THE REPAIR REVOLUTION

The throwaway economy: who's responsible?

CEFR: B2 · Upper-intermediate | **Speaking goal:** Distinguish product failure from replacement pressure, evaluate claims and negotiate responsibility.

01 TALK FIRST

1. When did you last replace a product that still worked?

2. Is buying an expensive brand a reliable way to get better durability?

3. What is the difference between something becoming unusable and becoming unfashionable?

02 READ / Designed to break—or designed to sell?

A phone with a weak battery, jeans with a small tear, a perfectly good laptop that cannot run new software: each presents a different reason to replace something. Yet modern shopping culture often treats them alike. Rather than asking whether a product can be fixed, we ask what the latest model costs.

It is tempting to say that everything was built to last in the past. Some older appliances were mechanically simpler and easier to open. However, surviving examples do not tell us how many failed. Today's products may also be safer, more efficient or more capable. The real question is not whether every old product was superior, but why repair has become inconvenient or uneconomical in so many cases.

The phrase 'planned obsolescence' describes deliberate strategies that shorten a product's useful life or encourage earlier replacement. A sealed battery or software restriction can make repair harder. But an item failing after a few years is not, by itself, proof of a deliberate plan. Ordinary wear, design trade-offs, manufacturing defects and changing customer preferences may also explain it. Evidence matters.

Fashion illustrates a different kind of obsolescence. A cheap shirt may still be wearable when it is declared out of style. Rapidly changing trends, targeted advertising and low prices encourage customers to buy more frequently. This is sometimes called perceived obsolescence: the product still works, but we no longer want it. The environmental costs of production and disposal may be far less visible than the price tag.

Repair is not automatically the cheapest option. A new small appliance may cost less than the labour needed to diagnose an old one. Missing spare parts can make the calculation worse. Community Repair Cafés, second-hand markets and clothing alterations offer alternatives, but they cannot solve every problem.

EU rules have begun to shift the incentives. Since July 2026, the right-to-repair measures have required manufacturers to offer repairs for specified product groups covered by EU repairability requirements, normally at a reasonable price. Separate EU consumer rules applying from September 2026 strengthen protection against misleading claims about durability and certain early-obsolescence practices. These are targeted measures, not a universal guarantee that anything can be fixed.

Who should change first? Consumers can buy less and maintain what they own. Manufacturers can make parts available and design for repair. Governments can help align prices with environmental costs. Perhaps the most useful question is not who deserves all the blame, but what would make keeping a product genuinely easier than replacing it.

03 VOCABULARY / Match the words and meanings

The definitions are mixed. Write the matching letter beside each word.

1. obsolescence	**A.** making misleading claims about environmental benefits
2. deliberate	**B.** the ability to remain in good condition over time
3. wear and tear	**C.** getting rid of something
4. trade-off	**D.** capable of being fixed
5. perceived	**E.** components used to replace damaged parts
6. incentive	**F.** something that encourages a particular decision
7. spare parts	**G.** believed or felt, whether or not objectively true
8. repairable	**H.** a choice in which gaining one benefit means losing another
9. disposal	**I.** damage caused by ordinary use over time
10. durability	**J.** done intentionally rather than by accident
11. greenwashing	**K.** the process of becoming out of date or no longer useful

USE THE WORDS / Complete the sentences

1. Fashion marketing can create _____ obsolescence even when clothes still fit.

2. The warranty gives manufacturers an _____ to improve reliability.

3. An old product may show normal _____ rather than a deliberate fault.

4. Making a device waterproof may involve a design _____ with repair access.

Make it yours: use two expressions in your own opinion.

04 READ BETWEEN THE LINES

1. What distinction is central to the article?

A) All old goods were better

B) Failure is not always evidence of a deliberate strategy

C) Software never affects a product's life

2. What does perceived obsolescence mean here?

A) The product is illegal

B) The product works but feels out of fashion

C) The product cannot be recycled

3. Why can repair be unattractive?

A) Repair labour can cost more than a new product

B) All repair services are free

C) New goods never have an environmental cost

4. Which statement about EU law is accurate?

A) Every product must be repaired free

B) Specified groups have repair rights under conditions

C) Fashion trends have been banned

05 WATCH / Optional short classroom video

How Does Electronic Waste Impact the Environment? · PBS Above the Noise

Watch 0:00–4:00 only (4 minutes); the complete film is further viewing.

Open the original video

Before: Predict why people discard electronic products even when they can still work.

During: In the first four minutes, identify two sources of e-waste and one example of a repair barrier.

After: Is it more effective to change consumer habits or product design? Defend your answer.

If video is unavailable: Discarded electronics can contain materials that are dangerous when handled badly. Some products are difficult to repair because of glued components, parts restrictions or software barriers. Consumers may also replace devices simply because newer models attract them.

06 SAY WHAT YOU REALLY THINK

1. When does a product's failure justify accusing a manufacturer of planned obsolescence?

2. Are premium brands usually worth their price in the long run?

3. Does fast fashion respond to consumer demand or create it?

4. Should repair services pay lower taxes than new-product retailers?

5. Could a repairability score influence your next purchase?

6. Is recycling enough if we continue to buy at the same rate?

7. Who should carry the greatest responsibility: consumer, company or government?

07 GROUP DECISION / The consumer responsibility summit

A city wants to reduce the number of working products thrown away. It can fund public repair workshops, give repair vouchers, introduce school life-skills workshops or run a campaign against disposable fashion. Budget allows only two actions.

Consumer group

Demand affordable choices and clear information, not guilt.

Local repair shop

Explain wages, equipment costs and demand for skilled jobs.

Retailer

Defend reasonable prices and customer choice; propose a workable compromise.

Environment group

Prioritise waste reduction and durable behaviour change.

Final outcome: Agree on two funded policies, a success measure and one objection to your plan.

Useful expressions

• It's tempting to assume that ...

- That doesn't necessarily follow.
- A more convincing explanation is ...
- We need to distinguish ... from ...
- I see the trade-off, but ...
- The most realistic intervention would be ...

08 KEEP EXPLORING / Read & Watch More

These are optional resources to explore after class, not compulsory homework.

READ · B1+ · 4 min: EU: new consumer right to repair

Official 2026 overview of the products and obligations covered.

READ · B2+ · 6 min: Smartphone repairability scores

Find the repairability rating, spare-parts and update requirements.

WATCH · B2+ · 10:20: PBS: where electronic waste goes

Investigates planned obsolescence and global electronic waste.

WATCH · B2+ · 12:35: DW Planet A: can fast fashion be green?

Challenges the sustainability claims of major clothing brands.

Think about it: Which change would reduce waste most?

SOURCES BEHIND THE READING

Original English reading, informed by these primary references. The legal measures cover specified products, not every item.

European Commission - right to repair (2026)

Council of the EU - repair rights explained

US education statistics - Home Economics history

More ideas? Suggest a topic at https://bilingually-curious.pages.dev/suggest/