
The Naming Chain

Peter Duppenthaler,
ECC Foreign Language Institute

No matter how well-prepared the teacher may be, the class will just not jell if the students do not have a chance to get to know one another. This does not mean that the teacher should spend a lot of time on the first day having students give self introductions. Although this is a nice idea, it is something best left till after the ice is broken and the students have some idea of who is saying what.

The activity that I have found to be helpful and meaningful is a simple way to get to know one another's names. After all, without a name and a face to attach later information to, what good is class time spent on self introductions? The activity, which I call "The Naming Chain," is also an excellent way for the teacher to learn the names of the students (at least enough of them so that the teacher will not feel that learning the rest is more of a job than he or she is up to).

The procedure is simple and can be used, with a slight variation (see below), with any size ESL/EFL class on the first day. The activity should take about ten to fifteen minutes at most. In addition to giving the students a chance to learn one another's names and the teacher a chance to learn the students' names, it is a great way to help the students learn and be able to pronounce the teacher's name. One would be surprised at how many students do not know their own teacher's name or at least lack the confidence, in how to pronounce it correctly, to ask for the teacher by name at the office or over the telephone.

Although I use this activity in my EFL classes, it is obviously suitable for any situation in which it is important to develop group rapport—be it a classroom, workshop, or whatever.

Procedure

1. Once you have taken roll, ask the students to form a circle. If this is impossible, then have them carry out the activity sitting in their regular seats.
2. Begin by saying that you want the students to learn one another's names.
3. Tell them that you will say your family name and then the student next to you will say your family name and his/her own family name. I use family names because this is what is usually in the roll book; however, you can use first names, or English nicknames if you and the students prefer.
4. After the student next to you has said his/her name, the student next to him/her must say your family name, the family name of the student next to you, and his/her own family name.
5. Each student in turn must say all the names that have been said, in order, beginning with the teacher's name and ending with his/her own. While each student is doing this, the teacher should try saying the names along with each student and jotting down any helpful "reminders" (e.g., wears glasses, etc.) that

can be used to help identify students later on.

6. Once the last student in the class has said all the names plus his/her own, the teacher should do a quick spot check by asking various individual students to give the names of other students the teacher indicates. If there are still a lot of problems (e.g., with pronunciation), repeat the activity in reverse order (you may want to be the first one to say your name if you would rather not have to be the last person in the group).

Variation

If the class is very large, divide the students into groups. Have them call off numbers so that there will be about ten to fifteen members in each group and then have all the same numbers sit together. Once they have gotten together, demonstrate to the class, join one group, and begin the activity. When one round has been completed, have the students count off again, regroup, and repeat the activity. Repeat the counting, regrouping, and activity until the majority of the students have had a chance to learn one another's names.

Follow-up

As a follow-up, quickly repeat the naming chain activity at the beginning of the second class. In addition, during the class ask each student to write his/her name and one piece of interesting information about himself/herself (e.g.,

hobby, favorite musician or food, home country/town, etc.) on a piece of paper, and collect the papers. Before the next class make a "Find Someone Who" activity sheet (listing one piece of information for each student with spaces for their names after the information) and do the "Find Someone Who" activity in the third class (students get one sheet each, circulate asking questions in order to find out which student fits which piece of information, and fill in the names on the sheet). Be sure to include a piece of information about yourself and join the fun.

By the end of the third class, each student should know and be able to pronounce most of the other students' names, as well as their teacher's. After this, I think that you will find that the students will feel more comfortable about being together and more willing to come to you with their problems—a great way to pave the way for learning more about and from one another.

About the Author

Peter Duppenthaler received his M.Ed. (TESOL) from Temple University. He has taught English in Japan since 1974, and is currently chief of both the Educational Research Division and the Educational Training Section at ECC Foreign Language Institute, Osaka, Japan. Current interests include: teacher training, curriculum design and development, and the relationship between age and learning.