

Use a Raffle to Teach ESL? Crazy? No! Effective? Yes!!

Grace A. Blossom, Rio Salado Community College

It all started when a friend said, "Can you use this piece of material (two yards of new plaid suiting) in your class?" I took it and then wondered what I could do with it. The idea came to hold a raffle. It worked!! My students started speaking English enthusiastically. Here's how I did it.

Preparation

I told the class we were going to raffle the cloth and in order to get a ticket they must tell three to five things about the piece of cloth.

The speaking ability of the students ranged from almost nil to slight proficiency. A few had fairly good comprehension and some knowledge of grammar, but lacked the ability to express themselves in English.

Some of the students, of course, did not understand. The use of a raffle as a technique to learn to speak English was a completely new idea. It took this first raffle for them to fully understand, but after that we were off and running.

I listed helpful short sentences and useful verbs on the chalkboard. For example:

We are going to raffle the cloth

(If I win) (I am going to) (make a dress).

I am going to make shorts.

I am going to make seat covers for my car.

Verbs:

make	sell	give
keep	take	wash

Presentations and the Drawing

The first time it took two class periods to get the idea of the raffle and the presentations worked out. The following class period, after a few minutes of study, they gave their presentations. Almost every student read his or her presentation. Remember, this was the first raffle.

For the raffle numbers I cut up a page of an old calendar. I wrote the words, "I am the winner" on one number and folded them all ready for the drawing. This is the one and only time I prepared the tickets myself. Thereafter the preparation was in the hands of an able student.¹

The drawing itself was also conducted by a student and took only a few minutes of actual class time. Instead of allowing each student to reach in to take a ticket, she handed them out shaking the ticket box well each time.

Polishing the Procedure

The next class hour we started the second raffle. This time the prize was a baseball cap, the kind businesses give away for advertising. I listed useful sentences and helpful verbs on the board, and again the students set to work preparing their oral presentations in order

to get a raffle ticket. This time, however, the more advanced students did not read but spoke their presentations, and I realized that we needed an incentive to encourage speaking. To do this I told them that those who read got one ticket, but those who spoke in English without reading got two. It worked! By the fifth raffle only two in a class of twenty read their material.

Prizes

What can you raffle? Anything within reason. One only needs to look around the house, in the costume jewelry box. Or ask your friends and family. I often raffle paperback books which I buy from the used book shelves at the local library for ten cents a copy. We once raffled a porcelain dish and three pretty little ashtrays that were left in the materials cupboard four years ago. One student said, "If I win the ashtrays I am going to throw them in the garbage because I don't smoke." Fluency? Yes, indeed! When a student comes up with a sentence like that or a useful new phrase, I write it on the board for all to see.

Students fully understand that the object raffled is not important. The raffle is only a means to developing oral proficiency in English. The real value of the thing raffled is the amount of fluency developed.

Advantages

With each new raffle a new set of vocabulary items is developed and used.

As language fluency develops, the student is aware and the teacher is aware, and there is tremendous satisfaction for both. As time goes on, the students become more relaxed and self assured.

The raffle technique can be a part of almost any class. Any teacher can use it. It's effective! It leads to a student centered classroom. It requires no costly textbooks. And, of course, it is enjoyable!

Of all the innovative techniques I have used in my classroom, the raffle is the most successful. One reason may be that it breaks down the overwhelming task of learning to speak a new language into small, manageable bits. Or it may be because it is so concrete and practical. Whatever the reason, it works!

Note

1. I would change only one thing about the raffle tickets. Now, instead of making new ones for each raffle, we put numbers on little squares of oak tag and use them time after time.

About the Author

Grace Blossom has been a teacher of English as a second language for many years. She spent ten years with the Bureau of Indian Affairs teaching Navajo Indians, and one year as a Fulbright lecturer in Bogotá, Colombia. For the past several years she has taught in the Adult Division of Rio Salado Community College in Arizona.