

Teacher Introduction Activity for Improving Rapport and Critical Thinking

by AUSTIN PACK



Left: A rope that could be used for a camping tent

Right: A coin bearing the year (2012) in which the author's daughter was born

The purposes of this activity are for the teacher to build better rapport with students and for students to improve their ability to think critically. In this activity, the teacher brings several personal items from his or her life to share with students. These items should be carefully selected and should in some way represent the values, experiences, or characteristics of the teacher. Students, working in groups, discuss what the objects are, what they do or what they are used for, and what they might represent in the teacher's life. This activity might be best to use during the first week of a course, as it helps students learn about their teacher and practice their critical-thinking and oral English skills.

SETUP

This communicative activity is ideal for English language learners of at least a low-intermediate proficiency level. The time required to complete the activity is around 30 minutes. Before class, you will need to carefully select personal items from your life that you are comfortable sharing with students. Choose items that students may not know the name of in English and may not know the use or meaning of. Be sure to choose items that students won't break as they handle them. Items should be appropriate for your students and the educational

environment. Depending on the context, it may be wise to avoid items with religious or political significance so as to not distract from the purpose of the activity.

This activity works best when each group of students has an item; therefore, the number of items you need to bring will depend on the number of students in your class. Ideally, students should be put into groups of four or five, with each group given one item. In teaching situations with a large number of students, you may consider taking pictures of your items and bringing multiple sets of copies for students to look at in groups. Alternatively, you may consider presenting pictures of the items by using a projector, if one is available.

Items that have worked well in my classes in the past include the following:

1. A small rope used for a camping tent, representing my interest in the outdoors, hiking, and backpacking
2. Extra-fine sandpaper, which I use to file and shape the nails on my right hand for playing the guitar
3. A collector's coin, which my father gave to my daughter the day she was born (the year inscribed on the coin is the same year my daughter was born)
4. A bag of red peppers, representing my love of spicy food
5. An infant's nasal aspirator (because my son was just recently born)
6. A souvenir statue of Leonidas from Greece, representing my experience of living in Greece and my ability to speak Greek

When deciding on what items to bring, you might consider selecting items with a variety of levels of difficulty. That is, for some of the items it is somewhat easy to learn something about the teacher, while other items are more abstract and unusual, thus requiring students to use critical thinking and creativity.

PROCEDURE

1. Divide students into groups of four or five. If possible, students should sit at a table or have their desks pushed together in order to make communication among them as easy as possible.
2. Give each group of students one of your personal items.
3. Explain that each group has been given a personal item that in some way represents an important aspect of your life. Write the following questions on the board and ask students to discuss possible answers in English:
 - A. What is the item?
 - B. What does it do, or what can you do with it?
 - C. What might it tell you about your teacher?
4. Give each group three to five minutes to look over the item and discuss the questions. Have students write down their answers.
5. After three to five minutes, rotate the items so that each group now has a different item. Note that for large classes, you will need to modify the activity. As suggested above under Setup, instead of giving students the actual items, you can consider using multiple sets of pictures of your items, or using a computer and projector to show the items, one at a time, for groups to discuss.
6. Repeat Steps 4 and 5 until each group has had a chance to handle each item and try to answer the questions.
7. Collect the items and, with the whole class, discuss them one by one. Give students an opportunity to share their answers. If necessary, ask questions to

After this activity, students seem more invested in the class and more willing to open up and participate.

guide them toward the “correct” answers. For example, you might ask students about the kind of situation or location students might find the item. Consider pointing out clues that might be part of the item, like a word, a date, or other details.

8. Ask students what they have learned from the activity. In the discussion, consider highlighting some of the benefits of the activity that are mentioned below.

EXTENSIONS AND VARIATIONS

1. A modified version of this activity can be repeated throughout the semester. Instead of the teacher bringing items, a student in each group is required to bring the items. When the activity is repeated throughout the semester, students should be put into the same groups, where they discuss what each item is, what it can be used for, and what information they might learn about the student who brought the item. In this variation, the items brought by the student remain within the group and do not get passed on to other groups.
2. Instead of having students bring items to discuss in groups, students can give an oral presentation in which they stand in front of the class and share briefly the significance of one item or several items. Consider repeating this activity from time to time throughout the semester, with several students presenting each time. With large classes, you may need to manage the time by limiting the number of items students can share.

BENEFITS AND CONCLUSION

One benefit of this activity that I have observed is that it strengthens rapport

between students and teacher. Students appreciate learning about their teacher’s life, and after this activity, students seem more invested in the class and more willing to open up and participate.

Another benefit is that the activity develops critical-thinking skills. Often, if students have never seen the item before, they don’t know what it is called and don’t know what the item is used for. Students will look carefully at the item for clues and then develop their critical-thinking skills by discussing the most likely uses for the item. Students can be quite creative, finding meaningful ways to use the item that are different from the original intended use.

In addition, students practice the important skill of circumlocution. If they do not know the particular name of an item in English, they must communicate by using words they do know in order to describe the item. This skill is beneficial because when students are in conversation and don’t know a particular word, they are still able to maintain communication by finding a meaningful way around the word they do not know.

This activity will need to be altered to fit the needs of your classroom. Don’t hesitate to modify the lesson by changing the timing, number of items, or questions for students to discuss. Also, don’t be afraid to bring creative and abstract items to share with students. Sometimes the most difficult items are the ones students like discussing the most. You will be surprised by what your students come up with!

Austin Pack has been teaching English, Greek, and linguistics since 2007. He is currently an EAP language tutor at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China.

Photos by Austin Pack