

Rapport-Building Activity

by NICHOLAS HUZIEFF



A "yellow trumpet" made of playdough

What exactly is rapport? In a teaching context, rapport can mean knowing your students and their different learning styles and using your relationship with them to teach at a more personal level. Because the activity described in this article involves using playdough (a colorful modeling substance) while giving learners opportunities to interact with others, it naturally appeals to a variety of learning styles, including visual, kinesthetic, linguistic, logical, and social. Activating students' different learning styles motivates them to be more engaged in the task at hand and serves as a means for them to naturally build rapport with one another and with the teacher.

SETUP

This engaging and fun activity is meant for English language learners with at least a pre-intermediate level of proficiency in English. The time required to carry out the activity is between 40 minutes and an hour. As the

teacher, you will need chalk and a blackboard or markers and a whiteboard. In addition, you will need tables or movable desks for groups of three to six students (depending on the size of the class), enough pencils or pens and paper for all students, and modeling clay or playdough.

If no premade playdough is available, it is possible to make your own using flour, water, salt, vegetable oil, cream of tartar, and food coloring. See <http://www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Make-Playdough-Play-doh> for instructions.

PROCEDURE

You will need to decide how many students should be in each group (no fewer than three and no more than six). Prepare lumps of clay or playdough for each group. There should be enough so that each student will have a lump to work with. Offering a variety of colors can make the activity more interesting.

Then follow these steps to carry out the activity:

1. Divide the class into groups. If possible, each group should sit at a table, or students should push their desks together.
2. Hand out pieces of paper to students in each group (A4-sized paper works well), one piece per student.
3. Ask students to fold their paper in half.
4. Have a student from each group get lumps of clay or playdough and take the lumps back to his or her group. Each group should have a lump of each color available.
5. Tell students that they are going to form something that represents them in some way (a favorite food, a favorite sport, an object they really like, etc.). Give

students a few minutes to decide what they would like to create.

6. Ask students to take a piece of their favorite color of clay and make their creation to represent themselves. Tell them to place their object on the top half of their paper (see the photo on page 35).
7. While students are making their creations, write on the board: *My name is (first name) (last name). This (adjective) (noun) represents me because . . .*
8. When students are done making their creations, direct students' attention to the board. Explain that each student at the table will write the sentences, filling in information that is true for themselves and their creations, on the bottom half of their paper.

Model the writing you want them to do by providing students with your own example. You might say, "*My name is (first name) (last name). This yellow trumpet represents me because I enjoy playing music and making other people happy.*" Write the fill-ins into the sentences on the board. (With upper-intermediate and advanced students, encourage them to elaborate on their explanations, based on their understanding of symbolism. An example would be, "A trumpet represents me because yellow is a symbol of happiness in my country, and a trumpet is at the front of the band to play the melody loudly and clearly so that everyone may hear it.")

9. Tell students they will now have their turn to write their own names and explanations as you have done, using the sentence model on the board. But make sure to tell students not to show other people in their group what they have written yet! One way to model this part is by covering up the part of the sentence on the board that says, "*because I enjoy playing music and making other people happy*" with a long strip of paper on which you

have written, "*Can you guess why this _____ represents me?*" In the blanks, write "yellow trumpet."

10. Sit down at the nearest table and model for students how they will proceed. First, they will introduce themselves, using the sentences they have just finished writing to describe their object. Second, they will ask the question they have just seen you write (filling in words that identify their own object where you wrote "yellow trumpet"). Third, they will let other group members make guesses. Finally, they will reveal the reason their creation represents them. If necessary, you can say, "Hello, my name is (first name) (last name). Can you guess why this yellow trumpet represents me?" so that students will hear the correct intonation.
11. Students take turns introducing themselves and getting their group mates to guess what they have made and the reason they have chosen to make that particular creation. After the student gives his or her reason, others might ask questions in order to get the student to say more about it.
12. While students are speaking with one another in groups, circulate and note down language issues that you hear, such as unclear pronunciation, vocabulary gaps, or grammatical errors. You may also want to record other elements of language usage that are relative strengths (depending on the specific aims of the particular class). These notes provide a useful starting point for planning out upcoming lessons in ways that will address certain key language points as well as other aspects of language usage you deem important.

VARIATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

For a change in group dynamics, you can either let students form new groups or elect to group learners according to the color of their individual clay creations, thereby

creating larger groups. For example, you may say, “Everyone with yellow objects please sit at this table; everyone with green objects please sit at that table” You may group students according to any other criterion as you see fit, allowing for flexibility in students’ choice of grouping.

Then, with learners in new groups, they should work together to create a true or fictional story based on their individual creations. You should encourage students to create a positive story that combines everyone’s creation in some way. You can tell a short example story, based on a few creations other than what students have themselves created, in order to increase motivation. Encourage originality and let learners have fun forming their own group stories!

While listening to other groups’ stories, listeners could rate the story for creativity, dramatic presentation, and aesthetics.

While circulating, monitoring and listening attentively to students’ conversations, you should be sure to note down language usage. Depending on group size and time allotted, you might even ask groups to break the story into a beginning, middle, and ending, allowing each person in the group to tell a part of the story to the whole class.

Another possibility is to ask students to combine their creations to form something that symbolizes what they all share in common. The playdough could be combined into one larger creation—for example, a model of the world to symbolize world peace—or individual creations could be retained and used together in an organization or system. For example, a group of animals and musical instruments could be brought together to form a circus to symbolize happiness and adventure. This task provides another natural platform for communication, creativity, and rapport building.

SECONDARY BENEFITS

In addition to building rapport, this activity could provide the English language teacher with

an early informal assessment of the reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities of the students. First assessments are sometimes a challenge to complete in the opening week of classes, and these activities allow the teacher an initial opportunity to observe and to listen to genuine language being produced at the beginning of a course. The teacher can then specifically note students’ strengths and challenges, and again, this information could inform future lesson planning.

CONCLUSION

At the end, consider challenging your learners to come up with other ways to use the clay or playdough to practice English. If necessary, you could suggest examples of, for instance, demonstrating comparative adjectives, illustrating emotions, or creating a solution to a school-wide social problem with a sequence of steps. You may be surprised at the kinds of ideas your learners produce!

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Photo by Nicholas Huzieff