Expressing yourself: ways of expressing criticism

Overview: In this lesson learners review, consolidate and practise expressions for criticising people and their behaviour.

Total time for activities: 40 – 45 minutes

Level: upper intermediate to advanced

1. Before class, cut up the Student's Copy so that you have copies of Worksheets A to D for each learner.

2. If applicable, ask learners to discuss their experience of giving and receiving criticism in English.
   - Did they find it difficult to criticise people? If so, why?
   - How did they decide exactly what to say? Did they use any particular words or phrases?
   - How did they feel about receiving criticism? Did they feel that what was said to them was appropriate?
   - Do they think there are any differences between ways of criticising in English and in their L1(s)?
   If you feel that your class has too little experience of giving and receiving criticism in English, they can briefly discuss the above questions with reference to their L1(s).

3. Distribute Worksheet A. Learners work on the task in pairs. Check answers in plenary.

   Guideline answers (Learners may make other valid comments.)
   The ‘b’ versions are all ways of making criticism more tentative or polite, to avoid sounding unkind or giving offence.
   1. You can use “I have to say” when you are going to say something that may annoy or upset someone, especially because it expresses criticism.
   2. You can use “With respect” to introduce a criticism or disagreement, in order to sound more polite.
   3. You can use “to put it mildly” at the end of a sentence, to suggest that something is actually even worse than you are saying.
   4. You can use “shall we say” in the middle of a sentence, to make a criticism seem less severe or offensive.
   5. You can use “Don’t get me wrong” to make sure that someone understands your criticism correctly.
   6. You can use “how shall I put it” at the beginning or in the middle of a sentence to say something that is honest but may sound rude or unkind.
   7. You can use “Without wishing to ...” to introduce a criticism someone may not like.
   8. You can use “to give someone their due” to make a criticism seem less strong by balancing it with a positive comment.

   Invite the class to make further comments about similarities and differences between English and their L1(s). Do the English expressions have close equivalents in their L1(s)?

4. Distribute Worksheet B. Learners work on the task in pairs. Check answers in plenary.

   Answers
   1. I’m bound to say I found his performance pretty disappointing.
   2. With all due respect, Mr Davies, I do think you’re being a little unreasonable.
   3. I think his behaviour in the meeting was immature, to say the least.
   4. Her boyfriend is a bit, let me put it this way, difficult to get along with.
   5. She never calls me, though to be fair, she always remembers my birthday.
   6. She never calls me, though in all fairness, she always remembers my birthday.
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5. Distribute Worksheet C. Stressed syllables are underlined. Explain that there is some variation, but these are typical ways of stressing these expressions. In the phrase ‘shall we say’, the word ‘say’ is usually spoken with a level tone, and is often lengthened considerably. Drill the expressions, ensuring that the stresses are correct.

6. Ask learners to turn Worksheet C over. Distribute Worksheet D. Learners work on the task in pairs. After checking answers, learners should take it in turns to say the sentences to each other, being careful to stress the correct syllables (if they are unsure they can consult Worksheet C).

Answers
1. Some of the decisions you’ve been making lately have been eccentric, to put it mildly.
2. I have to say, the way you dress is a bit too casual for this workplace.
3. All of their music sounds a bit similar, but to give them their due, they do it well.
4. I thought the food they served was, shall we say, unimaginative.
5. Her results aren’t as good this year, though in all fairness, she’s been off school a lot with various health problems.
6. With all due respect, Chris, your comments aren’t really relevant to the topic we’re discussing.
7. Don’t get me wrong, I agree that he’s got some interesting things to say, but I just wish he’d shut up and listen to other people occasionally.
8. He’s terribly unpunctual, although, to be fair, he does do a good job when he finally turns up.
9. The deadline they’ve set for this project is ambitious, to say the least.

Follow-up
- Learners can notice examples of criticising in films (or in the community around them if they are in an English-speaking environment) and report to the class: What was the situation and the relationship between the speakers? What exactly was said, and with what effect?
Worksheet A

Compare the ‘a’ and ‘b’ versions of each sentence. In each case, what are the differences between the two versions?

1a  I found his performance pretty disappointing.
1b  I have to say, I found his performance pretty disappointing.

2a  I do think you’re being a little unreasonable, Mr Davies.
2b  With respect, Mr Davies, I do think you’re being a little unreasonable.

3a  I think his behaviour in the meeting was immature.
3b  I think his behaviour in the meeting was immature, to put it mildly.

4a  The training programme seems a little dull.
4b  The training programme seems, shall we say, a little dull.

5a  I do like Christine, I just don’t think she’s right for you.
5b  Don’t get me wrong, I do like Christine, I just don’t think she’s right for you.

6a  Her boyfriend is a bit difficult to get along with.
6b  Her boyfriend is a bit, how shall I put it, difficult to get along with.

7a  I think you need to lose a little weight.
7b  Without wishing to hurt your feelings, I think you need to lose a little weight.

8a  She never calls me.
8b  She never calls me, though to give her her due, she always remembers my birthday.
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Worksheet B

Use the words in the box to form other ways of expressing criticism. You may also need to add other words.

let  due  fair  fairness  least  bound

1. I ______ ______ to say I found his performance pretty disappointing.

2. With ______ ______ respect, Mr Davies, I do think you’re being a little unreasonable.

3. I think his behaviour in the meeting was immature, to say ______ ______.

4. Her boyfriend is a bit, ______ me put it this ______, difficult to get along with.

5. She never calls me, though to ______ ______, she always remembers my birthday.

6. She never calls me, though in ______ ______, she always remembers my birthday.

Worksheet C

Ways of expressing criticism

► I’m bound to say
► With respect
► With all due respect
► to put it mildly
► to say the least
► shall we say
► Don’t get me wrong
► how shall I put it
► let me put it this way
► Without wishing to (hurt your feelings)
► to give her her due / to give John his due
► to be fair
► in all fairness
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Worksheet D

Complete each sentence with one of the expressions you have studied in this lesson, using the word in brackets at the end.

1. Some of the decisions you’ve been making lately have been eccentric. (mildly)
2. The way you dress is a bit too casual for this workplace. (have)
3. All of their music sounds a bit similar, but they do it well. (give)
4. I thought the food they served was unimaginative. (shall)
5. Her results aren’t as good this year, though she’s been off school a lot with various health problems. (fairness)
6. Chris, your comments aren’t really relevant to the topic we’re discussing. (respect)
7. I agree that he’s got some interesting things to say, but I just wish he’d shut up and listen to other people occasionally. (wrong)
8. He’s terribly unpunctual, although he does do a good job when he finally turns up. (fair)
9. The deadline they’ve set for this project is ambitious. (least)