

Classroom Activity: Group Introductions

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Reference Data:

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This paper describes a group introduction activity which would take place in the first class periods of an EFL Oral Communication class. Students form groups of four, interview each other, and present their peers to the class. The activity takes about 3 hours of class time, and is designed to create a relaxed, safe atmosphere in the EFL classroom.

本論はEFLのオーラル・コミュニケーションの授業で行うグループ紹介の活動を記述するものである。この活動はコースの最初の授業で実施するもので、学生は4人のグループに分けられ、お互いにインタビューし、それをもとに自分のグループのメンバーをクラス全体で紹介する。この他者紹介の活動は、外国語の授業にリラックスした安心できる雰囲気を作り上げるために考案され、授業3時間分(3コマ分)程度を要する。

Why Group Introductions?

The first time I faced an EFL class of 50 students in Japan I was quite taken aback, having come from a school in Europe, which had classes of 10 students. As I had found the small class size effective for language learning, I immediately wished to recreate that type of atmosphere in my large university classes. In my experience, the group introduction activity usually takes a minimum of three hours of class time, half for interviews and half for introductions. I find the students enjoy the activity, and usually use English fairly freely for communication by the end of the activity. The activity is useful for most of my EFL classes from basic level to advanced, except classes of students at the most basic level.

Creating a Small Class Atmosphere in Large EFL Classes

I noticed that often when students enter a large class, they remain in the groups they entered in, with friends, acquaintances, students from their major they met in orientation camp, etc., and they often stay in this set group throughout the semester, or year. I have found that controlling the atmosphere in a small classroom is much more manageable than a large classroom, therefore my challenge was to create a small class atmosphere in a large class.

Separating Students into Small Groups

I start by mentally dividing the total number of students in the class by four and then having students count off up to the resulting number. They then must find their other numbers to form groups of four. In doing this, I can usually effectively separate students from their acquaintances, creating groups of students who don't know each other. Then I have the students interview each other in their groups. Three students interview one student, until all students have been interviewed. I have all students take notes on the interviewee, using a form that I hand out to the students (see Figure 1).

Topic	Hiroaki	Shinya	Yuka	Mari

Figure 1. Interview form (Students write the names in after they receive the form)

Interview Topics

Usually I have students cover basic topics that I provide them. While discussion of the areas that may be of interest to them is a valuable exercise, the time consumption may outweigh the benefits. Of course topics such as *family, hobbies, musical interests, school, pets, like/dislikes, food preferences, dreams, future plans*, and so forth are standard. In addition I try to have the interviewers delve into deeper waters: *three things we should know about you, two secrets you have, your treasures, future plans, how would you like to see yourself in 30 years, how would you like others to see you*, and so on.

I give the groups enough time to thoroughly elicit full responses from each student. Allowing them to have ample time gives students a depth of knowledge of each other quickly. Having only one, or sometimes two, classes per week necessitates a rapid immersion into this communicative environment.

The Introductions

I then instruct the students on how to structure their introductions. Generally, students are allowed to produce their own methods to introduce each other, but there some important stipulations. One is that they should not simply introduce each other in pairs; it must be a *group introduction*, with two students introducing two others at the same time, taking turns speaking, of course. I also stipulate that the introducees be in the center, between the introducers. For example, after interviewing Shinya and Yuka about various topics, Hiroaki and Mari would agree on how to introduce them to the class (see Figure 2).

Topic	Hiroaki	Shinya	Yuka	Mari
Name		X		
Family		X	X	
Pets				
Hobbies			X	
Major			X	
Future Occupation		X		
Dream		X		

Figure 2. Hiroaki's interview form

Hiroaki might present the information about the areas marked with an X, leaving Mari to present the other squares. During the introductions, Shinya's and Yuka's names should be said as often as possible, to help the rest of the class remember who they are.

Interview Questions and Discussion Areas

Depending on the level of students and the time available, teachers may choose to give students a prepared handout for interviews, or have the students create their own questions

to ask and areas to explore. It is possible for each group of four to come up with their own questions, but this method is rather haphazard, and often too time-consuming. A more effective method is to ask the class as a whole to offer what they would want to know about their fellow students. You may have each group offer 10 categories each and write them on the blackboard. The class can as a whole then choose which 10, 15 or 20 questions/categories they would most like to know about their peers. For myself, to save time I give them a list of areas to inquire about, and specific questions to ask, most of which I have collected from students' suggestions in previous classes.

The Introductions Begin

After choosing some fair method of determining the order of the introductions, and each group knows when they present, the introductions begin. I usually spend some time "on stage" with each group to try and make them feel relaxed and safe. I ensure that the four students are lined up A, B, C, D. After Student A and Student D introduce the center two students, the students exchange places and Student B and Student C introduce the other two students. I have found that this arrangement is most relaxing and conducive to a forthcoming presentation.

At the risk of being obvious, I will show a brief excerpt of a typical introduction. Naoto and Nozomi could switch back and forth between Aya and Izumi (as demonstrated below), or they could both introduce Aya completely, and then finish up with Izumi.

Introduction Group: Naoto and Nozomi introducing Aya and Izumi

- Naoto: This is Aya. She lives in Setagaya with her grandmother, father, mother, younger brother, and her two cats, Mina and Tom.
- Nozomi: This is Izumi. She's from Yokohama, but now lives in the student dorm on campus. She has a roommate from Canada, and is happy to have a chance to practice English on a daily basis. There are four in her family: herself, her father, mother, and older sister, who's graduating this year from university. She has no pets, but loves dogs.
- Naoto: Aya is majoring in International Relations, and her dream is to work for the U.N. She's also interested in International Law. She belongs to the tennis club, and in her spare time, she likes to cook.
- Nozomi: Izumi is a French major, but doesn't yet know what she wants to be in the future. Izumi belongs to the ESS, English Speaking Society. She likes to watch movies in her spare time.

After Naoto and Nozomi complete their introductions, they change places with Aya and Izumi, who in turn begin their introductions of the two who just introduced them.

Follow-up Questions

After all interviews are completed, the class has a chance to ask follow-up questions. For a higher level class, I would let the students ask questions as they wish. However, if the class is reticent to speak, I will prompt them by calling on

students to ask questions. When necessary, I model follow-up questions. For lower level classes I assign the previous group in the order to ask the questions, i.e., Student A from the previous presentation would ask his/her counterpart a question, and so forth. It is better that the previous group to ask the questions, thus allowing other groups to concentrate on their upcoming presentation. For basic level classes, I write model questions on the board to ask, using *wh* questions. Students can rely totally on these questions, though most come up with their own questions. These follow-up questions ensure that the whole class is involved in the introductions.

Each activity is designed to create a safe atmosphere, in which each student has a stake in the successful completion of each oral assignment. It is important to me as a teacher that the class become a unified whole, in which each student feels capable of speaking, capable of saying something valuable, feels that others will support them, and feels a sense of responsibility toward the other students in the class.

Conclusion

I have found that beginning a semester with group introductions in large oral communication classes is quite an effective ice breaker. The atmosphere in my classes when I begin this way, is often relaxed and energetic. In addition, I use the same general format in group presentations throughout the semester. Students then follow a similar method of presentation and follow-up questions in the subsequent presentations. Having the students experience this format in the first classes of the semester or year allows them to become familiar and comfortable with this method. In my experience I have found that the process is dynamic and does not seem to lose its vitality or get stale.