
Building Community Through Structured Interviews

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Language Learners' Need to Share and Communicate

The English as a second language instructor can easily be overwhelmed at times when he is confronted with the dual responsibilities of teaching language acquisition and acculturation, all of which are operating on a multitude of levels and individual needs. There are valid pedagogical and psychological reasons to disengage from these responsibilities at certain times and return them to the community of students, where they may be shared.

Research in intercultural communications and the experience of sojourners have supported an issue that should be of significant interest to the ESL profession. People who have chosen to come to a new country and struggle to acquire a new language and culture are much more likely to be successful if there is a strong support group waiting there to offer understanding and encouragement throughout most of their acculturation process (Brislin 1981). It is meaningful for students to see that others, who have gone through the process they are just beginning, have not only survived but have to varying degrees prospered. As teachers, it is important to remember that this process of community building needs facilitation and a modest amount of structure to succeed.

Instructors of adult students know that they bring a rich potpourri of experience and insights to any learning situation. What

they also bring is the need for relevant content (Selman 1979). Learning for adults must be based on adult situations which require them to draw on their experience and knowledge as they reach to become linguistically and culturally independent from the teacher. Adult learners often attend ESL classes to satisfy certain social needs also. It is an opportunity to share of themselves and to compare experiences and concerns with other non-native speakers who are struggling to learn the English language.

This need to share and communicate experiences, both the successes and frustrations, can reinforce students' perceived need to use the language in a meaningful context. It is one thing to practice contrived language and situations with the instructor; it is quite another for a student to realize that certain structures are needed to communicate personal shared experiences with other students.

Structured Interview: Procedure

A language acquisition process which I have found to enhance both the building of community and, concomitantly, the need to communicate has been the structured interview. Students work in pairs in the classroom and follow guidelines provided by the teacher as they interview each other. This format and technique is flexible enough that it can be used with learners at all levels—even low beginners—provided that provision is made for adequate oral and aural practice before the exercise.

Pairs are assigned by the teacher, and it is important to keep them as heterogenous as possible (i.e. different sex, different native-language background, etc.). This encourages communication in English.

Once the teacher decides on a topic for the interview, eight to twelve questions focusing on likely areas of interest are composed as a handout and distributed to pairs of students. During the first week of my intermediate class I use the following handout, with plenty of space left between questions. It usually takes two class sessions for students to work through it.

(Session one)

1. What is your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. Are you married? Do you have children?
4. When did you come to America?
5. What did you do in your country?

(Session two)

6. Do you have a job now? What do you do?
7. What is the biggest problem for you in America?
8. What do you like least about America?
9. Why do you study English at Clark College?
10. What do you like best about America?
11. What kind of work would you like to do in the future?

Students take turns interviewing each other, and the interviewee's response is recorded on the interviewer's paper. The recorded answers need not be lengthy or grammatically correct. The focus is on community conversation.

Once both partners have asked and recorded responses to all the questions, it is time for the students to share with the group what

they have discovered about their partner. As they do so, they are free (and are encouraged) to contribute additional information not requested on the handout. Listening classmates are also encouraged to ask follow-up questions about what they are learning about other pairs of students. After this has been done several times, there tend to be comments and asides, which are also an important part of the community building process.

Structured Interview: Benefits

It has been my experience that students respond positively to sharing of themselves and to learning about their classmates. Several of the most obvious effects of this learning procedure are...

1. At any given time, English is being generated by half the class and being used meaningfully and communicatively.
2. There is a perceived need for communication because people are talking about themselves and their concerns.
3. Perhaps most important, the teacher is not talking. This encourages linguistic independence on the part of students, and allows the instructor the opportunity to monitor areas where language or culture may need further attention or where new topics of structures interviews may be developed at a later date.

References

- Brislin, Richard W. 1981. *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Face To Face Interaction*. New York: Pergamon Press.

Selman, Mary. 1979. *An Introduction To Teaching English as a Second Language To Adults*. Vancouver, B.C.: Pampas Press.

About the Author

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