

1 Getting to know our students

Learning their names

Learning students' names quickly in large classes isn't easy, but it is essential because:

- It promotes good basic human relationships.
- It is helpful in monitoring student records (test results, attendance, assignments).
- Calling people by their names is basic recognition that they are individuals and are being respected as such.
- Calling students by their names helps us to call them to order.
- We begin to feel more comfortable with a class as soon as we know our students' names.
- Students themselves feel better in a class where they know the names of classmates.

Learning students' names is particularly problematic and especially important in the adult education center arrangement, where new students may appear every night. In such a setting, new students feel much more welcome when they are introduced by name and perceive that it is important for them to become familiar with the names of other students. Like most people, students often have strong emotional connections to their names, and we benefit from tapping some of these connections for the purpose of language learning.

A word of warning is needed here. In western cultures people are used to addressing each other by their first names. This, however, is not the rule in many oriental cultures, and an insistence on a first name familiarity can make many students uncomfortable. It is therefore wise to ask for the name students want to be called in class rather than for their first name.

Learning students' names is an activity we need to practice at the beginning of a session. I have discovered, however, that students enjoy doing name exercises throughout the session and profit from continuing to do them.

Below are several activities that can help us to learn students' names.

1.1 Name toss

Aim	fluency practice, learning names
Level	all levels
Time	10–20 minutes
Preparation	Bring several soft balls to class (or if you don't have balls, any piece of soft material rolled or tied into a ball shape will do).

Procedure

- 1 Students stand in circles of 10–15 students.
- 2 The first student takes the ball and says, *My name is ...*, saying his/her own name as he/she throws it to another.
- 3 The second student does the same, until all or most of the students have participated.
- 4 The process is repeated, but this time the student has to say, *Your name is ...* as he/she throws the ball to a student whose name he/she has learned.
- 5 A volunteer throws the ball around the entire circle, saying, *Your name is ...* as he/she throws the ball to each student.
- 6 The procedure is repeated with several volunteers.
- 7 Circulate among the circles to learn as many names as possible.
- 8 Repeat the procedure several days, always asking students to move into a circle where they do not yet know classmates' names.

Notes

- In classes where desks are nailed down and it is impossible for students to form a circle, students can stand at their desks.
- I have also discovered that classes of adults enjoy this activity. I have practiced it with sophisticated Chinese engineers as well as with Mexican housewives.
- In classes where many new students appear, the name toss can be used often for review.

Variation

I have also used the toss game for learning vocabulary. Each student takes on a word from a previously studied list and the tossing is done just as it was for names.

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1.2 Picture it

Aim	learning names, fluency practice, creating supportive environment
Level	intermediate–advanced
Time	15–20 minutes

Procedure

- 1 Students use large pieces of note paper or stick several pieces of paper together. The paper serves as each student's individual poster. If you have large poster paper available, use it. (See Box 1 for examples.)
- 2 Students write their name in large letters on their poster and add a picture or mnemonic that will help the class remember his/her name in the target language.
- 3 In pairs, students explain their posters to each other.
- 4 Each pair joins another pair, and partners explain each other's posters to the group of four.
- 5 Circulate and listen to name explanations, learning as many names as possible.
- 6 Students post their presentation posters around the room, where they stay posted for a period of time.

Optional follow-ups

- Each day 5–6 students explain their poster to the entire class.
- Each day 2–3 students explain the poster of a classmate whose mnemonic they remember well.

Box 1 Examples of explanations

My name is Won Ho. Please remember there is just *One Ho*. There are not two Ho's.

My name is Natalie. I have written it in three syllables *Na ta lie*. That is because I have three daughters. I have drawn the pictures of my three daughters.

My name is Saif. My name means 'sword'. I have drawn a picture of a sword. The last part of my name is 'if'. Remember that *if* I want to, I can cut things with the sword.

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1.3 Names as crosswords

Aim learning names, practicing letter formation

Level intermediate–advanced

Time 10–15 minutes

Procedure

- 1 Several students print their names in large clear letters on the board.
- 2 Other students write in their names as a crossword formation starting with a letter that appears in any name on the board, or they write their names across any of the names using any letter that already appears.
- 3 As more names appear, more and more letters will be available until all names appear on the board. (See Box 2 for an example.)
- 4 Students volunteer to read all the names in the name cluster where their own names appear. As they read the names, they identify the students who are called by those names.

Variation

Start with only one name: inevitably sooner or later all the students will be able to add their names, producing one big cluster. The activity thus promotes class solidarity as students will identify with those classmates whose names cross their own.

Box 2 Example of a name cluster

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R U T H
  A
  M   I
  M A R G A R E T
  Y   I   O
      S   B   S
          E L L I E
          R   R
          T   G
              E
  
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1.4 The story of my name

Aim learning names, learning about students' lives, talking, reading

Level intermediate–advanced

Time 20–30 minutes

Procedure

- 1 On the board, write a number of questions relating to the students' names. (See Box 3 for examples.)
- 2 Students stand up and mingle, sharing their name stories with as many classmates as possible until you stop the phase. While they talk, circulate to hear as many name stories as possible.
- 3 From their seats, students talk about as many facts as they can remember from any classmate's name story.
- 4 Classmates whose name stories are recalled verify or correct the facts.

Box 3 Questions that elicit name stories

Does your name have a meaning?
Why did your parents call you by your name?
Do you know what name you would have been given if you had been born the opposite sex?
Do you like your name?
Would you prefer another name?
Have you ever wanted to change your name?
Do you get angry when people mispronounce or misspell your name?
Do you think that your name is part of your identity?

Notes

- In classes where moving around is impossible, students exchange information with those sitting next to them, in back of them, and in front of them.
- The story about names by Sandra Cisneros in her book *The House on Mango Street* (Houston: Artepublico Press, 1985) makes a good complementary reading for the name story exercise.

1.5 Names and adjectives

Aim learning names, vocabulary acquisition (adjectives)

Level intermediate–advanced

Time 10–20 minutes

Procedure

- 1 Students think of an adjective that describes them and that begins with the same letter as their name. (See Box 4 for examples.)
- 2 The first students in each row say their names preceded by the adjective they have chosen. Example: *musical Maria*.
- 3 The second students repeat the first students' names together with the adjectives and add their own name and adjective combinations. Example: *musical Maria, happy Henry*.
- 4 The process is repeated until the last students in each row have said all the name-adjective combinations.
- 5 The last students in each row repeat the name-adjective combinations for the benefit of the whole class. Other students in the row help them if they get stuck.

Optional follow-ups

- Students call out name and adjective combinations of students not in their own rows.
- Students in need of a special challenge are invited to call out the names of an entire row that is not their own.
- Class reviews new adjectives learned.

Box 4 Possible name-adjective combinations

nice Natalie, ambitious Anna, magnificent Mario, particular Pelegrina, busy Bettina, marvelous Mohammed, shy Susannah, talented Theresa

Note

Instead of doing the activity in rows, we can do it in small groups. After students become thoroughly familiar with the names of one group, they can form new groups to learn the names of other students.

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1.6 I am and I love

Aim	learning names, simple sentence practice, vocabulary acquisition
Level	intermediate–advanced
Time	10–15 minutes

Procedure

- 1 Sitting in groups of 10–15, students say their names and the names of something or someone they love. Examples: *I am Ali and I love ice-cream; I am Irma and I love my husband; I am Keiko and I love New York.*
- 2 Students recall who loves what and call out what they know.
- 3 Students tell each other whose love comes close to a fondness of their own and explain why.

Variation

You can also use *I am and I am afraid of* or *I am and I hate* in the same manner.

1.7 Desk placards

Aim	learning names, taking attendance
Level	beginners–advanced
Preparation	Before your first class make 5" by 18" (12 cm by 46 cm) two-sided placards that are folded in the middle so that they can stand. Make one placard for each student. On one side print each student's name in bold letters. If your office provides student pictures, paste the picture of each student next to his/her name.



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Procedure

- 1 As students enter your class, ask what their name is and have them find their own placard.
- 2 Students place their placards on their desks in front of them where you can see them.
- 3 Continue the procedure for as many lessons as you need to learn students' names.

Notes

- You know who is absent by seeing who has not picked up his/her placard.
- My colleague who teaches classes of ninety in Japan told me that his placards are in place the entire semester.

Acknowledgement

I learned this strategy from Dawn Yonally, whom I met at the TESOL 1996 conference in Chicago.

1.8 Use real pictures

Aim	writing, fluency practice, learning names
Level	all levels
Time	fluid
Preparation	Bring camera to class.

Procedure

- 1 On the first day of class bring a camera loaded with enough film to take a picture of every single student in your class.
- 2 Have the pictures developed and bring them to class.
- 3 Students write their names and something to remember them by on the back of their own pictures.
- 4 Students mingle and tell one another what they have chosen to be remembered by.
- 5 With the whole class, volunteers share names they recall and what helped to spark their memory.
- 6 Collect all the pictures and study them.
- 7 Use the pictures to call attendance until you are sure of all the names.

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Learning about our students' lives

Students appreciate a teacher who takes an interest in their likes and dislikes, their special interests and their difficulties. Knowing our students as human beings helps us to see the larger picture of their lives and explains many behaviors that we might otherwise consider unreasonable. Knowing our students is the best preventative medicine for discipline problems.

In large classes giving individual attention is extremely difficult, but it is not impossible and may not take the enormous amount of time we sometimes believe it must. Sometimes individual attention is a matter of attitude rather than a matter of time. Many language acquisition activities offer us the opportunity to know our students better. Below are some activities of this type.

1.9 The letter

Aim	getting acquainted, reading, writing
Level	intermediate–advanced
Time	20–30 minutes

Preparation Write a letter about yourself to your students. Reveal as much about yourself as you feel comfortable doing. Write about the same things that you would like your students to tell you about. Make enough copies of the letter for the students in your class. (See Box 5 for an example of a letter.)

Procedure

- 1 Hand out copies of your letter and read it out loud; make sure that it's understood.
- 2 Ask students to write you a letter about themselves. It can be written on the back of your letter. Explain that these letters will not be graded and may not be returned. The purpose of the letters is to know each other better.
- 3 Collect the letters and later prepare a 'guess who' activity for the next class (see 1.10 below for 'guess who' procedure), or write a brief answer to each letter.

Notes

- If you don't have enough class time, assign the letter for homework.
- Even in very large classes, reading these letters is not difficult and does not take a great deal of time, because you don't have to mark

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them or comment on them and the letters are usually interesting. Some teachers, however, feel the need to answer these letters and this can, of course, be done.

- I keep the letters as long as I have the students in my class and reread them before conferences with parents or students.

Box 5 Example of letter to students

Dear Student,

My name is Natalie Hess, and I have taught ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) for many years and in many countries. I really love my work because through it I get a chance to do two of my favorite things: talking to people and reading books. My work takes up most of my time, but when I don't work I love to cook, to ride my bicycle, to swim, and to read. I feel very close to my family.

I am afraid of mice and I love eating chocolate. I hate tests!

For me, spelling has always been the hardest part of learning a language. That's because I am not a visual learner. I think that a classroom is an exciting place because there is always a great exchange of ideas going on.

I am glad that you are in this class. Please write me a bit about yourself.

Sincerely, Natalie

Sample of student answer

Dear Natalie,

Thank you for your nice letter. My name is Kumiko and I am from Osaka, Japan. Have you ever been to Japan? I have a little sister and a dog. The dog's name is Puppy and she is very cute. My sister and I fight a lot, but now that I am in America I miss her. I am glad to be in your class. I hope to learn a lot!

Sincerely, Kumiko