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# The Use of Fictitious Occupations in the Classroom: An Adapted Technique

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The practice of assigning names from the language being studied to foreign-language students has been around for a long time. In my own 1960's high school German class, for example, I became Manfred. Today, certain textbook courses, such as the *Threshold* series, make it mandatory. Certain currently popular methods, like Suggestopedia and the Natural Method, take this identity-changing process even further. They assign prestigious, but fictitious, occupations to their students. Teachers using role-play and drama techniques in their classrooms report success as well. Perhaps this is because students act the parts of different people when carrying out their roles.

It has been hypothesized (Krashen, Burt, & Dulay, 1982) that assigning fictitious occupations and/or roles to students helps them lower their "affective filter," because it is the movie producer or successful business person who makes errors, not the beginning or intermediate student. And, following this theory, lowering the affective filter allows students to learn better.

Of course, you do not have to wholly accept the Monitor Model or follow the tenets of Suggestopedia in order to adapt interesting sounding techniques into your own teaching. This article describes one possible adaptation from the sources named above.

I personally do not like assigning students fictitious English names. Students have their own names, and should be proud of them. I have no such qualms, however, about having students adopt fictitious occupations. Only I do not assign them to

my students. I let the students pick their own, not from a list drawn up by the teacher, but out of their own heads. If a student wants to be a sumo wrestler or a fashion designer, I do not want to force him into being a foreign-service officer or airline pilot.

The practice of having students come up with fictitious occupations has proved very useful in teaching company classes, where everybody has similar occupations and works for the same company. It is also useful in school settings, for the same reason.

The technique of using fictitious occupations really comes in handy when you are using a standardized text. Most textbook series have sections or chapters dealing with occupations. In an effort to personalize instruction, teachers naturally ask the students about their own occupations, or better yet, have the students ask each other. When everybody is a mechanical engineer or college freshman, however, such efforts fall flat. But when you have a class made up of pro golfers, famous actors, baseball players, beer testers, and the Prime Minister, things go a lot more smoothly.

Another important consideration is the fact that students take to the idea very quickly. They are proud of their imagined occupation, perhaps because they thought it up themselves. And they readily remember those of their fellow students. They also exploit the material on their own (sometimes with a little prompting) by asking each other about their salaries, places of work, and past histories. I agree that students ought to be doing the same thing with their real identities, but delving into the

fictitious ones first sometimes helps pave the way into developing interest in each other's real lives and personalities. And it has the further benefit of providing shy students with a shield, and students who feel that their ordinary lives are dull and boring, with something interesting to talk about.

Language teaching is not only methods and theories, it is everyday classroom practice and performance. If techniques, taken from the former, can help us with the latter, our everyday classroom situation, we should by all means take advantage of them, adapting them to our own needs and situations.

### References

- Krashen, S., K. Burt., and H. Dulay. 1982. *Language Two*. New York: Oxford University Press

### About the Author

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