

**Language, Communication, and Successful Conflict Resolution**  
**Middle School – Contemporary World History; American Civics/Government**

**Elaborated Lesson Focus:**

The purpose of this lesson is for students to consider the role of communication in resolving conflicts. Specifically, the lesson encourages students to think about language and how it can create – or dissipate – conflict.

**Performance Tasks:**

- Students will learn about homographs
- Students will use debate to reach consensus on the meanings of various words
- Students will explore the importance of a “shared vocabulary” in conversation and debate
- Students will extrapolate from personal experience of conflict to the universal experience of conflict
- Students will work in pairs to examine the nature of successful communication

**Techniques and Skills:**

Vocabulary building, reading comprehension, large group discussion, working in pairs, critical and analytical thinking, public speaking, supporting ideas with examples, research, and creative writing.

**Requirements:**

*Materials:*

- Chalkboard and chalk, or chart paper and markers
- *Student Handouts: Pop Quiz, Word Game* (as individual cards)

*Time:*

- 45 minutes

**Lesson Preparation:**

- Prepare copies of *Student Handouts* for distribution
- Prepare (copy and cut) “word cards” for word game

**Procedures:**

1. Once the class is seated, without any introduction distribute *Student Handout: Pop Quiz*.
2. Allow 5-10 minutes for students to complete the handout.
3. Tell the class that they will now grade their own quiz. Ask for a volunteer to read their first sentence.
4. After the first volunteer reads, say that his/her answer is wrong. Ask for a second volunteer. If the second volunteer uses the word in the same context as the first (“The wind blows hard,” and “Wind makes windmills go,” etc.) then repeat that his/her answer is wrong. If the second volunteer uses the word in a different context (“My brother always forgets to wind his watch.”), take a poll. Ask the class: How many of you used the word in this way? How many of you used the word the first way? Which is right?

*Note:* Because the students believe that this is a quiz, they may be very invested in getting the answers right. They may wish to argue the veracity of their answers. Allow this to occur. Allow students to debate among themselves which use of each word is accurate. Do not offer a final “verdict” on which students are correct. Mediate where necessary by asking questions, such as: Who else feels the way {Emmanuel} feels? Did anyone else use the word that way? Why do you think {Li} is wrong?

5. Once students have arrived at a place of complete disagreement, encourage the class to reflect on this experience. Ask the class to describe what just happened. Who is right? Who is wrong? Why is there such a difference in opinion? What happened to their ability to communicate?
6. Assure students that this was not an actual quiz, but was an experiment to show how important communication is in dealing with conflict. Tell the class that the words on the “quiz” were HOMOGRAPHs: words that are spelled one way but have more than one pronunciation and meaning.

*Note:* To dispel any anxiety or concern, reiterate to students that this was not a quiz, but was only an experiment to illustrate the importance of clear communication, and that there will be no recorded grades.

7. Explain to the class that this experiment illustrates how, without a shared and agreed upon vocabulary, arguments can escalate and agreement becomes more and more difficult—even if both sides are right.
8. Elicit from the class examples of arguments, conflicts, or disagreements that they’ve experienced that arose from lack of communication, or from the aggressive or negative use of words. Record the students’ answers on the chalkboard or on chart paper.

*Note:* Students may offer specific slurs or stereotypes during this discussion. It is important to remind the class that while exploring the negative use of language is an important step to understanding conflict, the use of certain terms—in fact, sometimes just a reference to these terms—may be difficult for some of their peers, and therefore should be discussed in class with particular sensitivity.

9. Conduct a short discussion about their responses using the following questions as a guide:
  - How did communication (or lack of communication) create this conflict?
  - How might the communication problem have been improved or solved?
  - What sorts of strategies or behaviors could you have used to help improve communication during the conflict?
  - What are some of the different ways people communicate? How might these different styles lead to miscommunication?

*Note:* The *Student Handout: Word Game* cards (quantity: 36) should be copied and cut in advance of this activity.

10. Divide students into pairs. Ask each pair to choose one “talker” and one “listener.”

11. Give the “talker” one of the cards from *Student Handout: Word Cards*.

12. The “talker” has 30 seconds to get his or her partner to call out the word on his or her card without saying the word itself, or any of the other words listed on the card.
13. When the “listener” has guessed the word, the pair should stand up. The first pair to stand wins. See how long it takes for the rest of the pairs to stand.
14. Have students switch roles (the “listener” becomes the “talker” and vice versa). Distribute another card to each pair. Repeat the activity.
15. Reconvene as a whole group and allow students to discuss their experience. Use some or all of the following questions as a guide:
  - In what ways did you find this activity easy or difficult? Why?
  - What made you the most frustrated? How did you express your frustration?
  - How many times did you guess the word wrong?
  - How did the experience of guessing wrong make you feel?
  - What did you realize about how you communicate by participating in this activity?
  - Was it easier to be the “talker” or the “listener?” Why?
  - What did you learn about how your partner communicates?
  - What made it easier for you and your partner to understand each other? What made it more difficult?
16. Explain to the class that words can help two people communicate, but they can also get in the way of communication. Ask the class how the words on the “quiz” got in the way of communication.
17. Ask the class what other categories of words might get in the way of communication or create conflict. Chart responses on the chalkboard or on chart paper.
18. Conduct a short discussion using some or all of the following questions as a guide:
  - How can words CREATE conflict?
  - Give an example of how a person could use a word to create a conflict.
  - Is the childhood rhyme “sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me” accurate? How do words hurt? Give an example.
  - In what ways can language be used as a weapon? Explain.

*Extension Activities and Ideas for Further Learning*

- Have students create a “word poem” using the word COMMUNICATE. Students should write “communicate” vertically on the left hand side of a piece of paper. Then, they should create a poem where each line starts with a letter in the word. For example, the first line of their poem might be “Carefully listen to your friends,” the second line could be “Often they mean more than what they say,” and so on. Display student poems around the classroom—perhaps using them as ground rules for future productive classroom discussions.
- Instruct students to identify a current conflict from the local newspaper. The conflict can be local, regional, national, or international. Have them research their conflict—who are the parties involved, what is the nature of the conflict, what is the background of the conflict, etc. Then students should write a letter from a person (real or imaginary) on one side of the conflict to the other. Next, instruct them to

write another letter that is a response to their first letter. Students should consider how language and communication might help to lessen this conflict and bring about a resolution.

- There are a number of nonprofit organizations that focus on building and strengthening communication to resolve conflict. Examples might be: Americans for Peace Now, Amnesty International, Seeds of Peace, Pen Pals for Soldiers, or The Carter Center. Students should create an informational poster about one organization: what it does, where it works, how others can get involved, how others can learn more. Display the posters in the school cafeteria, library, lobby, or hallways to encourage others to get involved with the organization and their work towards peaceful conflict resolution.

*Student Handout: Pop Quiz*

*Directions:* Use each of the following words in a grammatically correct sentence.

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1. Wind: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Tear: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Bow: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Lead: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Content: \_\_\_\_\_

*Student Handout: Word Game*

**Directions for facilitator:** In preparation for use, cut along the double lines to create 36 individual cards. Distribute one card to each student pair.

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<b>ELEPHANT</b> <i>You cannot say: elephant, trunk, grey, peanut, Dumbo.</i>	<b>SCHOOL BUS</b> <i>You cannot say: school, bus, yellow.</i>	<b>BEST FRIEND</b> <i>You cannot say: best, friend, friends, peer.</i>
<b>FOOTBALL</b> <i>You cannot say: foot, ball, the name of any specific football teams (including mascots), or name specific TV shows or movies about football.</i>	<b>TIGER</b> <i>You cannot say: tiger, cat, stripe, Tigger, Frosted Flakes.</i>	<b>DOLLAR BILL</b> <i>You cannot say: dollar, bill, money, green, George Washington, or any nickname for dollar bill (i.e., greenback)</i>
<b>DECK OF CARDS</b> <i>You cannot say: deck, card, spade, diamond, heart, club, or name any specific card game.</i>	<b>BIRTHDAY CAKE</b> <i>You cannot say: birthday, cake, eat, or frosting.</i>	<b>THREE RING NOTEBOOK</b> <i>You cannot say: three, ring, note, book, notebook, spiral, notes, binder, or name any brand name three ring binder.</i>
<b>TENNIS RACQUET</b> <i>You cannot say: tennis, racquet, or name any professional tennis player.</i>	<b>DRUM SET</b> <i>You cannot say: drum, set, kit, drummer, sticks, cymbal, percussion, name any specific drummer, kind, or brand of drum (bass, snare, etc).</i>	<b>SUPERMAN</b> <i>You cannot say: super, Clark, Kent, Lois, Lane, Lex, Luthor, or name any specific movie or TV show that is about Superman.</i>
<b>SWIMSUIT</b> <i>You cannot say: pool, bathing, suit, swim, ocean, beach.</i>	<b>SOCCER</b> <i>You cannot say: soccer, ball, black, white, goal, Olympic(s), or name any specific soccer team, player, or team mascot.</i>	<b>MUSEUM</b> <i>You cannot say: museum, art, or name any specific museum.</i>
<b>SUNFLOWER</b> <i>You cannot say: sun, flower.</i>	<b>ENVELOPE</b> <i>You cannot say: envelope, letter, address, stamp, postage, mail.</i>	<b>BASEBALL CAP</b> <i>You cannot say: base, ball, cap, hat, bat, or name any specific baseball team, player, or mascot.</i>

<p><b>DANCE</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: dance, music, step, partner, prom, or name any specific style or type of dance (i.e., tap, ballet, break).</i></p>	<p><b>MANICURE</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: manicure, nail, manicurist, pedicure, finger, polish, or name any specific place or brand of nail polish.</i></p>	<p><b>SOAP</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: soap, bar, wash, or name any specific kind or brand of soap.</i></p>
<p><b>CIRCUS</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: circus, big top, Barnum, Bailey, three, ring, clown, tent.</i></p>	<p><b>KANGAROO</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: kangaroo, pouch, joey, hop.</i></p>	<p><b>COFFEE</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: coffee, tea, creamer, or name any specific brand or kind of coffee or coffee shop.</i></p>
<p><b>AIRPORT</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: air, port, plane, pilot, terminal, takeoff, land, or name any specific airport.</i></p>	<p><b>PIZZA</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: pizza, pie, pizzeria, or name any specific brand or kind of pizza or pizza place.</i></p>	<p><b>SUNGLASSES</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: sun, glasses, lens, frame, or name any specific brand of sunglasses.</i></p>
<p><b>CHEWING GUM</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: chewing, gum, bubble, chew, blow, or mention any specific kind or brand of gum.</i></p>	<p><b>LIGHTBULB</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: light, bulb, Edison, electric, lamp.</i></p>	<p><b>CARTOON</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: cartoon, Saturday, Sunday, comic, strip, or name any specific comic strip or cartoon.</i></p>
<p><b>STAMP</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: stamp, envelope, postage, letter, mail.</i></p>	<p><b>PLAYGROUND</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: play, ground, recess, park, swing, slide, or name any specific park or playground.</i></p>	<p><b>BANANA</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: banana, yellow, peel, fruit, monkey.</i></p>
<p><b>WATERMELON</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: water, melon, seed(s), fruit, cantaloupe.</i></p>	<p><b>PARROT</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: parrot, bird, macaw, polly, cracker.</i></p>	<p><b>MUSIC</b></p> <p><i>You cannot say: music, instrument, song, CD, musician, video, radio, or MP3 or name any MP3 player.</i></p>

