talk about a variety of things: how practical their plans are, how well they communicated their ideas, their use of visual aids, polite language, any persistent grammatical errors, etc. Getting students to reflect on their own performance – and give each other feedback before I give my own – usually works well.

Scenarios are designed to raise students spoken English to a higher plateau – beyond mere conversation. They should also bring enjoyment, excitement and interest into the classroom, and - for me - this one certainly does that.