

Getting Students Talking



Lisa Greenfield

has been teaching an off-site, multi-level, community-based ESOL class in SeaTac for Literacy Source for the last two years. To start it all, she got her BA in Linguistics from UW in Seattle, then taught English in Guatemala for one year, then got her MA in TESOL, again, from UW in Seattle. She's been with Literacy Source ever since and loves learning about all the stories each student brings to class. She especially loves potluck days because food speaks directly to her heart.

I've always struggled to find a good way to get my students talking from the very beginning of class. While teaching in grad school, I would ask a question each day as I took role, but it felt very artificial and forced. During a high-level listening and speaking class, I put a topic on the board and each student had to come up with a question to ask another student during role. This was much better, but required a fairly high level all-around for it to work smoothly. I now teach an extremely mixed-level class, I don't take role formally, and my class has open enrollment, so on any given day I could have new students. I've tried many things with this class: grids where students ask four others if they like various things (see Table 1), speaking lines where we have one or two questions that students ask each other as they move down the line, and having a question typed up and scrambled on the board that students have to unscramble and then ask each other, to name a few. All of the things I've tried have had their successes and failures, but none of them have really lent themselves to being easily reproduced and easily explained to new students.

When I first started teaching this class and quickly realized that it was going to be quite different from any other class I'd taught before, I made my way to my local Dollar Tree to see what their teaching section could offer me. I picked up many things on that first trip, one of them being a set of die-cut letters. I wasn't sure how I was going to use them, but they were only \$1, so why not grab a set? Last quarter, I thought I'd try doing a question of the day that mirrored so many of the *code-breakers* I'd done on the backs of cereal boxes when I was younger. I laid the letters in one pile and the numbers in another and put the letter *A* at the beginning with the number *1* just below it and then added the letter *B* with the number *2* below it to show what should go next. The first time I did it, I gathered all the students and told them what I wanted them to do. Once they were done, I handed each person a slip of paper like in Table 2 and they had to write out the question. Next, I told them to ask every person in the room their question. It worked out so well that I added it to our daily routine and now all I have to do is set out the letters and numbers and they do all the rest themselves.

Here's why I *love* this: it's extremely reproducible, it takes little explanation, it gets everyone out of their seats and talking to everyone else, and, most importantly for me, *every* student can do it, regardless of level. In terms of reproducibility, I just keep the letters and numbers in a small envelope in my teacher box (the joys of being an off-site teacher) and I just have to change up the little paper for each day. When I was doing the grids it took me so long to think of four new things to ask about each day that I was spending more time planning for my warm-ups than we were actually spending doing them. Explaining the organization of the letters and numbers was probably the most difficult part of getting into this routine, but once a few students got it down, I could easily leave it

to them to show their classmates. Explaining how to fill in the question is so easy once all the letters and numbers are organized; I usually just show new students how to do the first two letters and then they are on their own. The beauty of this is that everyone is doing it at the same time, so if someone has a question, it's a great opportunity for another student to help them with it. For the first year that I was teaching this class, I really struggled to find ways to get my students to move from their seats to talk to others. Any time we did the grid questions, they would mostly just ask the people sitting near them. When we did speaking lines, it was easy to see when some of them were ready to just go sit down for the rest of class. When we did the cut up question on the board, it was even worse because one or two people would tell me how to rearrange the question from their seats and then only ask the people sitting around them. This activity gets everyone walking over to the table with numbers and letters on it, and then walking around the whole classroom to make sure they ask everyone, and it also communicates

to new students that we're a get-up-and-walk-around kind of class. It's also great because my students tend to sit with the same people every day and this really helps us build a community where everyone knows each other's names and is ready and willing to talk with everyone else. My favorite thing about this warm-up though is that every student can participate. Whether they're still learning the alphabet or they're writing short essays, there's something in this activity for everyone to do.

I love how easy it is for me because no teacher ever has enough time to do all the things. But I mostly love that every day my students come to class, they know they are going to learn something about their classmates and they're going to have little conversations in English before they even open up their binders. I don't think I could ever go back to the way it was before.