WATER DIPLOMACY
TURNING RIVERS INTO BRIDGES

WATER DIPLOMACY – TURNING RIVERS INTO BRIDGES	
This lesson is designed to help students understand key concepts of water diplomacy and transboundary river management. Through activities like a ping-pong debate and negotiation simulations, students explore the economic value of rivers, the concept of water sovereignty, and the challenges of international water diplomacy.	
Subjects	**Time needed**
Civic education, Geography, Natural Sciences, Global Citizenship, English (EFL/CLIC context), Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies, International Relations	120 minutes (can be shortened to 60-70 minutes by framing it as 'debate only', skipping the negotiation stage)
Learning Objective(s)	
By the end of the lesson, students will be able to: • explain the economic and social importance of transboundary rivers and the concepts of upstream/downstream reliance • analyze a complex water conflict from multiple perspectives (human rights vs national sovereignty • construct and present persuasive arguments in a debate setting • negotiate a compromise agreement that addresses the critical needs of opposing parties	
Success criteria	
• I can explain why both Highland and Lowland have valid claims to the river • I can use persuasive language to defend a position I may not personally agree with • I can identify the difference between a 'position' (winning) and an 'interest' (survival/development) • I can collaborate to develop a water-sharing agreement	
Skills Development	
Critical thinking: Analyzing the trade-offs between energy production and agricultural security **Speaking skills**: Public speaking, rebuttal, and using formal debate language **Reflective thinking**: Considering the human impact of political decisions (empathy for	

characters Sara and Omar)
Collaborative problem-solving: Moving from competitive debate to cooperative negotiation

Approach and/or method

communicative approach; cooperative learning; role-play simulation; structured debate (ping pong format)

Key Concepts & Terms

Upstream/downstream, water scarcity, infrastructure (dams, irrigation system)

Materials Needed

Presentation, handout, video: 'The Blue River Conflict', role cards, props (*Diplomatic Pause* card), timer (for the debate rounds)

Assessment

Formative: teacher observation during the "Ping Pong Debate" and negotiation phase Discussion participation during the reflection.

Summative: The "agreement" produced in Step 3c, or the homework task.

Resources

Islam, S., Smith, K., Klimes, M., and Salzberg, A. (Eds.) (2025). *Routledge Handbook of Water Diplomacy*. Routledge

Further resources:
Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements, UN Water Convention documents
Boelens, R., Perreault, T., and Vos, J. (Eds.) (2018). *Water Justice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Bompan, E., Fragapane, F., Iannelli, M., e Pravettoni, R. (2019). *Atlante geopolitico dell'Acqua. Water grabbing, diritti, sicurezza alimentare ed energia*. Milano: Hoepli.
Borgomeo, E., Jägerskog, A., et al. (2021). *Ebb and Flow. Volume 2. Water in the Shadow of Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa*. World Bank
Delli Priscoli, J., and Wolf, A.T. (2009). *Managing and Transforming Water Conflicts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Schroering, C. (2024). *Global Solidarities Against Water Grabbing*. *Without Water, We Have Nothing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
Water Justice (2018). by
Zaveri, E., and Russ, J. et al. (2021). *Ebb and Flow. Volume 1. Water, Migration, and Development*. World Bank.

Online resources:

- Climate Diplomacy: https://climate-diplomacy.org/

In particular, the 'Case studies' section with over 130 case studies on environmental conflicts and cooperation worldwide, and the 'Water Diplomacy' section

Institute for Security and Development Policy: https://www.isdp.eu/

In particular, Dr. Klimes's papers: https://www.isdp.eu/people/martina-klimes/

- International Water Management Institute: https://www.iwmi.org/
- Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI): https://siwi.org/

In particular: Water Diplomacy Tools https://siwi.org/water-and-peace/water-diplomacy-tools/

- Teaching Negotiation Resource Centre: https://www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/teaching-negotiation-resource-center/
- Water Peace and Security Partnership: https://waterpeacesecurity.org/

Preparation:

Print handout and Role Cards. Prepare "Diplomatic Pause" cards. Set up projector and Canva presentation. Plan groups for the debate

Handout 1: Handout for students
Handout 2: Role cards
Handout 3: Diplomatic Pause cards
Presentation: to be projected by teacher
Homework: Researching a Real-World Water Conflict.

Procedure:

1a WARM-UP: Water in Daily life (5 min)

Students work in pairs. Ask them to discuss the questions from the handout:

- How do you use water every day?
- How is water used in your community, beyond your home?

Allow 2-3 minutes, then briefly collect ideas in plenary from pairs.

1b Context: The Economic Value of Rivers (10 min)

Students read the short text from the handout about the economic importance of rivers. In pairs or small groups, they discuss the reflective questions:

- Who owns the water in a river?
- What happens when a river starts in one country and flows into another? Who should control it?

Briefly introduce the concepts: upstream vs downstream countries, water scarcity, etc. using the questions in the relevant slide. Explain that many of the world's rivers cross national borders (e.g. the Nile, the Danube), which often creates political tension but can also lead to cooperation and diplomacy. Tell students they will now explore one such conflict between two fictional countries.

2a THE BLUE RIVER CONFLICT. VIDEO INTRODUCTION (10 min)
Students watch the 'Blue River Crisis' video. While watching, they answer the question in the handout: What is the main problem between the two countries?
Brief class feedback.
Expected answers:

- Highland wants to build a dam
- Lowland depends on the river for agriculture
- The dam could reduce water flow downstream

Explain that the students will now represent the two countries in a diplomatic debate.

2b DEBATE PREP (15 min)
Divide the class into two groups: Team Highland and Team Lowland.
Give out Role Cards.
Students read their card carefully and identify:

- their country's main arguments
- the character they represent (Omar or Sara)
- useful debate phrases.

In teams, they should:

- select their 3 strongest arguments
- decide who will speak in each debate phase
- decide the order in which arguments will be presented
- prepare one possible response to the opposing side.

Encourage students to think from their character's perspective, not their personal opinion.
Teacher circulates and helps with vocabulary, if needed.

2c PING PONG DEBATE (25 min)
Arrange the classroom so that the two teams face each other.
Explain the rules clearly before starting:

Round 1: Opening Statements (2 min each)
One spokesperson from each team presents their country's position in **2 minutes**.
They should explain:

- Why their country's needs are urgent
- Why their position is justified
- What is at stake for their people

Round 2: Crossfire (rapid fire exchange, 45 seconds per turn).
The teams alternate short arguments:
Highland → Lowland → Highland → Lowland.
Rules:

- **Maximum 45 seconds per speaker**

Students may:

- respond to the previous argument
- challenge the opposing side
- introduce a new argument

Each team has one **"Diplomatic Pause"** card.
If used, the team can **stop the debate for 30 seconds** to:

- consult teammates
- clarify ideas
- prepare a response

This reinforces the idea that **diplomacy involves strategy and communication**.

Round 3: The Vote
The class or a small jury of students votes on:

- which side presented the strongest arguments

Emphasize that **the vote is not about who is morally right, but who argued most effectively**.

2d REFLECTION and debriefing (10 min)
Guide a short class discussion using the handout questions:

- Did the debate solve the problem?
- Did the two sides understand each other better?
- If Highland builds the dam anyway, what might Lowland do?

Then ask:

- Is **Omar** wrong? Is **Sara** wrong?

Highlight the key insight: **Both countries have legitimate needs**
Explain that in real life, conflicts like this require **negotiation and compromise**, not just debate.

Tell the students: Now your role changes. You're no longer trying to win the argument. Your goal is to prevent conflict.

3a NEGOTIATION - FROM CONFLICT TO AGREEMENT
3a Team strategy discussion (10 min)
Students return to their original teams.
Using the negotiation section of the handout, they identify:

a. Their country's most important need (non-negotiable 'red line')
b. One possible compromise
c. A proposal they could make to the other country

Explain the key diplomacy concept:

- Position: what you demand
- Interest: why you need it

Example:

Position: "We must build the dam."
Interest: "We need electricity."

3b Mixed negotiation groups (15 min)
Students form mixed negotiation groups containing:

- Highland representatives
- Lowland representatives

Their task: Create **one agreement both countries can accept.**
The agreement must include at least two concrete points, for example:

- guaranteed minimum water flow
- shared dam management
- electricity sharing
- seasonal water release schedules

Students **write their agreement in the handout section "Our Agreement".**
Encourage them to think about **realistic compromise.**

3b PRESENTING AGREEMENTS (10 min)
Each group briefly presents its agreement.
After each presentation, the class discusses:

- Is the agreement fair for both countries?
- Does it benefit one side more than the other?
- Is it a long-term solution or temporary compromise?

Teacher concludes by highlighting an important idea in **water diplomacy:**

Rivers can be sources of conflict – but also opportunities for cooperation.

HOMEWORK

Students research a real transboundary river conflict, such as:

- ***The Nile River*** (Conflict: Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia) – very similar to the Blue River story!
- ***The Mekong River*** (Conflict: China and Southeast Asian nations like Vietnam and Thailand)
- ***The Colorado River*** (Conflict: USA and Mexico)
- ***The Danube River*** (Example of successful cooperation between many European countries)

They identify:

- countries involved
- upstream/downstream dynamics
- the main dispute
- any existing agreements