Food delivery riders call on platforms to open up AI 'black box' they say has cut pay

LEVEL B2


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I. WARM-UP

1. How often do you use food delivery apps? Why?
2. What factors should decide a rider's pay?
3. What do you think an algorithm does at work?

II. KEY VOCABULARY

algorithm
A set of rules a computer follows to make a decision or prediction.

automation
The use of machines and software to do tasks without much human control.

dynamic
Changing based on conditions; in pricing, it moves up or down in real time.

allocate
To give or assign something, such as jobs or resources, to people.

class action
A legal case brought by many people with the same complaint.

breach
To break a law, rule or agreement.

funding
Money provided for a project or organisation.

concealed
Hidden or not made public.

III. READING

Food delivery riders in Edinburgh say their pay has fallen as Deliveroo, Uber Eats and Just Eat increase automation. They want platforms to open the AI "black box" so riders can see how the algorithm allocates orders and sets rates.

Some riders report earning about half of what they made several years ago and say conditions have worsened. The group works with the Workers' Observatory, created by gig economy workers with academics at the University of St Andrews and the University of Edinburgh.

The observatory has funding for the next decade and tests how dynamic pricing affects earnings. Trades unions want the practice banned because it leaves income uncertain. Research linked Uber's 2023 pricing algorithm to lower hourly pay for drivers.

This week, drivers from the UK, the Netherlands and other countries launched a class action in Amsterdam, alleging the system breaches data rules and pushes pay down. Uber denies adjusting prices for an individual driver and points to features such as GPS. Riders say they wish platforms would explain the system clearly instead of keeping key data concealed.

Reading text adapted from reporting by **The Guardian***: "Food delivery riders call on platforms to...". Original article linked at theenglishwire.com.*

IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Where are the riders who say their pay has fallen?
2. Which three platforms are named in the report?
3. What does the Workers' Observatory study?
4. What effect did research link to Uber's 2023 pricing algorithm?
5. What does Uber deny about its pricing system?

V. DISCUSSION

1. Should platforms reveal more about how their algorithms work?
2. Is dynamic pricing fair for workers in the gig economy?
3. What data would you want to judge pay fairness?
4. How could riders and platforms improve trust?

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Wish / if only

Use wish/if only to say you want things to be different. For the present, use wish + past simple; for a change you want someone else to make, wish + would + verb also works; for regrets about the past, use wish + had + past participle.

> *"Riders say they* **wish platforms would explain** *the system clearly."*
>
> *"Many riders* **wish they had seen** *past rates earlier."*

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. Riders wish companies (open) ___ the AI data now. _____
2. If only the platforms (be) ___ more open before pay fell. _____
3. Riders wish they (know) ___ how the algorithm sets pay. _____
4. Drivers wish the pay system (not/change) ___ in 2023. _____
5. Unions wish regulators (ban) ___ dynamic pricing now. _____

Teacher's Notes

TEACHERS ONLY

These notes are designed to help you get the most out of this lesson. Please do not share this page with students.


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I. LESSON GUIDE

- Timing: 8–10 minutes warm-up, 8–10 minutes vocabulary, 12–15 minutes reading and comprehension, 8–10 minutes grammar, 10–12 minutes discussion.
- Pre-teach: algorithm, automation, dynamic pricing, allocate, class action, breach.
- Set a gist task first (What do riders want?), then scan for names, places and dates.
- Differentiate by role: stronger students summarise the legal case; others map who says what (riders, unions, Uber).

II. DISCUSSION FACILITATION TIPS

1. Start with a show of hands, then pair students with opposing views to swap reasons.
2. Elicit examples of surge pricing students have seen, then compare worker vs customer impacts.
3. Prompt concrete items (per-order rate, wait time, travel distance) and why each matters.
4. Use role-play pairs (rider vs platform) to propose one step each to build trust.

III. EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Debate: In teams, prepare and deliver a 2-minute case for or against banning dynamic pricing.

Writing: In pairs, write a 70-word rider request asking platforms to explain their algorithm.

IV. ANSWER KEY OVERVIEW

Comprehension questions: short factual answers from the text.

Grammar exercise: Wish / if only

Discussion: open-ended. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

Answer Key

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These answers are for teachers only. Please do not share this page with students.


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IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Where are the riders who say their pay has fallen?
   Edinburgh, Scotland.
2. Which three platforms are named in the report?
   Deliveroo, Uber Eats and Just Eat.
3. What does the Workers' Observatory study?
   How dynamic pricing affects earnings.
4. What effect did research link to Uber's 2023 pricing algorithm?
   Lower hourly pay for drivers.
5. What does Uber deny about its pricing system?
   That it adjusts prices for an individual driver.

V. DISCUSSION

Open answers. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Key point: Use wish/if only to say you want things to be different. For the present, use wish + past simple; for a change you want someone else to make, wish + would + verb also works; for regrets about the past, use wish + had + past participle. (Example 2 constructed.)

> *"Riders say they* **wish platforms would explain** *the system clearly."*
>
> *"Many riders* **wish they had seen** *past rates earlier."*

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. Riders wish companies ___ the AI data now.
   opened / would open
2. If only the platforms ___ more open before pay fell.
   had been
3. Riders wish they ___ how the algorithm sets pay.
   knew
4. Drivers wish the pay system ___ in 2023. **hadn't changed / had not changed**
5. Unions wish regulators ___ dynamic pricing now.
   banned / would ban