Personalizing Language Learning

Griff Griffiths and
Kathy Keohane

Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers

Series Editor
Penny Ur

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Personalizing Language Learning

CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOKS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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To the memory of my father, Patrick Keohane

For Janice
Fleur
Esther
Jesse

In hope of a second century
of love and friendship

How many things by season seasoned are
To their right praise and true perfection.
(Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice* V, i, 107–8)

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Introduction

This book provides a collection of creative classroom activities designed for busy teachers who wish to enhance language learning by integrating the personal experiences, feelings, values and opinions of individual learners into their classrooms. The activities are likely to be used as occasional enrichments to supplement your own course materials, adding a personally relevant dimension to otherwise impersonal textbook generated work.

The need for personalization: motivation and involvement

As language teachers, we are well aware that learners need to be motivated in order to be successful. Personal involvement is one very effective way of enhancing motivation. By this, we mean making language learning content personally meaningful. If learners feel that what they are asked to do is relevant to their own lives, and that their feelings, thoughts, opinions and knowledge are valued, and crucial to the success of the activities, then they will be fully engaged in the tasks and more likely to be motivated to learn the target language.

Textbooks, the core material for most classrooms, however, very often fail to achieve this level of involvement by learners. A great deal of commonly used material, particularly that used to model or elicit dialogue, is based on imaginary characters. Many listening or reading texts revolve around pre-selected topics which may have little interest for learners. Practice in particular language areas (e.g. grammar or pronunciation) is generally provided in exercises developed from these initial stimuli.

One example of a typical coursebook approach to the study of 'likes and dislikes' goes as follows. The language area is often presented or practised within the context of fictional characters who bear no relation to students' own lives. The lesson proceeds with students talking about what these imaginary people do and don't like, perhaps taking on the role of a specific character. A whole lesson could pass with only cursory reference to what the learners actually feel about things themselves.

There is no doubt that there are some learners who will be motivated

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regardless of the materials they use; there is also no doubt that many will not. There are always those who will fail to be inspired by materials which ignore their own world view. It is surprisingly easy, particularly when working with traditional materials, to neglect learners' individuality by omitting personally meaningful content.

The foreign language teacher is, however, in a position to enable truly interesting material to be used in class. The foreign language classroom has a flexibility unavailable in other subjects. Language learning aims can be achieved without teachers having to confine themselves to set texts or subjects. This being the case, the approach we advocate in this book is to take the learners themselves as the starting point for language practice. To stay with the example of likes and dislikes, learning is likely to be much more effective for far more learners if the teacher uses the students' own likes and dislikes (see 1.6) as the basis for an activity.

Specifically, we have found that our activities help in

- creating trust between class and teacher;
- facilitating positive group dynamics with your class;
- securing honest, helpful, and interesting feedback;
- bringing humour into the classroom;
- making language learning something you and your students will recall with affection;
- making language learning memorable.

Taking a humanistic approach

Some teachers have reservations about taking a humanistic approach. These teachers are concerned that they should not 'play the psychologist' in their classes; they fear they may delve too deep into their learners' personalities and they feel that the classroom may be the wrong place to do this. These same teachers may, however, feel that their classrooms need invigorating, their learners need remotivating and need to feel that the language learning class is personally relevant.

The activities presented in this book aim to involve learners' thoughts, opinions, knowledge and feelings with what they are learning without prying or making learners reveal what they would rather not. It helps to preserve individuals' right to privacy, and to create a feeling of trust in the classroom, if you make sure that learners know they will not be forced to participate; they should have the right to 'pass' in an activity. The activities do vary, from the mild revelations in 1.3 'Name round' to the potentially deeper discussions in 6.1 'My past, my self'. You yourself are the best judge of how comfortable you and your learners are with more revealing activities.

Teacher participation

We feel it improves the general atmosphere if you participate in the activities yourself. By participate, we mean that you should contribute in ways that are similar to how the students are contributing: if the students are asked to relate an important event from the past, the teacher should also do so. Unlike traditional activities, ours are eminently suitable for this. Everybody knows that the teacher can correctly complete a grammar exercise, but nobody knows what months were special to their teacher (see 7.6 Months in my life). Your participation should help learners to understand clearly what they have to do, as well as provide examples of appropriate language. In addition, we have found that this type of teacher participation has a positive effect on teacher–learner relationships, creates a comfortable classroom climate, and develops a trusting atmosphere between all participants.

Organization

The book is divided into eight sections as follows.

Chapter 1, 'Starting the course', provides opportunities for learners to talk to each other about themselves – who they are, what they are like, what is / has been important to them, what they like and dislike and their current attitude to the target language. As well as being used to begin a course, activities from 'Starting the course' can be used mid-course for a group that hasn't seemed to gel, or for a group starting a new academic year.

Chapter 2, 'Warming up', takes the ice-breaking a stage further. It looks at different topics and relates them directly to students' own lives. Learners are asked to think about particular places and events they consider important, to make careful observations of sounds and objects and to work collaboratively, finding out what they have in common with each other.

Chapter 3, 'Acting, reacting, interacting', is concerned with maximizing classroom opportunities for interaction. It contains activities which produce short narrations, student-generated dialogues, role plays, drama, and written interaction.

Chapter 4 is called 'Self-awareness and self-assertion'. All the activities in this chapter demand a high degree of interaction with others. There are three strands. The first, awareness of self, in this chapter means asking learners to think about what they are like in terms of physical appearance and personality, and to recognize their own qualities. This strand also asks them to think about themselves in terms of what makes them angry and what makes them laugh. The second,

awareness of others, here means being conscious of how to deal with people in both straightforward and difficult situations. There are opportunities for learners to gauge the appropriacy of questions in specific contexts, to persuade in calm and emotional situations, to sympathize and empathize, and to avoid conversation in public situations. Self-assertion, the final strand, means, as well as being able to deal with others effectively in difficult and potential conflict situations, learning how to distinguish between assertive, unassertive and aggressive modes of speech.

Chapter 5, 'Values and values awareness', considers the emotional value of material things. It also provides opportunities for learners to think about what qualities they value in people and which qualities enhance their own enjoyment of life. Learners have the chance to think about how people's values are likely to be different depending on their role in life. In addition they are asked to think about their own values in a wider sense by assessing their willingness to contribute to a variety of different causes.

Chapter 6 is called 'Self-knowledge'. This chapter contains activities which ask learners to think about themselves in the past and present. Learners have the chance to think about what they used to be like and to use important, or simply memorable, past experiences for language practice activities. Activities in this section also ask learners to think about the things in their life which make them the people they are now – for example what they're good at, what they want from life and what's important to them, not only in terms of serious values, but also with reference to the small but important choices they make and preferences they have on a day-to-day basis that make them unique individuals.

Chapter 7, 'Images and scenes – real and ideal', has activities to describe, in speaking and writing, pictures of people and places. This chapter also asks learners to tell stories, inventing some and using real events in their lives as the basis for others. In addition, Chapter 7 provides opportunities to act out mini-dramas generated by learners' own experiences.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, 'Closing the course', does three things. It provides an opportunity for students to reflect on what the course and their fellow classmates have meant to them, suggests ways of eliciting useful feedback, and gives some ideas for leave-taking activities. Ideas from this chapter can also be used earlier in the course to elicit useful feedback.

The activities

Content

The process of individual activities is described briefly, with examples. For each activity, a specific language focus is provided, and an indication of the minimum language level required for the task. Any necessary materials and preparation are detailed where appropriate. Many activities have sample texts for teachers to use.

Variations

We often suggest additional different ways of doing the activities, which we have called 'Variations'. The function of these Variations may be:

- to refine the base activity to suit a particular set of learners according to group composition, age, level and class size (see 1.1);
- to alter the language focus – i.e. keeping the stages of the activity the same but looking at different language areas (see 1.6);
- to extend or limit the language focus according to level (see 3.7);
- to provide an alternative shorter or simpler activity (see 7.7);
- to provide something which you might prefer (see 3.1);
- to provide less intrusive alternatives (see 3.5).

Follow-ons

Similarly, you will find sections headed 'Follow-on' which broaden or add new components to the original activity. Some of the activities in these sections extend the language focus, introducing new points within the same area (see 1.8) or provide extra practice in, for example, question formation (see 7.7). Where appropriate, we have indicated follow-on activities aimed at a specific level (see 6.1) or a particular skill, especially writing (see 2.1).

Age and level

All the activities can be used with adults. The majority can be used with teenagers, and some are suitable for even younger learners. Where helpful and appropriate, specific variations are offered for non-adult groups. The instructions for each activity indicate its suitability for adults, teenagers or children through the use of subheadings.

We have, as mentioned above, included a recommendation as to language level in our preliminary definitions for each activity. However, the majority of the activities are suitable, or can be adapted for a variety of levels. Normally the students themselves determine the complexity of

the language used. The character of the conversations which take place in Activity 2.2 'The parts of my life' will be very different with a lower-intermediate group and an advanced group, but the activity can be used successfully with both levels. For many of the activities we have suggested pre- or post-work activities, as described in the previous paragraph, which can also help to raise or lower the level.

Movement

Note that many of our activities necessitate movement by learners and teachers. Since most real-world communication entails both body language and mobility, we feel that this adds authenticity and individuality.

Pre-teaching

Note also that you may need to pre-teach specific vocabulary for some of the activities: for example activity 1.3, 'Name round', will not be successful unless learners already know the names of a variety of jobs in English. Activity 4.3, 'Empathizing and persuading', may fail if learners have an insufficient repertoire of persuasive phrases.

We hope and believe the activities in this book will enhance the atmosphere and motivation in your classes. They have achieved this and much more in the classrooms of the world where we have used them.

1 Starting the course

1.1 Multi-introductions

Introducing people in English

This is a very useful 'getting-to-know-you' activity for the beginning of a course

Language focus Introducing people
Level Elementary upwards
Materials Board; slips of paper

Procedure

FOR ADULTS, TEENAGERS AND CHILDREN

1 On the board, write the following:

Name Favourite colours Favourite pastime Extra information

2 Write in information about yourself beside each area, for example:

Name:	Kathy
Favourite colour:	Red
Favourite pastime:	Walking
Extra information:	Passed driving test at 31

Then ask the class to do the same on slips of paper. Explain that the 'extra information' section can include anything that they would be happy for other people to know about them, for example their zodiac sign, their shoe size, what they like to eat, somewhere they have been that they liked, etc. Elicit from the students more ideas of the type of thing they might include.

3 Ask one of the learners to introduce you as if the class didn't know you at all. The introduction might go like this:

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