

ADVANCED (C1/C2) EFL Lesson Plan on Free Will: Warm-up Questions

- 1) Why are you studying English? Is it by choice?
- 2) What does it mean to have *free will*? Do you believe that you have it?
- 3) Do you like studying philosophy? Why or why not?

Reading: Free Will is an Illusion¹

Foreword: Sam Harris is an American neuroscientist, philosopher, best-selling author, and host of the popular podcast *Making Sense*.²

Part 1: The Argument

The idea that we have free will assumes that we are free to behave differently than we do. We chose vanilla ice cream, but we could have chosen chocolate. The concept also assumes that we are the source of the drive to complete a particular action.

Philosopher Sam Harris argues that these assumptions are false. Harris, a *determinist*, believes that all of our wants are determined by prior causes, **namely**, events in the brain and past experiences that we do not control. He refers to several studies as support including the following:

5. In a 2011 study, participants were asked to press one of two buttons. Using fMRI, the researchers observed that two regions in the brain contained information about the button the participant would push *several seconds* before the decision was **consciously** made.³
6. Another 2011 study showed that by analyzing just 256 neurons, researchers could predict a person's actions with 80% accuracy before the person was aware of the decision.⁴

For Harris, this shows that the decisions we feel we make are determined before we are aware of them.

As such, we are as responsible for producing these decisions as we are for the production of hair on our head. These events both come from inside us, but there is no free choice involved.

As further support, Harris introduces a thought experiment.

Thought Experiment #1: [Listen](#) instead (end around 31:40)] Think of a movie, any movie (good or bad). Spend a few seconds making your choice. Take the time to notice how, in your head, you make the selection. Now, spend a few seconds doing it again and think about how you made your decision.

- 1) What movies did you choose?
- 2) How many options did you consider before choosing one?
- 3) Did you feel you had control over which options came to mind?
- 4) You know that *Titanic* and *Avatar* are movies. Did you pick them? Why didn't you?

Harris argues that the reason we didn't choose *Titanic* (or any other movie) is because it simply did not appear in our head. There was nothingness, and then suddenly, the names of films popped up and we chose one. Harris asks: Where is the free will in that? His point is that we, as the conscious witness of our

lives, do not make choices; instead, we receive them. The same thing happens when we pick a shirt to wear in the morning or a comment to say during dinner.

Harris offers another thought experiment about motivation.

Thought Experiment #2: Think of a time when you suddenly found the motivation to do an act that you'd been putting off for a long time. This act could be going to the gym, getting up earlier, starting an English course, or even washing the bathtub.

- 1) What action did you choose?
- 2) Though you had the same reasons to complete this act for a long time, what suddenly motivated you to complete it?
- 3) Were the reasons for taking the action within your control?

Harris uses this experiment to illustrate that we are not aware of the reasons that **compel** us to act. For 131 days, we wanted to start exercising but couldn't. And then one day, **out of the blue**, we start. The background forces behind our motivations to act in life are hidden from us. Harris concludes that we are no more responsible for the next thing we think (and therefore do) than we are for the fact that we were born into this world.

Part 1: Comprehension & Follow-Up Questions

- 1) Retell Harris's argument to a partner or your teacher in your own words.
- 2) What does Harris believe studies of the brain indicate? Do you find this argument convincing?
- 3) What are the 'thought experiments' trying to demonstrate about decision-making? What parts of them did you find convincing or unconvincing?
- 4) If free will is an illusion, how should society approach moral responsibility?

Next, you will read about the possible consequences of free will being an illusion. With a partner, first summarize how the belief in free will influences the below areas. Next, discuss how the areas would change if we accepted that free will did not exist.

- Criminal justice
- Human psychology & motivation
- Pride and guilt
- Childhood education

Part 2: Some Implications

To consider the legal **implications** of his view, Harris describes a crime from 2007 in which two men, Steven Hayes and Joshua Komisarjevsky, broke into a home, robbed, and violently murdered members of a family. Due to the horrific details of the crime, Harris believes that most of us would agree that the men should be held legally responsible for their actions, and we would likely overlook that Hayes showed great **remorse** after the act or that Komisarjevsky was regularly abused as a child. Although we would want to punish them, Harris has us consider a difficult question: *Given who they were, could they have acted differently?*

Harris comments, "As sickening as I find their behavior, I have to admit that if I were to trade places with one of these men, atom for atom, I would *be* him: There is no extra part of me that could decide to see the

world differently or to resist the **impulse to victimize** other people.”⁵ For Harris, the fact that we were not born like these criminals is a matter of luck.

Speaking Practice: Roleplay

Harris believes we need a new approach to moral responsibility and legal consequences. Choose your role below and participate in the roleplay.

Situation: The case of Hayes and Komisarjevsky is in court. The defense team, who believes that free will is an illusion, will represent Hayes and Komisarjevsky. The prosecution team will represent the family. The defense will present their case first. (If there is an extra person available, he or she can be the judge.)

The Defense Team (Determinist)

You believe that your clients did not freely choose to commit this act. It was the result of past events and biological factors. Therefore, they should receive a lighter sentence that focuses on rehabilitation (re-education), rather than on punishment. This rehabilitation can be a new experience in their lives that can lead to better outcomes. You will present your case first.

The Prosecution Team

Because of the horrific nature of their crimes, you believe that Hayes and Komisarjevsky should receive the harshest of penalties. Take a few minutes to think of reasons to support your position.

Given our inability to act other than we do, Harris believes that it follows that we should not take too much pride in our achievements because they are not ‘deserved’ in any deep sense. On a more positive note, we also should not feel overly ashamed of our failures. Further, according to Harris, it does not make sense to hate others because they do not freely choose to be who they are.

If free will is an illusion, why not give up?

Though our actions are determined by our biology and past, Harris does not believe we should give in to **apathy** and do nothing. Making an effort in life is essential in **bringing about** different experiences and outcomes. A young woman who is presented with a great career opportunity should make an effort to get the job even though she cannot **ultimately** control whether she will succeed or fail. In Harris’s view, every new experience, new skill, and new relationship is an ‘input’ that influences the direction of our lives. Our actions matter not because they are freely chosen but because they become part of the chain of events that determines our future.

Part 2: Comprehension & Follow-Up Questions

5. Do you agree with Harris’s conclusions about what free could imply?
6. Do his ideas match the consequences you discussed in the previous section?
7. What does Harris hope to illustrate with his summary of Hayes and Komisarjevsky’s case?
8. Do you believe that you are where you are today because of your own choices or luck?
9. In your own words, explain Harris’s view of why a life without control isn’t pointless. Does the argument make sense to you?

Vocabulary Focus: Match the words with their meaning as used in the article.

1. <u>illusion</u> (n)	a. with awareness of one's own existence, thoughts, etc.
2. <u>namely</u> (adv)	b. a false idea or belief, especially one that seems true
3. <u>consciously</u> (adv)	c. deep regret or guilt
4. <u>as such</u> (adv)	d. to cause something to happen
5. <u>compel</u> (v)	e. a lack of interest or enthusiasm
6. out of the <u>blue</u> (idiom)	f. a likely consequence of an action
7. <u>implication</u> (n)	g. to make someone a victim by harming them
8. <u>remorse</u> (n)	h. unexpectedly; without warning or apparent reason
9. <u>impulse</u> (n)	i. finally; in the end
10. <u>victimize</u> (v)	j. to force or drive someone to do something
11. <u>apathy</u> (n)	k. a sudden strong desire to act
12. <u>bring about</u> (phr. v)	l. therefore
13. <u>ultimately</u> (adv)	m. specifically; especially

Pronunciation: Repeat the above phrases with your teacher, stressing the underlined syllable.

Replace the underlined phrase with a word from the box above. Then ask the questions to a partner.

1. Can you share an experience when a great idea came to you unexpectedly?
2. Can you think of any events, specifically ones in your own life, where you felt forced to act by forces beyond your control?
3. What might be the consequences of telling children that they cannot completely control their futures?
4. Have you ever experienced 'buyer's guilt', i.e. when you buy something and later regret it?
5. When was the last time you acted on a strong sudden desire? Did you regret it?
6. Generally speaking, what can you do to cause a positive change in your life?

Speaking Activity: Alternate Histories & Conditionals

Task: Go through each of the below historical events and consider the global implications if the event had not happened. Use the **third conditional** when considering the past implications.

- *If the asteroid had not hit Earth, the dinosaurs would have survived.*
[If + past perfect, could/would/might + have + past participle]

Use the **mixed conditional** when considering implications on the present.

- *If the dinosaurs had survived, they might be alive today.*
[If + past perfect, could/would/might + base verb]

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An asteroid hit the earth 66 million years ago, (likely) triggering the extinction of the dinosaurs.• Columbus visits the Americas in 1492.• The Allied Forces succeed in the Normandy Invasion (D-Day) in 1944, changing the course of WW2.• The Internet is invented in the early 1980s• The Covid-19 virus spreads around the world in 2020.

When finished with the above events, **repeat** the same activity but for your personal life.

Moral Responsibility: Shades of Free Will

The below examples are from Harris's book on free will.⁶ With a partner, discuss each one and determine how they contrast in terms of moral responsibility.

Level of responsibility:	None (no punishment)	Some (some punishment)	Complete (harsh punishment)
1. A four-year-old boy was playing with his father's gun and killed a young woman. The gun had been kept loaded and unsecured in a dresser drawer.			
2. A 12-year-old boy who had been the victim of continual physical and emotional abuse took his father's gun and intentionally shot and killed a young woman because she was teasing him.			
3. A 25-year-old man who had been the victim of continual abuse as a child intentionally shot and killed his girlfriend because she left him for another man.			
4. A 25-year-old man who had been raised by wonderful parents and never abused intentionally shot and killed a young woman he had never met "just for the fun of it."			
5. A 25-year-old man who had been raised by wonderful parents and never abused intentionally shot and killed a young woman he had never met "just for the fun of it." An MRI of the man's brain revealed a tumor the size of a golf ball in his medial prefrontal cortex (a region responsible for the control of emotion and behavioral impulses).			

Follow-up questions

- 1) In all cases, a woman died because of events arising in the brain of another person. Did you judge them differently? If so, why?
- 2) At what age or point does a person become capable of being morally responsible for his actions?
- 3) If a person plans a crime and then commits it, is this worse than an impulsive crime?

Note: Harris uses these scenarios to show the difficulty of judging moral responsibility. He writes, "The more we understand the human mind in causal terms, the harder it becomes to draw a distinction between cases like 4 and 5."

Famous Quotations on Free Will

- "I have noticed that even people who claim everything is predetermined and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road." – Stephen Hawking
- "Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills." – Schopenhauer
- "I am compelled to act as if free will existed because if I wish to live in a civilized society, I must act responsibly." - Einstein

Speaking Activity: Role-play (Each person only reads his/her role.)

Situation: Phillip is a 17-year-old boy who wants to become a rapper. His rapper name is "Ill Phil". He has been trying to sell his music for several years without any success.

Parent	Phillip's music is terrible. No one in your family has any musical talent, including him. It's just not in your genes. It's time he recognized the truth: he was not made to be a musician.
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	<p>Talk to your son. Convince him to do something more practical, within his skillset. For example, he is great at math. You think he would be a great accountant.</p> <p><i>Key expression: "It's time to face reality—you just weren't <u>cut out to be</u> a rapper." (cut out to be = designed to be)</i></p>
Ill Phil	<p>You believe anything is possible if you work hard enough. You haven't had success with your rapping career, but it's probably because you need better equipment. Ask your parent to give you \$800 for a new microphone that will make your voice sound better.</p> <p><i>Key expression: If I believe in myself, anything is possible.</i></p>

Vocabulary Review: Insert a word from today's lesson into the appropriate blank.

bringing about / as such / compel / victimize / apathy / ultimately / namely
 out of the blue / consciously / impulse / implications / remorse

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> ... all of our wants are determined by prior causes, _____, events in the brain and past experiences that we do not control. ... contained information about the button the participant would push <i>several seconds</i> before the decision was _____ made. ... the decisions we feel we make are determined before we are aware of them. _____, we are as responsible for producing these decisions as we are for the production of hair on our head. ... we are not aware of the reasons that _____ us to act. And then one day, _____, we start. To consider the legal _____ of his view, Harris describes a crime... ... we would likely overlook that Hayes showed great _____ after the act... There is no extra part of me that could decide to see the world differently or to resist the _____ to _____ other people. Harris does not believe we should give in to _____. Making an effort in life is essential in _____ different experiences and outcomes. A young woman ... should make an effort to get the job even though she cannot _____ control whether she will succeed or fail.

Final Discussion Questions

- How is a human being different from a computer?
- In the future, will computers have free will?
- Do animals have free will? What about a slug?
- What did you take away from today's lesson?

Collocation Review

1. best-selling	a. places with him
2. a thought	b. author
3. putting	c. luck
4. If I were to trade	d. reality
5. a matter of	e. experiment
6. not feel overly	f. ashamed
7. chain of	g. off for a long time
8. time to face	h. out to be a rapper
9. not cut	i. events

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Possible answers to follow-up questions:

- 1) ...
- 2) *Harris believes that studies of the brain indicate our decisions are determined by unconscious brain processes before we are aware of them. He suggests that the conscious experience of making a decision is merely an awareness of a choice that has already been made by the brain.*
- 3) *The thought experiments are trying to demonstrate that the choices we believe we make consciously may actually be produced unconsciously. They aim to show that we do not have control over the thoughts and motivations that arise within us, which challenges the concept of free will.*
- 4) ...
- 5) ...
- 6) *Harris hopes to illustrate that even in the face of heinous crimes, if we accept that free will is an illusion, our approach to moral responsibility and legal punishment should be reconsidered. He suggests that criminals may not have had true control over their actions and that understanding the underlying factors (such as past abuse or remorse) should influence how they are judged and rehabilitated.*
- 7) ...
- 8) *Harris's view is that life isn't pointless without free will because our experiences, skills, relationships, and actions still influence the course of our lives. They matter as inputs that shape the future, even if we do not control them in the sense of free will. This deterministic view suggests that while we might not have ultimate control, our actions are still significant in the chain of events that define our lives.*

Vocabulary Answers: 1-b, 2-m, 3-a, 4-L, 5-j, 6-h, 7-f, 8-c, 9-k, 10-g, 11-e, 12-d, 13-i

Vocabulary Review Answers: See original passage

Collocation Answers: 1-b, 2-e, 3-g, 4-a, 5-c, 6-f, 7-i, 8-d, 9-h

¹ Much of this content was summarized after reading <https://mavara.center/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Sam-Harris-Free-Will.pdf>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Harris

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21486293/>

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21315264/>

⁵ <https://www.samharris.org/blog/the-illusion-of-free-will>

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Will_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Will_(book))