
Getting Students to Describe Each Other

Jan Fluitt-Dupuy, St. Joseph Seminary College

Even advanced L2 learners have difficulties in forming precise yet grammatically accurate descriptions. The technique described here is my tried method for teaching the skills of description to advanced and intermediate ESL students in a non-credit university program. It is the result of classroom experience teaching both ESL and American writing courses.

I teach descriptive writing for three reasons:

1. Description is a necessary skill in fluent conversation and composition,
2. It increases a student's observation powers and concentration on detail, and
3. It teaches logical ordering and patterning.

Besides learning these important language and study skills, students enjoy the fun of the description activities and learn quickly to work together.

The following lesson plan is broken down into four one-hour segments but can easily be cut or expanded according to the constraints of a curriculum. In a three-hour college course, I find that four days work best in combination with the variety of classroom activities: reading, writing, pair and group work, editing, and classroom discussions. I usually teach this description unit the first week of class or soon after because it is an excellent way to introduce the students to their language class and each other. Here is how it works:

Day 1: Matching Pictures and Descriptions/Brainstorming. Adjectives

Each student is given one of two items: either a picture of a person (cut from a magazine) or a one-sentence description of a picture. The task is for students to match sentences with pictures.

After all the sentence/picture pairs are made, the teacher can put the sentences on the board in order to explicate pertinent rules of grammar. The Appendix contains several such sentences. For example, students need to know how many adjectives are appropriate to modify one noun (usually one or two and no more than three) and that adjectives can appear in either an attributive or predicative position in a sentence. Students also need to spend some time as a class brainstorming a list of adjectives expressing a subjective opinion (pretty/ugly, sparkling/dull, strong/weak, etc.). The pictures can often provide a stimulus for brainstorming.

For homework, students are given a chart of adjectives (see figure 1) used to describe facial features and are asked to look up and study meanings of any unfamiliar words. Students should be aware that the synonym and antonym symbols in the chart will help them sort out difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary without constant reference to a dictionary. Also, the arrangement of the chart corresponds to a possible arrangement of these adjectives in sentences. In particular,

| Features | Type | size | shape | texture | color |
|------------|------|--|--|--|--|
| Face | | large/small | pointed, angular/bony* | X | X |
| complexion | | X | X | clear, smooth, fine/ bad*, coarse*, rough*/ | fair, freckled/ olive, dark, tanned |
| Hair | | short/mid-length shoulder-length/long | X | thick, coarse*, bushy*/ thin, (baby) fine/balding straight/curly, wavy | (strawberry)blond/gray white, silver/brown, brunette/(jet)black/ red, auburn, orange* |
| Eyes | | big, wide/small wide-/close-/deep-set sunken*/circled* | baby/bulging*/ almond-shaped, oriental, slanted* | X | (deep/icy/light/dark) blue/gray/green/hazel brown, black |
| -brows | | X | straight/arched | thick, heavy, bushy/ thin, uneven | [see hair color] |
| -lashes | | short, stubby*/long | X | thick, full/thin curly/straight | blond, red/brown, black |
| Nose | | big*/little, small wide, fat*/skinny, long | round/pug, upturned/ Roman, aquiline/sharp pointed, straight | X | red* |
| lips | | thin/full | X | X | rosy, (cherry)red/ colorless*, pale* |
| teeth | | small, fine, baby*/ large | pointed, square/ even, straight, pretty/ | X | (pearly)white/ yellowed*, stained* |
| Cheeks | | full, big | high/hollow*, sunken dimpled | soft, smooth, firm/ rough, coarse, pitted* | rosy, apple(red)/pale |
| beard | | long/short, trimmed clipped | moustache, goatee[nouns] | groomed, well-kept/scraggly ill-kept | [see hair color] |
| Chin | | double*/long* | prominent/receding*/ square/pointed/clefted | X | X |

N.B.: , indicates synonyms

/ indicates antonyms

() indicates an optional modifier

* indicates the adjective is not complimentary

Figure 1. Chart of descriptive adjectives for facial features.

with the exception of adjectives of opinion, the horizontal listings of adjectives by semantic groups represent the order proposed by Celce Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983): opinion + size + shape + texture + color. Likewise, the facial features are listed vertically in a top to bottom organizational pattern.

Day 2: Interviews and Out-of-Class Writing

The class period begins with the students asking questions about the vocabulary from the chart. The teacher should point out irregular plurals and count/non-count nouns to prevent later subject-verb agreement errors (e.g. His teeth *are* small and pointed; his beard *is* long).

The rest of the class period consists of the students breaking into pairs to interview and observe each other in order to write a description of his/her partner's face later. Students take notes about their partner's facial features by circling words on their vocabulary charts. Students must be aware of the aim of the assignment: to produce written paragraphs describing their partner. The paragraphs will then be read aloud in class, with the names deleted, so that other students can guess who is being described. Here, a short explanation of polite social norms is usually in order, so that no student will be offended by his or her description. A first draft is assigned for homework.

Day 3: Peer editing

Students are introduced to peer editing techniques and asked to edit the papers describing their own facial features, suggesting changes in structure and

vocabulary if necessary. Rewrites are to be completed at home. Note: this step can easily be omitted by teachers wary of the peer-editing technique. However, having the students read their own descriptions helps to insure that the paragraphs remain complimentary.

Day 4: Teacher Reads the Papers Aloud

At the beginning of class, the teacher collects the final drafts and reads the papers aloud to the class, slipping in necessary changes to smooth awkward grammar and omitting embarrassing statements. After each paragraph, students guess who is being described. The guessing forces students to look around the room and to learn the others' names. Plus, this activity usually produces some good-natured blushes and much laughter.

Benefits

In this lesson plan, students get to know one another through close pair and group work and through various information-gap activities. Presenting description in this fashion is not only fun, but also builds the four skills because the students must talk and listen to the teacher and each other as well as read and write descriptive paragraphs.

Indirectly, they are learning essential social and cultural aspects of the language (what one can and cannot say about a face to that face). In addition, students begin to learn the rudiments of logical organization of a paragraph, either top to bottom, or from most to least noticeable feature, or a combination of the two. Students begin preparing for other uses of the skill of description in life—both academic,

(ranging from reporting technical experiments to analyzing literature), and social, (ranging from enhancing personal description in conversation to building powers of observation).

References

Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Appendix Sample Descriptive Sentences

The lashes surrounding her *wide, baby* eyes were *short, and stubby*.

He wore his *goatee* and *moustache* impeccably *trimmed*; he was a well-dressed man in every aspect.

Her beautiful *long, wavy* hair falling about her face softened its *bony* features.

Her *tiny pug* nose was sprinkled with freckles.

His cheeks were badly *pitted*; in spite of this imperfection, he was still a handsome middle-aged man.

The older man's *silver* hair was *thin* on top and was quickly *receding* at the temples.

The ten-year-old child ran into the house from the cold; her cheeks were *rosy* and her lips *cherry red*.

The woman was in her forties. Her make up was perfect; even her eyebrows had been carefully *plucked* into a delicate arch.

About the Author

Jan Fluitt-Dupuy, a former Fulbright teacher-trainer in southern Italy, is Director of ESL at St. Joseph Seminary College near New Orleans, Louisiana. Her research interests include writing theory and computer-assisted language learning.