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A Ten-Step Process for Developing Teaching Units

Curriculum design and implementation can be a daunting process. Questions quickly arise, such as who is qualified to design the curriculum and how do these people begin the design process. According to Graves (2008), in many contexts the design of the curriculum and the implementation of the curricular product are considered to be two mutually exclusive processes, where a long chain of specialists including policy makers, methodologists, and publishers produce the curriculum in a hierarchical process, at the end of which lies the teacher.

The teacher's role is to implement the course and use materials received from the specialists. One weakness of this specialist model of curriculum design is a misalignment between materials and the classroom in which they are eventually implemented (Graves 2008). Common examples of these sorts of materials are the coursebooks that many English as a foreign language (EFL) schools and institutions rely on as the sole basis of their course syllabus (Cowling 2007). While coursebooks can fit this role adequately when they are a suitable match for the context and meet student needs, issues of alignment arise when they do not meet the needs of the students and the goals of the institution (Cowling 2007).

Mass-market coursebooks may not be a suitable match for a given classroom. Teachers may supplement such coursebooks with their own materials for a variety of reasons, among which are concerns about methodology, content, language, or the balance of skills necessary to meet learning outcomes (Cunningsworth 1995). Coursebooks may also place a financial burden on students and teachers (Richards 2001) to the extent that they may be too expensive for their target audience (Mack 2010). What, then, can teachers do when faced with a mass-market coursebook not specifically tailored to their teaching context or possibly no coursebook at all? The answer, based on our experience, is that teachers in either situation can act as curriculum designers themselves.

There has been a movement in recent years by teacher-practitioners to exert greater agency over curriculum analysis and design (El-Okda 2005; Jennings and Doyle 1996). Kumaravadivelu (2001) advocates a postmethod pedagogy where teachers "acquire and assert a fair degree of autonomy in pedagogic decision making" (548). He argues for a pedagogy that "is responsive to and responsible for local individual, institutional, social and cultural contexts in which learning and teaching take place" (Kumaravadivelu 2003, 544). While teachers should be aware of principles and practices from the field, "they rely mostly on context-sensitive local knowledge to identify problems, find solutions and try them out to see what works

and what doesn't in their specific context" (Kumaravadivelu 2003, 544). According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), teachers would not only have agency to create curriculum, but would be in a better position to address the concerns of the students and the institution than would an international publisher.

From September 2011 to the present, a group of teachers at the language center of a national university in Seoul have embraced their role as curriculum developers and collaborated on the creation, implementation, and ongoing development of a wholly teacher-generated backward-designed curriculum that targets our students' collective needs. The curriculum is teacher-generated in that we have created all our teaching materials without the use of traditional coursebooks, and it is backward-designed in that we began by identifying needs and learning outcomes before making all other curricular decisions. In the process of implementing and continuing this project, we have devised a ten-step development process (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014), based on a backward-design approach to curriculum design, to facilitate the creation and revision of five-week teaching units for our practical English conversation courses.

As Kumaravadivelu (2001) suggests, experimentation is part of teaching. It can, however, be frustrating if one lacks a means with which to process classroom experience and use those experiences for curriculum development. Reflection allows teachers to avoid making decisions based on mere intuition, impulse, or routine (Richards 1990; Farrell 2012). For this reason, we incorporated elements of the experiential learning cycle into our ten-step process. Without it, we would not have been able to learn from our successes and mistakes and make informed decisions on how to revise and improve our completed teaching units.

The purpose of this article is to describe the concepts that guided the creation of the process, to provide a description of the process as applied to our teaching context, and to offer examples from a teaching unit that was created and revised using the process. We write this article in the hope that this tool and our experiences using it may help guide other educators who wish to design their own teaching materials or units, either to supplement an existing curriculum or as the foundation for a new, completely teacher-generated curriculum.

MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE TEN-STEP PROCESS TO CREATE AND REVISE TEACHER-GENERATED MATERIALS

The ten-step process to generate materials (1) is intended for use by teachers themselves to facilitate the creation of teaching units, (2) incorporates a backward-design model, and (3) assumes the importance of reflection in teaching.

The ability of teachers to create their own materials

Teachers are fully capable of developing their own course curriculum (Graves 2000; Jennings and Doyle 1996), and it is preferable for them to determine what does and does not work through direct study of the classroom itself (Kumaravadivelu 2001; Kumaravadivelu 2003; Nunan 2004). At our language center, teachers found that our coursebooks would meet some needs well, some needs poorly, and some needs not at all. We saw a mismatch between the perceived needs of our students and the coursebook content. Since the coursebook content was not a perfect match for our students, we were often forced to supplement heavily with our own materials. Sheldon (1988, 238) suggests that teacher-generated material "potentially has a dynamic and maximal relevance to local needs" when compared to mass-market publications. Indeed, we were already supplementing heavily and were effectively creating much of the material used in courses at our language center.

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A further advantage of creating our teaching units and materials was the belief that "people support what they help to create" and will be more invested when they participate in the design and creation of the curriculum (Jennings and Doyle 1996, 171). We feel that a lack of investment in and satisfaction with the coursebooks (upon which the curriculum of any given semester was based) made teachers at the language center adopt and discard them on a regular basis. This led to teachers having to develop a new curriculum at the beginning of each academic year, or even at the start of each semester (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014). At the language center, the hope was that allowing teachers to create their own teaching units and materials would increase teacher investment, with the result of a more stable curriculum.

Teacher-generated curriculum and materials also can be tailored to the goals of the institution. For a language program's curriculum to grow and flourish, there needs to be a dynamic dialogue between the stakeholder groups of administrators, teachers, and students (Brown 2001). At the language center, student feedback prompted the director to request teachers to develop curriculum. She also provided guidance regarding university expectations in regard to testing and ultimately approved the project for wider implementation (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014). While the development of the teaching units was guided by collective student needs, the process was also open to input by administrators. In different teaching contexts, other stakeholder groups might be involved.

The application of a backward-design model

Another main element of the ten-step process is its backward-design approach to materials and curriculum development. Prior to the curriculum project, teachers would (1) agree on a coursebook before the beginning of a semester, (2) select which chapters to teach, (3) decide the learning outcomes based on the chapters, and (4) create test tasks based on those outcomes. In this way, we were following a forward-design model where "decisions about methodology and output" had to wait until "issues related to the content of instruction" were resolved (Richards 2013, 8). Because a primary concern of the curriculum project was the needs of all students, we moved from this forward-design model to a backward-design model. According to Wiggins and McTighe,

> backward design calls for us to operationalize our goals or standards in terms of assessment evidence as we *begin* to plan a unit or course. It reminds us to begin with the question, What would we accept as evidence that students have attained the desired understandings and proficiencies—*before* proceeding to plan teaching and learning experiences? … Greater coherence among desired results, key performances, and teaching and learning experiences leads to better student performance—the purpose of design. (1998, 8–9; italics in the original)

Our backward design began with (1) the needs, then proceeded to (2) learning outcomes based on those needs, followed by (3) test tasks based on the outcomes, and finally (4) content based on the language skills necessary to accomplish those tasks. This is certainly not an uncommon approach, as backward design "is a well-established tradition in curriculum design in general education and in recent years has re-emerged as a prominent curriculum development approach in language teaching" (Richards 2013, 20). Because a main goal of the curriculum project was to enhance and provide measurable learning outcomes for students' oral skills communication, the backward-design model fit in well with the ten-step process.

The significance of reflection in teaching

Reflection is the third main element of the process. We were inspired by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. We integrated Kolb's cycle into a process of reflection on teaching, evaluation of the reflections, and revision based on our experiences. As Farrell (2012) stated when discussing the origins of reflective practice, the purpose of reflection is for teachers "to make informed decisions about their teaching"

that were "based on systematic and conscious reflections rather than fleeting thoughts about teaching" (11). It is our belief that teaching units take time to come into their own and should be viewed as a work in progress over multiple semesters until they best match students' collective needs. We further believe that a system of reflection provides teachers new to the teaching unit with a voice in the process and increases their investment in the process of materials development. Reflection therefore allows for informed decisions over time and greater investment in the outcome of the teaching unit. Furthermore, we have found that structured reflection allows for improvement over time. Instead of leading teachers to develop a curriculum once, only to start over again several years later, the ten-step process uses its built-in reflection to allow for manageable and organic curriculum development (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014).

TEN STEPS FOR DEVELOPING TEACHING UNITS

The ongoing curriculum project has resulted in a ten-step process (see Figure 1), which continues to be used for creating and revising five-week teaching units. This process was used to supplement a coursebook in the first semester of the project, and after that to entirely replace the coursebook. The ten-step process was not defined prior to the start of the project; rather, it developed organically out of discussions and as teaching units were created, reflected upon, and revised over time.

The following is a brief description of each of the ten steps, how they were implemented, and how they led to the creation of several five-week units of instruction. The units included "Hot Spots," where students described and provided directions to local places of interest; "Conversation Strategies," where students employed language to develop and continue small-group conversations; "Problem Solving," where small groups of students discussed and solved common problems at their university; and "Small Talk," where students role-played first-time encounters with someone from another country or culture. In this article, we focus on "Small Talk," as it was one of the first of the units created using the ten-step process and has undergone multiple revisions. Although the examples provided here follow the creation and revision of one small part of a five-week unit, we believe that this process is effective in the development of teaching units of virtually any size.

Step 1: Student needs

The process begins with student needs, in accordance with the principles of backward design. If needs have not been identified, or if they need to be reidentified, teachers may execute their own needs assessments (Tarone 1989) by using one or more of the available methods of needs analysis. West (1997) suggests that a variety of methods—among which are questionnaires and structured interviews—be employed to analyze student needs. Key components of a successful analysis are that it is learner centered, related to the real world, repeatable, and prioritized.

The curriculum project strove to address the shared needs of all students enrolled in the course. Teachers were requested by the language center director to proceed with

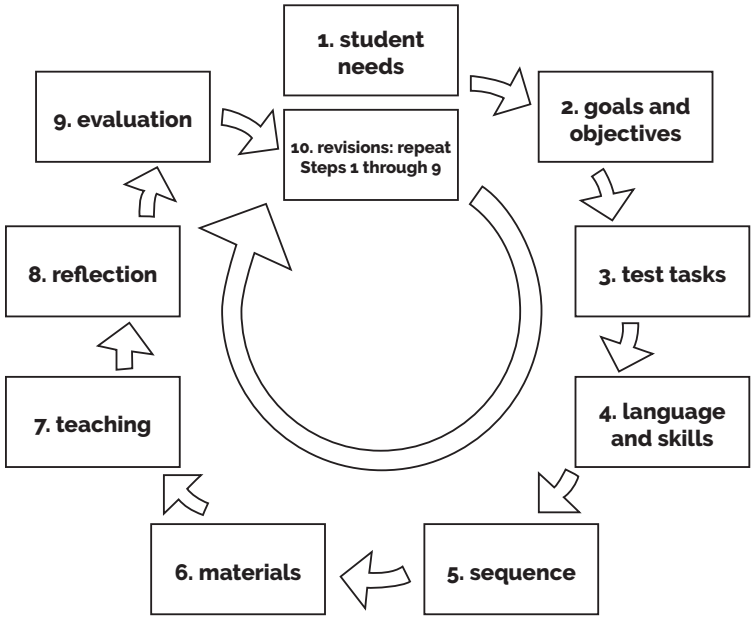

Figure 1. A ten-step cyclical process of course generation and revision (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014)

all possible haste and were not provided with financial support for a thorough needs analysis. The initial needs analysis was conducted by brainstorming in faculty meetings. The subsequent list of student needs was based on two major factors: (1) teacher observation of classroom behavior and (2) student feedback gathered through informal conversations with teachers. A compiled list of needs was then made available to all teachers.

Teachers and students both identified the learning need of Small Talk (ST). Students themselves informed teachers that they did not know how to approach or initiate and continue a first-time conversation with a non-Korean stranger. Teachers had also observed that their students were often unable to conduct a successful first-time conversation in English outside class, despite such conversations often being the focus of the first lesson of the semester (as presented by the coursebook at the time). The teachers then proceeded to create the ST unit based on those student needs.

Step 2: Goals and objectives

The second step is to create goals and objectives to define learning outcomes based on student needs. According to Graves (2000), goals state the broader aims of what the teaching unit is meant to address, while the objectives break down the goals into statements that are teachable, learnable, and specifically measurable. If students meet all the objectives, they will therefore also meet the goals.

In the case of ST, teachers defined the goal as being able to conduct a successful first-time conversation with a foreigner in a variety of situations. More specific objectives within that goal were a specific length of the conversation and an ability to grasp the situation and apply the appropriate formality in greetings, closings, and choice of language. Students were also introduced to small-talk topics which were, as decided by teachers, generally safe for first-time conversations and would lead to successful encounters.

Step 3: Test tasks

The third step involves the creation of the language task to assess students' performance in relation to the specific objectives and broader goal of the teaching unit. Van den Branden (2012) states that task-based learning—rather than having students learn language and try to translate their learning into spontaneous language use—exposes students to "approximations and simulations of the kinds of tasks they are supposed to be able to perform outside the classroom and learn about relevant forms of language while trying to understand and produce the language that these communicative tasks involve" (134). As with all aspects of testing, the test task will be limited by available resources. Rough test materials, including a rubric, may be created at this point and then revisited during the materials creation phase (see Step 6). The tasks need not be limited to an in-class oral communication test. Alternative assessments such as a project or presentation are possible as well.

In the case of ST, the test task was for students to conduct a three-minute conversation simulating a first meeting, with one student playing the role of himself or herself and another student playing the role of a foreigner. Students then switched roles with their partner for a second conversation. Students were provided with contexts in which each of the meetings was imagined to be taking place. Teachers felt that this would be the most effective way to simulate the conditions necessary to use the skills covered in ST.

Teachers defined the [Small Talk] goal as being able to conduct a successful first-time conversation with a foreigner in a variety of situations.

Step 4: Language and skills

For the next step, teachers volunteer to pilot the test while other teachers record the explicit language and sociolinguistic skills used to complete the task. We recommend that the teachers who pilot the test be different from those who designed the test, in order to bring to light unanticipated problems in the test design (and possibly in the teaching unit) prior to the creation of the entire teaching unit. Teachers creating the teaching units may then use the test responses to determine the language and skills to be taught in the unit. This list is then modified based on perceived overall usefulness to the students and available instructional time. Further factors are teachability and learnability—that is, the ease with which the language or skill can be taught by the teacher or acquired by the student (Thornbury 1999).

When performing the ST test task, teachers immediately identified that language choices were heavily influenced by the context in which the conversation was supposed to be taking place—for example, the lower-register "Hey, how's it going?" and the higher-register "Good morning/afternoon/evening." From teachers' performance of the role plays, language thought to be most useful to students was selected.

Step 5: Sequence

The next step is to order the selected language and skills into a sequence. Once the order is determined, a number of smaller objectives may be created to contribute to meeting the original unit objectives. Teachers should now consider the amount of time available for instruction. Should it appear that too much or too little language has been selected, teachers may revisit Step 4 to change the language selection, Step 3 to modify the test task, or even Step 2 to make modifications to the unit objectives.

At the time that ST was created, teaching units were five weeks long. The first three lessons (weeks) were devoted to helping students develop the skills necessary to meet the goals and objectives. The fourth lesson was used to revisit past lessons and practice for the test. Finally, the fifth lesson was used to administer the test. In the case of ST, the greetings were introduced in the first lesson and were practiced in a variety of situations as the unit went on.

Step 6: Materials

Teachers then use the lesson objectives to create in-class activities, homework, and quizzes to help students develop the language and skills to succeed in the unit. Once the materials are created, they are sequenced into a logical order for each lesson (with some activities and even language being moved as the lessons are created), and lesson plans are created for each lesson. Final versions of the test materials can also be created.

At this point in the process, we found it useful to meet, share ideas, and receive feedback from colleagues regarding materials in development. During the initial semesters of curriculum development, materials were shared in person or via email. By the second semester of the project, a website for students and teachers was in place. We used the website's online forums to facilitate the sharing of lesson materials, conduct online discussions, and provide feedback.

One example of ST teaching material was a PowerPoint presentation. We collected photographs from open-source websites as well as some taken by teachers in places on campus where students might encounter non-Koreans, such as at a park or a coffee shop. We chose places and situations familiar to students in order to help them visualize common contexts and to tie the unit to their own personal experience. The presentation was then used in a pre-task activity where students worked together in groups to brainstorm relevant topics of conversation for each context. We used this presentation in our lesson because it (1) supported student learning in preparation for the final test task and (2) elicited language from students that resembles real-world use, a goal of language tasks (Ellis 2003). Teaching does not, however, need to be limited by technology. Should teachers find themselves without access to a computer or photographs,

they could just as easily describe different settings to their students.

Step 7: Teaching

Following materials creation, the next step is to teach the unit. Teachers conduct the lessons and utilize the materials that were generated prior to the beginning of the teaching unit. It is important at this stage for teachers to not only conduct the lessons but also take careful notes of student reactions, behavior, and performance in relation to the objectives of each lesson and the overall goal of the unit. These notes will be important in subsequent steps of the process.

At the outset of the curriculum project, the language center director had instructed teachers to standardize the learning outcomes and test tasks. In compliance with the director's instructions, all teachers introduced the same target language using the same handouts, assigned the same homework and in-class quizzes, administered the same end-of-unit test, and used the same assessment plan to assign grades. Those teachers who prepared the materials also provided a basic lesson plan as an aid to teachers who were new to the curriculum. Teachers in our program were not bound, however, to the provided lesson plans. The lesson plans were intended to support teachers, not to restrict them. Teachers were encouraged to modify and experiment with the lessons, and then to report the outcomes of their modifications. Successful modifications could then be recorded into future versions of the lesson plans, sometimes replacing the original activities and sometimes providing optional activities, which teachers could use to accomplish the same objectives.

Step 8: Reflection

Reflection is employed to make sense of the concrete experience of teaching the unit. As Moran (2001) noted when discussing experiential learning, in reflective observation the participant "pauses to reflect on what happened in order to describe what happened, staying with the facts of the experience" (18). Following classroom instruction, teachers return to their notes and make reflective observations based on their experiences. We recommend that teachers suspend interpretation and first express their observations of what they saw, heard, and felt during instruction. While we recommend that reflection occur throughout the process, it is most important after student completion of the test tasks so that teachers can look back at the teaching unit as a whole. Evaluation and decision making for revisions will come from end-of-unit reflection.

We met each week, after teaching the week's lessons, for one hour to share our observations and discuss what we perceived to have gone well and what needed improvement for each lesson. At the meetings, a designated teacher recorded feedback directly on an electronic copy of the lesson plan for future revisions. In the case of ST, one such observation recorded through group reflection was that the greetings alone did not always match the provided situation and led to awkward or inauthentic conversations.

Step 9: Evaluation

In this step, the teachers not only reflect on the unit but also evaluate it and make suggestions for the next round of revisions. It is important to separate observation from analysis and interpretation to avoid jumping to conclusions about the success of the teaching unit. As Moran (2001) notes, reflective observation is followed by abstract conceptualization where the teacher "assigns meaning to the experience by developing explanations or theories" (18). It is recommended that the teacher keep the initial student need in mind when evaluating the efficacy of the teaching unit. We have found

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that it is easy to be distracted by later elements of the process, such as the end-of-unit test task. It is entirely possible to spend too much time on designing a test task that is not well aligned with the targeted student need.

In response to the observation that some of the student conversations in the ST unit seemed inauthentic, we revisited how students would begin the role play of a first-time conversation with a foreigner or stranger. Rather than opening with a simple greeting, teachers suggested that students be taught how to use the context to generate an icebreaker.

In addition, as part of the evaluation of the unit, student feedback was gathered formally, through confidential online surveys, as well as informally, through conversations between teachers and students. Students agreed that the teaching unit met their need. For example, in a future semester students reported having used the unit content to successfully meet foreigners. A representative from the language center administration also reviewed our materials and provided feedback from an administrator's perspective. That feedback was useful because it provided teachers with guidance on the broader goals and vision of the university. For example, it ensured that the curriculum met certain requirements for international accreditation, a matter of great importance to the university administrators.

Step 10: Revisions

The final step is actually a return to the first step in the process and is included to emphasize the cyclical nature of the ten-step process. Active experimentation follows abstract conceptualization in the experiential learning cycle and is the stage when the teacher "prepares to reenter experience by devising strategies consistent with personal learning goals, the nature of the content, and the form of the experience" (Moran 2001, 18). At this point in the process, the teachers meet to discuss revisions and to formulate strategies on how best to revise and improve the teaching unit. It is our recommendation that teachers go through the feedback once again and discuss what aspects of the unit are possible to revise within the time available to them. We would recommend that teachers take an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach to revisions. That is, not every aspect of the unit will require change and fixing. It is important that teachers take time to prioritize the changes that need to be made before embarking on revisions so that necessary changes can occur within a realistic time frame.

After the end-of-unit reflection meeting, tasks were divided among teachers. Different teachers took different items to revise and kept in contact with each other as revisions were made. Prior to the beginning of the semester, all revised materials were collected by a point person to make certain that everything was in order and ready to be taught for the next teaching cycle.

The icebreaker concept was incorporated into revisions during the following round of development. It was incorporated into the objectives, the test task, the syllabus, and the lesson materials. These newly developed materials included a handout for students, revised PowerPoint presentations, and new role-play activities. Table 1 provides a summary of the creation and revision of the ST teaching unit through the ten-step process.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

Based on our experiences working with this process since 2011, we would make the following additional suggestions. Collaboration played a major role in the creation and implementation of our ten-step process. Indeed, we have described it elsewhere as one of our guiding principles in the defining of this process (Butler, Heslup, and Kurth 2014). We recommend that teachers consider collaborating closely with their peers whenever possible. Other studies have shown that curriculum reform can falter and fail without collaboration and discussion among teachers (Wang and Cheng 2005). Additionally, one major drawback to creating your own materials can be the time and energy required (Cunningsworth 1995; Graves 2000; Richards 2001). We have found that balancing the workload in small groups of three or four

Step	Application in the Small Talk teaching unit*
1. Student Needs	Students approached teachers with questions about how to start a conversation with a foreigner. Students reported struggling with first-time conversations in English.
2. Goals and Objectives	Students will be able to initiate a first-time conversation with a foreigner, using context-appropriate register and language.
3. Test Tasks	Students will conduct a role play with a classmate wherein a student playing himself or herself initiates a short first-meeting conversation in English (using language and skills from the module) with a student playing the role of a foreigner in a specific context.
4. Language and Skills	Two greeting phrases were generated in the Test Task practice: "Hey, how's it going?" (lower register) "Good morning/afternoon/evening." (higher register)
5. Sequence	*Lesson 1* – Students will distinguish between and practice high- and low-register greetings and responses. *Lesson 2* – Students will begin to apply the language learned to different possible situations and contexts outside the language classroom. *Lesson 3* – Students will begin to shift among a wider variety of high- and low-register contexts and integrate them into complete role plays. *Lesson 4* – Students will review and practice role plays in formal and informal situations for the end-of-module test. *Lesson 5* – Students will take the end-of-module test.
6. Materials	Handouts were created to provide language support. A PowerPoint presentation was created to provide example situations in which to practice the language.
7. Teaching	Students practiced initiating conversation with greetings in Lessons 1–4. They began practicing in role plays with classmates in Lesson 2 and continued through Lesson 4, with varying situations and partners.
8. Reflection	Teachers observed that the greetings taught did not always match the provided situation and led to awkward or inauthentic conversations, resulting in unsuccessful first-meeting conversations.
9. Evaluation	It seemed that students needed to be introduced to the concept of beginning with an icebreaker based upon the context. Students also needed to understand what would be a more or less appropriate or natural icebreaker in a given situation.
10. Revisions	A new handout was created to introduce the concept of icebreakers, and the presentation was revised to provide more opportunities to practice icebreakers.

*In the interest of brevity, only one small aspect of the Small Talk module is presented here.

Table 1. The ten-step process with examples from Small Talk

teachers keeps the labor manageable while keeping discussions and debate productive.

A further observation is that the cyclical nature of the ten-step process has allowed us to complete time-intensive tasks over the course of multiple semesters. As a result, we can do further research to help define student needs and accompanying goals and objectives. The ST unit contains several examples of how language and culture content, English language teaching approaches, and materials creation have been informed over time by teacher research during reflection and revisions.

For example, we began with a concept, based on English as a second language principles, of "appropriate" first encounters but gradually revised our ST goals to support greater awareness of the role of English as an international language. Our guidance for this change came from research in the field of EFL. In this way, we continued to follow the experiential learning cycle in that we began with a concrete experience, followed up on that experience by performing reflective observation, sought out sources in the field to help with our abstract conceptualization of the experience, and finally began revisions for the next semester in the active experimentation phase. By following the experiential learning cycle over several semesters, we have been able to make informed curricular decisions.

We have also had an opportunity to improve our materials over time. During the first semester, much of what we produced for students tended to be rougher than the material we used in later semesters. As Sheldon (1988) notes, one downside of teacher-created materials is that the glossier materials provided by publishers can be more alluring to students even if those materials are of poorer pedagogic value. Our materials got better as we tested them out and made them work, but that improvement required time, commitment, and patience from all stakeholders.

While this article has presented the process as a series of ten discrete and sequential steps, it is important to note that this description is a simplification to illustrate the steps clearly and to indicate the cyclical nature of the process. The process of curriculum development is a holistic one, with each element influencing nearly all the others (Graves 2000). As described in Steps 3 and 5, there were many instances where a change made in a later step led to a modification in a previous step or steps. Also, while we engaged in formal reflection and evaluation following teaching, informal reflection and evaluation were ongoing throughout all steps in the process. With this in mind, we still find it helpful to think of the process as progressing in order, especially when creating timelines and setting goals and deadlines.

More-prescriptive language programs might require teachers to closely follow provided coursebooks and syllabi. If teachers are not free to create their own units, there is precedent for modifying content that does not suit the target students (Graves 2000; Richards 2001). The ten-step process could be used to modify coursebook content to meet student needs. The process could be used to identify a gap between the content and students' needs and to assist teachers in generating activities and materials to work within their prescribed curriculum. For example, instead of creating an end-of-unit assessment, teachers could use the test task to create an activity that would assess student learning at the end of a lesson rather than at the end of a unit.

CONCLUSION

As we have outlined above, curriculum design and evaluation is not a matter for specialists alone. The specialist model produces a variety of curricular policies, materials, and products, among which is the mass-market coursebook. Teachers may find that their coursebook is not a suitable fit for their students. Rather than waiting for an outside entity to fill the gap or fix a problematic element, teachers can utilize their own experience, knowledge, and skills to better meet student needs.

After establishing who is qualified, the next natural question is how to do it. We had the same question when we began in 2011. The

ten-step process has proven to be our answer to that question. It has offered us a means to create teaching units over time and allowed us to make informed curricular decisions that are responsive to our students' needs. We hope that it will be of equal use to educators who find that their present curriculum is not meeting the needs of their students.

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Literature Circles as Support for Language Development

There are many instructional approaches for helping English language learners improve both reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. One such approach, the literature circle—which is somewhat like a student book club in the classroom—has drawn a great deal of attention in recent years (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999). Many teachers champion the strategy and use it consistently in their classrooms (Daniels 2002).

According to the Standards for the English Language Arts published by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996, 32), the instructional practices realized by literature circles embody quality educational standards and are used by teachers "who are bringing out the best in their students day by day." To shed light on the many ways that literature circles improve English skills, this article defines the term, provides a brief theoretical foundation for the use of literature circles, describes their benefits, and then presents a four-lesson unit that applies the approach to the teaching of a literary text.

WHAT IS A LITERATURE CIRCLE?

A literature circle is an activity in which members meet to discuss and respond to a book that they are all reading (Daniels 2002). As Cameron et al. (2012) explain, literature circles are led mostly by students, while the teacher remains in the background and performs only basic control functions. Roles are usually assigned to members of the literature circle to allow the group to function productively and to help members remain focused on the chosen book. Examples of five individual roles are Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher (Daniels and Steineke 2004). The Discussion Director's task, for example, could be to develop at least five questions about the text and then share these questions with the group. The Literary Luminary pinpoints important parts of the text for the group in order to stimulate thinking and elicit some interesting facts about the text. The Illustrator's job might be to draw pictures related to the reading and share the drawings with the group; the group members then speculate on the meaning of the pictures and connect them to their own ideas about the text. The Summarizer's role is to recall what happened in the reading and prepare a summary for the group, and the Vocabulary Enricher helps the group find and discuss new or difficult words (Daniels and Steineke 2004). These roles can rotate with each discussion so that every student has the opportunity to perform each role. Overall, the purpose of the literature circle is to support student language improvement, particularly through reading comprehension and vocabulary learning.

BENEFITS OF LITERATURE CIRCLES

Recent evidence demonstrates that literature circles positively impact student learning processes and language development. Much of this impact is directed towards several important areas for language learning, including the following.

Improved comprehension skills

Most important of all the benefits, literature circles help students develop comprehension skills that are essential when reading a text. Literature circles support strategies such as visualizing, connecting, questioning, inferring, and analyzing that are vital to solid comprehension and lively conversation (Daniels and Steineke 2004). Since the assigned roles in literature circles require students to draw the events, create questions, and summarize the text, learners are called upon to use a variety of strengths and skills to prepare for the discussion. As students perform their roles, they draw information from the text, pay attention to details to support their ideas, highlight main ideas, and respond critically to what they have read by making judgments about the characters' intentions and actions, and about how and why things happened in the story.

Literature circles help students develop comprehension skills that are essential when reading a text.

Increased student participation in a safe environment

Literature circles help to provide a safe classroom environment where students can build confidence and feel enabled to take risks while interacting in their second language (Burns 1998; Larson 2008). Learners may feel more comfortable working with their peers than being constantly monitored or corrected by the teacher and may be more willing to share their viewpoints without feeling anxious about making mistakes.

Enhanced responsibility and motivation

Another benefit of literature circles is helping students feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. Student choice and social interaction easily integrate into literature circles, which support student motivation and can have a very powerful effect on achievement (Burner 2007). Researchers have also found that when students work in collaborative groups they encourage each other's efforts and that this leads to increased motivation and effort (Daniels 2002; Chi 2008; Williams 2009).

Expanded collaborative discussion

Reading specialists highlight discussion, student response, and collaboration—all aspects of literature circles—as important for providing a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999). When students learn a second language, collaborative discussions with peers often play a vital role in reinforcing comprehension skills (Egbert 2007; Ketch 2005) because the active involvement that takes place entails speaking and listening to many different perspectives, which deepens second language learners' understandings (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999).

Developed oral proficiency

Research has found that the target language is learned more effectively when second language learners have a variety of opportunities to practice real communication (Krashen 1981); working in literature groups provides students with opportunities for social interaction and communication about issues important to them (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2008; Nagy and Townsend 2012). During the meaningful oral discussions that occur in literature circles, learners have more opportunities to practice oral skills, which eventually may help to develop their oral proficiency (Souvenir 1997).

Increased scaffolding opportunities

Scaffolding is the support given to students during the learning process so that they can cope with the learning task (Sawyer 2006). Almasi, McKeown, and Beck (1996),

for example, note that the discussing and exchanging of ideas that occur in literature circles can support a deep understanding of a text. This scaffolding shapes students' attitudes, helping them realize that their reading challenges are solvable, and increases their interest and involvement in the given activity.

Reinforced writing skills

Reading interactions may have positive effects on writing skills in general; they may also support greater participation and involvement as students share and shape their opinions on paper. Teachers can assign engaging and challenging group-writing activities that stimulate students' critical thinking, such as choosing a different ending to a short story, writing a short critique, or addressing writing prompts that reflect knowledge of what they have read (Webb et al. 1998).

OVERVIEW OF FOUR-LESSON UNIT

The brief overview of targets and processes below demonstrates how literature circles might be used in the language classroom in a unit consisting of four lessons.

Instructional goals

Although instructional goals for literature circles may vary depending on the text and context, the goal of the unit is that students, through group activities and discussion, will be able to analyze and comprehend a text. At the end of this sample unit, students should be able to:

- demonstrate the ability to compare and contrast the personalities of the main characters;
- provide understanding of the plot and the setting of the story and the characters' actions;
- apply strategies to preview, comprehend, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and relate literature to their own lives;
- understand literary conflicts;
- define and provide examples of vocabulary from the text and identify a language concept (e.g., similes, metaphors, allusions) used in literature; and
- understand the idea of timelines, create conversations based on narratives, and use transition signals to compare and contrast.

Using the text *Holes* for a literature circle

Holes, by Louis Sachar (1998), a popular young-adolescent text for intermediate-level language students, will be the basis of several tasks in this four-lesson unit. In the book, the author tells the tale of two young main characters who are cursed with bad luck, Stanley Yelnats and Hector Zeroni, who is called Zero. Stanley is wrongly accused of stealing a pair of baseball shoes, and Zero was abandoned by his mother and has experienced a lot of suffering and difficulties in his lifetime. It is these misfortunes that result in the boys being incarcerated in a juvenile correctional facility called Camp Green Lake, which has neither green plants nor a lake. At the harsh desert camp (representative of actual juvenile facilities in the United States but not like any specific ones), all the inmates are given tools to dig holes in the hard ground in order to "build character"; however, the story reveals a different purpose for the digging: the administrators of the camp are looking for a supposed buried treasure. Through a series of flashbacks, the story reveals how the current events that the characters take part in intertwine with events that took place in the past and how these events affect their lives. Eventually, the two boys become great friends, consequently boosting their strength to stand up for their rights to camp administrators and receive justice. The main themes of the story are justice, friendship, bullying, and overcoming hardship.

Pre-task overview and modeling

Before the unit starts, students should already have been exposed to topics related to the main themes in the selected short story or novel. In a preview lesson, the students are asked to share their personal experiences around important themes in the text. This

discussion leads to the introduction of the characters in the chosen reading.

To introduce the students to the concept of the literature circle, the teacher adopts the role of facilitator to help scaffold the understanding of how the text can be split into smaller parts and, through several simple stages of discussion and analysis, can be more easily understood. To this end, students read a short story in class and then receive a handout explaining the roles to be used during the unit. The teacher explains the roles and asks for five volunteers to create a model literature circle in front of the class as they discuss the short story.

Next, in the initial meeting of the actual literature circles, students look over the text and decide how to divide it up among the number of meetings they will have; they also assign roles for the first meeting. Once all questions have been answered and the teacher sees that all the students understand the process, the lessons can begin.

THE FOUR LESSONS

The teacher decides the timing of the literature circle lessons—they can be held daily, every other day, once per week, or whenever the teacher thinks it feasible and effective for the students. Each lesson below is organized in four sections: (1) Learning targets; (2) Preview (introduction); (3) Do (lesson content and tasks); and (4) Review (assessment of outcomes according to the learning targets). Preview activities may not be necessary for students in various contexts, while in others teachers may want to break up lesson sections in different ways. Student roles, if used, will determine how the circles run and which student leads which aspect of the tasks. Parts of the lessons can be deleted or adapted at the teacher's discretion, and some tasks will change based on the texts chosen for the literature circles. Although the following lessons are based on an unspecified short story or novel, several of the specific tasks described in the four lessons use the text *Holes* as an example of the procedure.

LESSON 1

Learning targets: At the end of the lesson, students will be able to identify the setting and the characters of the chosen text (short story or novel), use new vocabulary, and make inferences from the story.

Preview:

1. The purpose of this brainstorming task is for students to construct schema that will help them understand the setting of the text that has been selected for the literature circle unit. The teacher shows pictures of a place like the setting of the text—in the home country, if relevant—to the students so that they become familiar with the setting of the story. Students describe the characteristics of that place and brainstorm vocabulary that is relevant to that setting. They can also discuss what it might be like to live in such a place.

   For *Holes*, the picture would be of a desert, and students might brainstorm words such as *flat, hot, sunny,* and *dusty* and a list of animals that might be found there such as *scorpions, rattlesnakes,* and *lizards*.

2. The goal of the second task is to enable the students to understand the concepts of the setting and the characters and to make inferences. To this end, the teacher works with students to understand the use of three worksheets: (a) a character details organizer (like the free one at http://freeology.com/graphicorgs/character-details-organizer) that asks students to chart each character's name, physical description, personality/qualities, and role in the story along with an important quote; (b) a worksheet with room to write in the time, place, description, culture, and other facts about the setting of the story; and (c) an inference chart with titled columns like "What the book says," "What I know about this," and "What I can infer." After students understand

how to use the worksheets, the teacher asks them to tell a short story they know that is familiar to all students, and then, using the worksheets, students describe the setting, list the main events, identify the characters' behaviors and actions, and infer why the setting was or was not good for the main character(s). The students then make inferences about the characters and setting of the familiar story and discuss their answers. For additional practice with the worksheets and relevant concepts, the students can tell another familiar story and discuss their responses to it in their literature circles.

3. The teacher may choose to preview vocabulary from the first section of the chosen text (in this case, *Holes*).

Do:

1. Having read the assigned chapters from the chosen text and prepared for their roles, students meet in their literature circles and work collaboratively on the worksheets to describe the characteristics of the setting and identify the characters. In groups, students then add to and/or comment on a drawing of the setting by the group's Illustrator, based on the descriptions in the novel. Using an inference chart, students look for evidence to infer how the setting may impact the characters. Students also share what they know so far about each character's behavior, traits, and actions, and about the events that have taken place.

   For *Holes*, students would work from their understandings of the desert setting that were built in the preview, and the Illustrator would provide a picture of Camp Green Lake for the group. The group describes in what ways the setting would be a good or not so good place to live and why. Students list what they know about Stanley, Zero, and other important characters from this initial reading.

2. Finally, students discuss the main plot points presented so far in the text.

   Students reading *Holes*, for example, discuss what the curse is and how the word *curse* is interpreted in their own cultures. They might also discuss "luck" and the way they deal with bad luck from their cultural perspective. Last, each group describes how the curse was placed in *Holes* and predicts whether and how the curse will be broken.

Review:

Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Clear illustration of the major features of the setting
- Completeness of character grids
- Logic of inferences
- Correct use of vocabulary

LESSON 2

Learning targets: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify a specific language concept (e.g., idioms, humor, descriptive adjectives, allusions, similes) and create their own examples, list plot points in chronological order, and address a text-based grammar point (e.g., verb tenses, use of prepositions of motion, sentence combination, use of ordering words).

Preview:

1. The teacher introduces the language concept by providing examples from the short story or novel. Students discuss the meaning and structure of the concept and find other examples from the text. Students then create their own examples of the language concept.

   For *Holes*, the teacher introduces the concept of *simile* by providing an example from the novel, e.g., "Zero's face looked like a jack-o'-lantern that … ."

The teacher then shows pictures of a jack-o'-lantern, and students try to guess what is meant by the description of Zero's face. In groups, students then find other text examples, and finally come up with similar figurative descriptions from their cultures and share them with peers.

2. The teacher pre-teaches the grammar point by using examples from the text and other models.

   For *Holes*, the teacher models how to combine two sentences into one to create a simile and then passes out a worksheet where students combine pairs of sentences into a single descriptive sentence. An example provides scaffolding for the students, such as "John is strong. A lion is strong. John is strong **like** a lion." Students then interact in groups to describe things or people they know by comparing them to things, people, and so on using *as* and *like*. The aim is to give the students exposure to and practice with similes that are similar to those used in the novel.

3. The teacher asks the students to help complete a timeline of events from the story. Students first make their own timeline in groups, creating a sentence for each plot point. They then share their timelines with the class, discussing points of disagreement.

   Because *Holes* entwines stories from diverse generations, the teacher introduces the idea of a flashback by drawing a timeline on the board and asking the students to select events that took place in the past and in the present that are interconnected. The teacher then places a pin on the timeline, and as a class the students retell the events back and forth using words and phrases such as *first, then, before, in the past,* and *next*.

Do:

1. In their literature circles, students share examples of the language concepts they found while reading the assigned text. They also talk about how these examples affect or enhance the text.

   In their *Holes* literature circles, students share similes they found and discuss how the comparisons the author used make the descriptions more vivid. They create additional similes for the characters by using information from the current chapters.

2. Student groups collaborate to find examples of major events in the text and list them on a timeline worksheet, to eventually be added to the class timeline.

   In their *Holes* literature circles, students work together to create and write a one-paragraph "flashback" for one of the characters.

Review:

Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Grammatical correctness of the language concept
- Relevant inferences based on clues or evidence
- Inclusion of important events on a timeline
- Correct use of grammar point

LESSON 3

Learning targets: At the end of the lesson, students will be able to define and provide examples for new vocabulary and create a grammatically correct conversation based on a narrative piece from the text.

Preview:

1. The class reviews categories of literary conflict, such as person vs. person and person vs. society. The students then provide examples of these conflicts from real life or popular stories, with the teacher providing necessary vocabulary

support. After that, the teacher demonstrates an example of a conflict, and students come up with suggestions that might solve the problem. For more practice, the students share personal life experiences about conflicts that they have had, and others suggest possible solutions.

2. The teacher then chooses a context from a familiar story where there is a conflict and more than one character. Together with the students, the teacher creates a brief narrative based on that event and writes it on the board. The teacher encourages the students to share their opinions about what the characters might have said based on the narrative and writes the resultant conversation on the board. Students read and discuss the narrative and conversation and ask any questions they have.

Do:

1. In their literature circles, members of each group collaborate to list the conflicts they think of in the part of the text that they have read so far; students use a chart with the types of conflicts at the top (e.g., person vs. person, person vs. society) and put their examples of each type of conflict from the text in the correct column.

2. Students consider the conflicts that have been noted and work to find solutions based on what is possible in the reading. Students define and use new vocabulary from the text as they collaborate.

3. Each group chooses an excerpt from the text that deals with a conflict between two or more characters and creates and models a grammatical conversation based on the conflict. Students are encouraged to use language and grammar concepts to practice what they have previously learned.

Review:

Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Identification of a literary conflict
- Logic of solutions based on the novel
- Grammaticality of conversation
- Correct definition and use of new vocabulary

LESSON 4

Learning targets: At the end of the lesson, students will be able to explain relationships among characters in the reading, use signal words for comparison and contrast, and write a logical comparison/contrast paragraph.

Preview:

1. The teacher asks each group to write down as much information as possible about one character from the story or novel. The teacher then models comparison and contrast by asking guiding questions about the characters. The teacher writes in a Venn diagram (using, for example, the chart maker at www.lucidchart.com/pages/examples/venn_diagram_maker) as students explain whether each point is a similarity or a difference. Students copy the ideas to their own Venn diagram.

   In *Holes*, students will focus on the two main characters, Stanley and Zero, who, though different, will become good friends because of the extraordinary circumstances in which they met. Students can watch a short clip from the video version of *Holes* in which the two characters get to know each other. While or after watching the video, each student notes the following information for each character:

The teacher asks each group to write down as much information as possible about one character from the story or novel.

- Name of the character
- His or her family background
- Why he or she is in the camp
- Characteristics of the character
- Other notable information (dress, behavior, and so on)

Students then complete the Venn diagram that the teacher has modeled and discuss questions such as these:

- In what ways are the two protagonists similar or different?
- Do you think that they will be friends or enemies in jail? Why?
- What information helped you guess what might happen to the two characters?

2. The teacher passes out a worksheet of important signal words and expressions such as *on the other hand, but,* and *whereas*. The teacher shows a comparison/contrast paragraph to the students, and they indicate how the signal words are used. In groups, students underline the signal words in the paragraph. They then use their Venn diagram to write sentences about the similarities and differences of the two characters they have examined. The teacher and peers check for correct usage of the signal words and other grammar points.

Do:

1. In their circles, students discuss their Venn diagrams and add or delete any information.

   In their *Holes* literature circles, students discuss how Stanley and Zero met and how the two characters are similar and different (physically and in character). Students also share their perspectives about the circumstances under which Stanley and Zero have become friends. Students debate the way Zero and Stanley influenced each other and the way their friendship made them stronger and gave them the courage to challenge the hard living conditions in the camp.

2. Using a final copy of a Venn diagram, students list the characters' similarities and differences that they have agreed on. They use the diagram to write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the characters using the comparison/contrast signal words.

Review:

Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Correct use of a Venn diagram
- Appropriate use of signal words
- Paragraph based on events in the text

CONCLUSION

These four lessons provide a simple framework to support learners in comprehending and using the content and language in a specific text. Important for teachers, literature circles are flexible and lend themselves well not only to all types and lengths of texts but also to the addition of other language resources such as video, audio, and graphics. In addition, there is no set number of lessons for any one text, and the framework above is only one suggestion of the many available (conduct an online search for "literature circles" to find examples, more lessons, and additional instructions). Teachers may choose to emphasize other aspects of the text and focus on different grammar points, but the central idea that students are involved both with the text and with each other does not change.

Research shows that using literature circles as an instructional approach in the classroom has the potential to create a positive and interactive environment that sustains the kinds of student motivation and involvement that

Using literature circles as an instructional approach in the classroom has the potential to create a positive and interactive environment.

are essential to reading development. Through interactive discussions and collaborative tasks, learners complete conversational and written activities that expose them to diverse responses and perspectives. These experiences not only help improve their basic language and literacy skills, but may also help to develop high-order thinking skills that are vital for helping learners to grow as independent and autonomous readers.

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HUGO DART
Brazil

The Rio–Warsaw Connection: Encouraging Interculturalism among Students

It all began in Norwich. As they do every year, teachers from different parts of the world went in July 2012 to that beautiful little city in the east of England to take part in one of the two-week professional development courses offered by the Norwich Institute for Language Education (NILE). Sponsored by Rio de Janeiro's Instituto Brasil-Estados Unidos (IBEU), I had chosen Advanced Language and Intercultural Awareness.

On the second day of the course, I—the only Brazilian participant—went with Karolina Isio-Kurpińska—the only Polish one—to a supermarket just outside the campus of the University of East Anglia, where our classes took place. We had a long talk about our respective countries and how similar and different our experiences were. During the rest of the course, we became good friends and even did our final project together. What we had gotten from that exchange would come to matter a lot very soon.

After returning from the trip, I read *Intercultural Language Activities* (Corbett 2010), one of the titles recommended by Uwe Pohl, our main teacher at NILE. The first chapter is about setting up an online community where students from different places interact and make discoveries about each other's culture while practicing their English. The idea sounded fascinating; as we know, social networking programs are an effective way to get students communicating with each other (Harmer 2012), and foreign language classrooms create new cultural contexts every school term (Kramsch 1993). If I were to give it a try, I thought, it would be only logical to work once again with Karolina, who agreed the project could be interesting. We looked forward to finding out what contexts would be created in a virtual environment, where participants were to feel free to contribute their own ways of looking at themselves and each other.

This article describes the ensuing ten-week project we developed for students from the two countries, and it offers an evaluation of the results along with suggestions to make online intercultural projects a productive way to improve the teaching and learning of English.

GETTING READY

Karolina and I have come to understand culture as more than a body of knowledge about works of art, places, institutions, events, symbols, and ways of living—it is also "a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with

each other" (Scarino and Liddicoat 2009, 19). That is why, as essential as reading is, no amount of it can replace actual experience and contact with what seems foreign and distant. Our main goal was to give the teenagers participating in the project something they cannot get from watching television and movies and at the same time enable them to see that learning English can be a real gateway to discovery. Most importantly, we wanted to make sure the cultural information participants shared with each other would be received "in a nonjudgmental fashion, in a way that does not place value or judgment on distinctions" between the cultures of the participants (Peterson and Coltrane 2003, 2).

By the end of 2012 we had made a few decisions:

- We would offer a ten-week project to a limited number of students at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) intermediate level B1 (Council of Europe 2001).
- The project would take place on an exclusive Facebook group, the social network used by most students.
- Participating students would have a new task every week to share what they knew and felt about different aspects of their realities. Our view, based on Freire (1996), was that each task should stimulate students' curiosity and allow them to independently explore the possibilities of dialogue.
- Once we posted the tasks, the students would be the only ones to write.

We then formulated a ten-week plan; teachers of both countries added ideas (in Warsaw, as Karolina was now involved in other academic activities, two of her colleagues, Krystyna Rubiec-Masalska and Agata Guzowska, were directly responsible for the participating students). On Sundays, after a brief exchange on Facebook, either Karolina or I would post the task(s) for the coming week on the group page. We would always be in complete agreement about the content and wording.

I created the Facebook group, and we selected the students who would participate. Although we limited the actual groups from each country to ten students, all who wished to be involved could participate; we assigned students who were not selected to work with the ones who were, even though only the latter would be posting on the group page.

I told all students who were interested that they had 24 hours to friend me on Facebook and send a private message indicating why they wanted to be in the project. In the following class, from among those who had sent me the message in time, I randomly drew the names of ten students. We also went over the main principles for students to observe, including modesty, politeness, sincerity, interest in the other party's answers, and, above all, interaction.

THE TEN-WEEK RIO–WARSAW CONNECTION

The "first edition" of what we called The Rio–Warsaw Connection included students from Rio's IBEU and Warsaw's General High School 34–Miguel de Cervantes. Following is a description of the ten-week project in intercultural exchange.

Week One

Students were tasked to introduce themselves, talk about any cultural assumptions they had about the project, and suggest guidelines for the group to follow. At the end of the week, we summarized the following four netiquette rules:

As essential as reading is, no amount of it can replace actual experience and contact with what seems foreign and distant.

1. All participants should post at least one comment a week in each thread, but we encourage you to post more!

2. You are all students of English, and this project is about fluency and communication, not language accuracy. Mistakes that do not influence meaning should not, therefore, be corrected. If you have doubts about what the other person means, ask him or her to clarify!

3. The use of emoticons is allowed and encouraged, and we also suggest you post photos!

4. We are here to learn about each other's cultures, so the most important netiquette point is mutual respect!

On Friday, at the end of the week, we posted a pre-task: without doing any kind of research, students were instructed to tell what they knew about their counterparts' cities.

Week Two

Week Two was a chance for students to talk about their cities—what they liked and disliked, and what they would recommend to visitors. As expected, all Brazilians could say about Poland is that "it's cold," and Polish students could think only of beaches, sunny weather, and the "giant Christ statue." When students had the chance to share something about their cities, the teachers were pleasantly surprised by their enthusiasm. They posted pictures of places they liked, commented on each other's posts, and spontaneously discussed food. One of the best moments in the whole ten weeks happened right then, when a Brazilian student talked about (and posted pictures of) *brigadeiro*, a popular local sweet, and one of the Polish girls went and made some. The moment we saw the photo she had proudly taken of the first truly Polish *brigadeiro* was definitely a highlight.

At this point, one of my students asked us if they could add each other as friends on Facebook. We told her that that was a great idea. Soon, almost all of them had friended one another.

Week Three

We had every reason to enter Week Three optimistically, and that taught us a lesson. The topic was national culture. We asked students to talk about how their countries are viewed by themselves and foreigners and any stereotypes they were aware of; we also asked them to describe some typical dishes, as well as any gestures and body language, that might be specific to their country. After the excitement of the first two weeks, this time few students posted. Karolina sent a message encouraging them to post, which resulted in more contributions towards the end of the week.

This first bump in the road led us to conclude that the lull had most likely been due to some fading of the initial excitement and that our direct intervention might be necessary at certain times to encourage students to participate. All tasks should be presented as exciting opportunities to share—and learn—something that matters to them. That is, of course, provided we had designed the tasks well enough.

Week Four

We were more cautious with our expectations, but things got back on track. Once again, there were two tasks. The first was for participants to share the TV shows, movies, books, and music they like, a topic they enjoyed talking about. The second task was for them to post pictures of what they see from their windows and also pictures of their desks at home. The pictures aroused everybody's curiosity and brought everyone closer together.

Week Five

Week Five was our second low point. When asked to share which news sources they usually turn to, and what the major headlines were at that moment, students found little to say. After some encouragement, a few stories were posted, but it became clear to us that, for our teenagers, knowing what was going on in the world was not a top priority.

Week Six

In Week Six, we took a gamble. The previous Friday, again as a pre-task, we asked students to watch the 1994 U.S. movie *Forrest Gump* and list the various cultural and historical references they found. Then, as the week started, we asked them to imagine what Mr. Gump's journey would have been like had he lived in the students' respective countries. It turned out that (1) that movie was too old for most of our students to even know what it was about, and (2) they were not willing to do much research, even if that meant watching a film that was easy to find. I eventually got a few of my students to post something meaningful, but there was no denying it had been the worst week yet.

Week Seven

We went for something completely different. The first of two tasks was for students to find and post pictures of examples of "English around them" in signs, shops, and street art, and a few of them did. The second task was for them to list English words frequently used by people in their countries, even if those people were not English speakers, indicating whether the words were cognates or false cognates and whether specific groups used them. There were enough contributions for the week to be considered satisfactory. Among the examples listed by both groups were words related to computers and the Internet, along with names of foods (e.g., *hot dog* and *cheeseburger*) and the expression "Whatever," which I presume students are using to mimic young Americans they see on TV.

Week Eight

In Week Eight, students talked about national TV shows and movies they liked. They were to post pictures and links to videos and discuss which ones they thought people from other countries would enjoy and which ones were highly culture-specific. This was another good week, with less interaction than we would have liked but with interesting examples; for instance, the Brazilians named a few comedy films and light afternoon TV shows, while the Polish students mostly mentioned dramatic, historical movies. The female students did seem to agree on their favorite male actors, though, with George Clooney and Daniel Craig being mentioned most often.

Week Nine

At the beginning of the week, I posted a short message congratulating the Polish on their National Independence Day. When my students were encouraged to follow suit, a spontaneous conversation began, and participants from both countries posted pictures and discussed how they felt about that kind of celebration.

Also in Week Nine, students discussed how much of the movie, television, and music content they were exposed to was from English-speaking countries and the heavy influence of that entertainment on their countries. Here there was some interesting sharing.

Week Ten

We asked students to talk about what lay ahead. What were their plans and expectations? How important did they think English would be in their future lives? Students produced a few long responses, and again we were happy with the result.

Finally, Karolina and I posted our reflections about the project, saying how happy we were with everything students had shared and how they had shared it. We also said the group would remain active on Facebook, so they would always be able to find each other there. At that point, all the Brazilian students who had participated got a certificate signed by the Polish teachers, and vice versa. We also sent each other's students little souvenirs from our countries.

THE SECOND AND THIRD EDITIONS OF THE PROJECT

After the ten-week project, Karolina and I shared our experience on the Facebook group I had created for NILE. Two of our former NILE classmates, along with some of their students, joined in to create a second edition of the project, which was now called The Motril [Spain]–Rio–Warsaw Connection.

We updated the plan based on what we had learned from the first experience. Now, instead of discussing the news, our students were asked to talk about their respective schools—what they liked, disliked, and would change if they could. We kept the *Forrest Gump* activity, but now with some real preparation time in the classroom. We watched the trailer and a couple of scenes from the movie and had a discussion about them in preparation for the task. With the support of our respective schools, The Motril–Rio–Warsaw Connection thrived.

Nevertheless, at the end of the tenth week, as I reflected on everything we had done, I realized that the participation of students had been irregular and their interaction less impressive than in the original group. Because of the difficulties in coordinating tasks among three groups and communicating among a larger number of teachers, we decided to go back to the Rio–Warsaw format. Krystyna, IBEU teacher Sandra Saito, and I made the third edition of the project similar to the first one, with some improvements based on our accumulated experience. For instance, we would no longer have more than one task per week. Also, now that we had tried "horizontal expansion" by including more students at the same level, it was time to try "vertical expansion" by including students of different levels.

We created a second group, also with Brazilian and Polish participants at both the CEFR intermediate B1 and advanced C1 levels (Council of Europe 2001). This time, we dealt with more challenging tasks, most of which were designed by Krystyna, who had been with us since the beginning. These tasks included (1) having students share their favorite songs in their native languages (sharing English versions of the lyrics with the group); (2) creating a chain story (in which participants took turns adding five to ten sentences to the same story they told collectively); and (3) posting personal messages to each other (we paired them up alphabetically). The undisputed highlight was when three of my students spontaneously made and posted a video on how to make *brigadeiro*. (One might think that sweet is an obsession of ours … .) Meanwhile, the intermediate students interacted a lot more than the ones in either of the first two editions. Their posts during the *Forrest Gump* task were particularly creative.

We have been opening doors that lead to understanding and, as a consequence, increased tolerance.

In the end, all three projects have enabled our students to learn things they otherwise would not have and to practice their English in a way they did not expect. We have been opening doors that lead to understanding and, as a consequence, increased tolerance.

After the third edition came to a close, I began to imagine a fourth Rio–Warsaw Connection. Some of the tasks may be rethought a bit, but the main improvement we will make is to follow our students even more closely and ensure they remain motivated and able to balance their everyday responsibilities with their participation in the project.

HOW YOU CAN DO IT

Just as I have tried to adapt this project for students of different levels, I believe that fellow teachers from around the world can do something similar with their students, even if technological resources are limited.

What we are doing is all about interculturalism, so the starting point is to get in touch with people from another country—or even another city in the same country, as we know there is typically wide cultural variety within a single nation (that is certainly true of Brazil). Facebook itself is a place to find teachers from around the globe, as are some helpful websites from Corbett (2010):

- ePals (www.epals.com)
- Tandem City (www.tandemcity.info)

- eLanguages (www.elanguages.org)

- The British Council (schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org)

As mentioned before, some students who are not selected work with ones who are. This creates opportunities for pairs and trios; even if a few are entering the posts, all can be involved. That has worked well. When talking about themselves, some students would often actively include their partners. For example, one student wrote about her favorite band, while another classmate, who had not been selected, stated her preference for a different band. Teachers may select participants any way they want, provided all see the process as fair. And it is essential that no one feels left out.

Some teachers may be working with students who simply do not have Internet access. It might still be possible to collect the group's contributions in class, type them at the school or at some other facility, and later bring printed images of the screen to share and discuss with all participants.

At IBEU In-Service sessions, my colleagues and I discussed the notion of adapting the project for lower-level students, which would entail developing a set of simpler tasks and closer teacher supervision. It may even be necessary for the teacher to review each post before it is published. That is not ideal, but it might be advisable in some cases. Another idea is to conduct the project in a shorter time frame, perhaps five or six weeks, if the availability of teachers and students—and their time—is limited.

As far as the lesson plan itself is concerned, teachers may choose to talk about any topic they think students will be interested in. Here are a few examples:

- Bullying is a serious problem in a lot of places. Is it a problem in your school? How do people deal with it? Let's compare the approach to this issue in the two countries.

- Let's talk about your favorite outfits. What do you wear to school? Are uniforms required? Should they be? What about the times you go out with friends? Post a few pictures, and we'll see how similar teen fashion is in your countries.

- We are having a great time interacting online, but is that how you normally chat with your friends? This week, let's compare the different ways teenagers interact with classmates and relatives.

- In Week Seven, we talked about how English is all around us—in street signs and in the vocabulary we use. This week, let's see how much each of us is in contact with the language on a day-by-day basis. When do you get to practice your English? Chatting online? Playing videogames? What are the expressions you use the most?

Sustaining student motivation is often challenging. Actions that might help include:

- making sure that tasks for successive weeks are not too similar to each other

- having the class discuss the weekly task as group work

- praising students' contributions

- allowing students to propose the task for a given week. (That is something I plan to try in the next edition by organizing an in-class election of the best proposed task.)

There is always the possibility that students will stop posting for a while—or altogether. That is why it is a good idea to establish a few ground rules right at the participant selection stage. Is it acceptable for someone who has been selected to quit? Is there a penalty for that? Halfway through the third edition I had to replace a participant for the very first time—even after being warned and without presenting a reason, he stopped contributing. It is certainly wise to prepare for that possibility; in my case, a number of students had expressed interest in the project but had

not been selected, so finding a replacement was not difficult.

EXPANDING STUDENT INTERACTIONS

One idea that has come up over and over again to enhance interaction is to use a program like Skype to get participants from different countries to see one another. The reasons I have not used it so far are the time-zone difference and Internet connection limitations. I do think it would be exciting to have students send video messages to each other at some point. One option would be to have students record their own videos, and then their respective teachers could put them all together.

Teachers who find this intercultural project interesting might want to investigate different, deeper ways to explore the proposed topics. It is my experience that the tasks assigned each week lead to lively classroom discussions, especially when we turn them into activities that lead all students to further examine their own culture and of that of their counterparts. Here are a few examples of such activities based on tasks in the ten-week project:

- When students are asked to think of English words used by people in their countries, they can begin by carrying out small-group conversations on the differences between the slang and the specific vocabulary that they and their peers normally use and those that are characteristic of other groups. In Brazil, for example, students are very much aware of vocabulary currently used by Internet surfers, such as the word *brother* and variations of it to mean "friend." How do those differences come about? Do they serve a purpose? This is an opportunity for students to reflect on why they speak the way they do. In the same task, talking about cognates and false cognates is the starting point of an activity that could go on for several classes, in which students investigate the origins of words and their relationship to history and geography.

- The task in which participants reflect on how much they know about each other's country and on what stereotypes are commonly associated with their own country could lead to a role-playing exercise. For example, a student from Rio plays the part of a tourist from Warsaw, in the city for the first time, meeting Brazilians from various regions and walks of life. What would this tourist expect to encounter? How would the people the tourist meets behave? What aspects of local culture might be especially difficult for him or her to understand? This activity could be a lot of fun as well as an invitation for students to think critically about their own homes.

- When students learn about their counterparts' schools, they could be asked to write an essay on what it would be like for them to suddenly find themselves as newcomers there. If students have time to do additional research, they could make a presentation to the class about what life is like for a student in the other country, focusing on what they perceive as being easier or harder than what they are used to. Students could also try to imagine what, for them, a perfect school would be like. Then the class is divided into teams, and each one does the exercise from a different perspective—that of teachers, hall monitors, cleaning staff, and so on.

These ideas are potential follow-ups to activities in the project. As the goal is to enable students to expand their horizons as much as possible, it is a good idea to help them revisit and rethink assumptions under which they might not even know they operate every day.

CONCLUSION

Not so long ago, we had pen pals and used actual pens and paper. We would sometimes find each other through ads in magazines and initiate a kind of correspondence in which it could take weeks to get a reply to each message. Now that technology has made instant, inexpensive communication between

We are looking at people with whom we could not imagine what we have in common, and we are learning to identify and take apart stereotypes.

people on opposite sides of the earth a reality, many of us are still looking only for those who are much like ourselves. Such massive underuse of the potential that is in our students' hands presents teachers of English with a golden opportunity to broaden their students' horizons.

We have departed from the notion of teaching culture by simply transmitting information. We are exploring interculturality, which includes a reflection on both cultures, as both are "target cultures" at the same time, in a truly interpersonal process (Kramsch 1993). We are looking at people with whom we could not imagine what we have in common, and we are learning to identify and take apart stereotypes.

"Learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others" (Scarino and Liddicoat 2009, 21). What we are accomplishing with our connection is just a first step, but it might be a rather meaningful one.

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READER'S GUIDE

This guide is designed to enrich your reading of the articles in this issue. You may choose to read them on your own, taking notes or jotting down answers to the discussion questions below. Or you may use the guide to explore the articles with colleagues.

For example, many teachers discuss *Forum* at regularly scheduled meetings with department colleagues and members of teachers' groups, or in teacher-training courses and workshops. Often, teachers choose an article for their group to read before the meeting or class, then discuss that article when they meet. Teachers have found it helpful to take notes on articles or write a response to an article and bring that response to share in a discussion group. Another idea is for teachers to try a selected activity or technique described in one of the articles, then report back to the group on their experiences and discuss positives, negatives, and possible adaptations for their teaching context.

A Ten-Step Process for Developing Teaching Units (Pages 2–12)

Pre-Reading

1. Have you ever collaborated with other teachers or administrators on a curriculum development project? Have you ever discussed with your colleagues how to adapt a curriculum or textbook for your classes?
2. When teaching a class for the first time, what process do you use if you need to create your own curriculum or syllabus?

Post-Reading

1. If you were going to revise with your colleagues a curriculum for a particular course, which stages of this ten-step process do you think would be the hardest to perform? What would you and your colleagues need to do to achieve success for those stages?
2. In the authors' view, what is the significance of reflection in teaching? To what degree do you think this could help teachers at your institution design curriculums?

Literature Circles as Support for Language Development (Pages 13–21)

Pre-Reading

1. Have you ever participated in a book discussion group or literature circle? Have you ever discussed short stories or books with your students?

2. What are the potential benefits of extensive reading for English language learners?

Post-Reading

1. How can literature circles improve students' critical thinking skills?

2. Of the five roles in a literature circle (Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher), which one might be most difficult for your students to perform? How would you help a student get started with this role?

3. What book or short story would work well for a literature circle in your class? Which activities in this article would you use with that text?

The Rio–Warsaw Connection: Encouraging Interculturalism among Students (Pages 22–29)

Pre-Reading

1. Have you ever used Facebook or other Internet-based social media programs with your students? What are the benefits for adolescent and adult learners?

2. If you were asked for advice on teaching culture, what would you say? What do you think teachers need to keep in mind when teaching culture in the classroom?

Post-Reading

1. The author describes Week Six as not working out as well as he had anticipated. If you were doing the ten-week project with students from your country, how would you change the Week Six task to make it work more effectively?

2. The second pre-reading question asks for your thoughts on teaching culture. Have they changed in any way after reading this article? The author mentions, "We are looking at people with whom we could not imagine what we have in common, and we are learning to identify and take apart stereotypes." What techniques presented in this article do you think can best help your students continue to do this?

Critiquing Questions

by LYNN W. ZIMMERMAN

Question formation is a basic part of teaching and learning English. However, we often focus on the ability to form the question properly and not as much on the quality of the information the question is seeking. Whether teaching English language learners or students who want to be English teachers, teachers need to carefully consider the intent of questions.

If students are expected to provide simple factual information, a question such as "What kind of pet do you have?" will elicit that information. However, if you want your students to discuss their preferences for certain types of pets or the advantages and disadvantages of different pets, then another type of question must be asked to promote discussion—in other words, a discussion question. The purpose of discussion questions should be to guide and stimulate discussion, not just to acquire information.

What makes a good discussion question? A question that results in a Yes/No answer or one that elicits only factual information is not likely to promote discussion. More fruitful are open-ended questions that elicit factual information as well as opinions and differing perspectives.

Suppose your class is discussing environmental issues. One may pose the question, "Do you recycle?" The appropriate answer of "Yes" or "No" stimulates no discussion. The questioner could then add the qualifier, "Why or why not?" However, this type of add-on still may not promote much discussion, especially with lower-level or younger learners. The respondent might say, "Yes, I recycle because it's the right thing to do." On the other hand, consider this question: "If you were going to design a recycling public-service poster for your city, what would you focus on, and why?" With appropriate scaffolding, even upper

beginners could discuss that question. For upper-level learners, a question to stimulate discussion might be, "Some cities offer refunds to people when they recycle and impose fines when people do not. What kind of incentive program do you think your city should adopt to encourage recycling?" This question gives a framework and ideas with the introductory statement and then asks the respondent to present his or her own ideas. Within a lesson that provides background information, intermediate students should also be able to discuss that question.

WHY FOCUS ON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS?

I realized that we do not focus on teaching English students how to develop discussion questions when I was teaching a graduate-level course in intercultural communication in Poland; the students were at B2 and C1 proficiency levels, and the course included opportunities for the students to lead small-group discussions. While most of the questions students asked were technically correct, few of their questions were effective discussion questions. For example, I overheard one student ask, "Do women in our country have equal rights?" Because these were upper-level students, this question did provoke some discussion despite not being an open-ended question. However, in most English classrooms, it would not have. I thought it would have been better to ask, "What evidence have you seen that women have equal rights in our country?" or "How has the status of women changed in our country over the past 20 years?"

To address the issue of how to develop effective discussion questions, I planned an interactive activity that required students to write questions about a topic we had just focused on; in this case, the topic was sociocultural influences on intercultural communication. After writing discussion questions, students then critiqued one another's questions. Although I used this activity with a class of 30 students, this would also be an effective activity in larger classes because it involves small-group work.

Q/A ACTIVITY

Because of the interactivity this technique encourages, it would be appropriate for almost any type of class. The first step is to choose a topic that you would normally use and present it in whatever way fits the topic and your class. The only criterion is that the topic should be one that promotes discussion—that is, a topic on which students can express their opinions and perspectives.

Next, divide the students into an even number of groups. The ideal group size for this activity is four students. The group will have two identities: in Part 1 of the activity, they will be Group 1; in Part 2, they will be Group 2. As Group 1, students write three open-ended discussion questions about the topic the class has been studying. Once students have completed this task, they give the questions to another group (Group 2). Although I prepared a handout (see the sample at the end of this article) and gave a copy to each group, students could just as easily prepare this activity themselves using notebook paper.

As Group 2, students orally respond to the questions they received. Tell them not to write their answers, but to read the questions aloud and discuss them as they would in a small-group discussion.

Next, tell groups to write a critique of each question. Ask students:

- Did the question stimulate much discussion? Why? Why not?
- How could the question be improved to be a better discussion question?

You might want to write these questions on the board.

Then have a full-class discussion about the activity. Ask students to identify the question they thought was the best and to explain why. Ask for suggestions to improve the questions that promoted less discussion in their groups. Elicit from the students the differences

between Yes/No questions and open-ended questions, along with observations about how the latter promote more discussion. Conclude by having students summarize the characteristics of effective discussion questions. You might want to list those characteristics on the board.

CONCLUSION

This multistep technique engages students in authentic discussion at several levels and uses a variety of language skills and functions. Because of the technique's simplicity, it could be used with almost any age and level of student, except very young learners and beginners. To start off, students have to be familiar enough with the topic to be able to develop their questions; that may require them to read about or do research on the topic and to discuss it with classmates. Or, students can develop questions about a topic the class has recently studied.

Writing the questions will provide opportunity for discussion about how to properly phrase them. As students answer another group's questions, they are discussing the topic again, perhaps from a different perspective than they did originally, because each group will approach the topic differently. Then, as students analyze, discuss, and write about the quality of the questions, they have to use appropriate language to explain the strengths and weaknesses of each question.

Finally, the whole-class discussion about the most effective questions and suggestions for improving weaker questions promotes speaking about the topic using relevant vocabulary; it also engages students in the functions of comparing and contrasting the various questions, making suggestions, and perhaps agreeing and disagreeing. These are all skills and functions that students at the upper-beginner level and beyond can manage and continue to develop.

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Q/A Activity Worksheet

Group 1: Write three open-ended questions that could be used in a discussion group. Give the list of questions to Group 2.

Group 2: Discuss the questions. **Do not write** your answers to the questions.

Write a critique of each question. Did the question stimulate much discussion? Why? Why not? How could the question be improved to make it a better discussion question?

Question 1	
Question 1 Critique	
Question 2	
Question 2 Critique	
Question 3	
Question 3 Critique	

Cultural Introductions by Way of Storytelling

by MATTHEW JELLICK

Chicken tacos

This introductory lesson is something I have used on the first day of class with students around the globe. The activity touches on each of the skill sets associated with English language acquisition, with special attention paid to cultural issues that can be applied on a country-by-country basis. No matter what country you use this technique in, the goal is to create an inviting lesson in which students exercise English abilities while sharing their cultural and personal norms (or exceptions). Whether you are a local teacher or foreign instructor, the technique offers many variations, as each of us is unique, with different likes and dislikes to share. Depending on the circumstances in your classroom, the technique can be used as a warm-up activity or take up an entire hour-long session.

The technique is based on the notion of a "Mad Lib." You, as the teacher, make up a creative story to share with the class, leaving blank key cultural and personal references particular to the country and individual students. By incorporating examples of celebrities, foods, music, places, and other culture-specific customs, this activity enables the students to finish their own stories, highlighting their individual preferences as the unique part that completes each sentence.

You can decide on the vocabulary used in the story, allowing for specific skill-level application in accordance with the class's collective mastery of English. Length can be adjusted as well, shortening or expanding the exercise based on the class's ability. There is no story too basic or too short to use as a framework for this technique, and in fact, only a sentence or two could replace a full paragraph.

Before students complete their own stories, it may be a good idea to demonstrate a sample story aloud to clarify vocabulary while

sharing examples from your own culture or personal experiences. (Just as it is useful for a teacher to learn about his or her students, it is likewise a benefit for the students to learn about their teacher.)

An example I could use with respect to the foods and places I grew up with as an American is to fill in the blanks in the sentence "When we went for a walk in _____, we *grew hungry* and decided to stop for _____" like this: "When we went for a walk in **Los Angeles**, we *grew hungry* and decided to stop for **chicken tacos**." Here, I would stop and discuss the phrase "grew hungry" as vocabulary practice while also noting the American-specific submissions of "Los Angeles" and "chicken tacos." I might also show pictures of Los Angeles and of chicken tacos to support the cognitive processes affiliated with learning about new places and foods.

For that same sentence, Korean students could have put "Seoul" and "kimchi" in the blanks, while Ethiopians might have used "Addis" and "injera." One strength of this technique is that it can be used in countless countries and still have the desired academic and cultural reach.

After you complete the sample story and clarify new vocabulary, give the students a turn to fill in their own distinctive answers. One way to do this is to give each student a copy of the story with the blanks to fill in. Another way is to write the story, with the blanks, on the board or a piece of poster paper. Encouraging creativity—letting students make the story funny, scary, or anything else—goes a long way in making this an enjoyable exercise; such creativity promotes the individuality of the culture and personal preferences being addressed, but moreover, it stimulates student interest. If student input elicits laughter or equally enthusiastic emotions, then the chances of the exercise resulting in meaningful learning will be increased.

After each student has completed his or her respective story, one way to touch upon the language skill of speaking would be to pick individual students to read their stories aloud. (Stories can also be created and shared in pairs or groups, shortening the attention-span deficit while allowing students to work together.) This approach gives students practice in pronunciation and experience speaking in front of a class; at the same time, it provides a sense of ownership and pride at sharing their personalized stories with the class. Here, each student or partner can share his or her favorite musician, movie star, and food with the rest of the class while the teacher fills in the blanks on the story written on the board. In most cases, this will provoke laughter, agreement, or casual comments from others, forming a classroom bond through language practice. If the class is small, each student could read just one sentence, culminating in a group-wide completion of the story as opposed to numerous individual stories. Class size and length can dictate what route you choose with respect to personal sharing or partner/group sharing.

This technique is geared towards an introductory class that encourages students who might not know each other to share their own individual preferences. There is no right or wrong answer to any of the blanks in the story, only an opportunity to share specifics about what we like, where we come from, and how that affects each of us individually.

Encouraging students to introduce themselves and their culture on the first day of class becomes a learning opportunity for me as a teacher; I gain insight into the ages, personalities, and preferences of my students. This opens up pathways to information that I can use later in the course. Having that initial information about my students' likes, I am able to highlight them throughout the semester.

I have had success with this technique in various classrooms and countries. It is a creative and fun way to introduce myself to the class and in turn to learn more about my students' culture and interests. The technique is also a means of informal assessment because I can take note of speaking skills during the oral recitation. More of a fun exercise than anything on which to base an exam, this technique serves as a first-class activity when you are working with a new

culture in an unfamiliar country, or simply with a class where you want to learn about your students' interests.

EXTENSIONS AND VARIATIONS

To extend the lesson, have students create the entire story, not just fill in the cultural blanks. This could be done individually for homework or, if time allows, with the class as a whole working together to set the "plot" of the story, perhaps with a more culturally specific setting. "Driving in a car," for example, is not something all students can relate to on a daily basis, and, depending on the context, "riding in a bus" might be more appropriate. Again, this technique can be adapted for different cultures and their respective norms, and in accordance with student ability levels.

The Sample Story is meant to serve as an example. Rather than using it, you could create a plot about going to the beach, taking a family vacation, seeing a movie, or whatever seems appropriate for your class. Preparation is minimal, with creativity being the most integral component in making this a successful lesson.

Sample Story

As we trekked through the city of _____, my pet _____ and I became tired due to the extreme humidity. "I could sure use something to drink," I thought, looking around for a store. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small market that was sure to sell some delicious _____, a drink that would refresh. (Pet) and I crossed the street and went inside, where the air conditioning was nice and cool. Walking around the store, we overheard the familiar sounds of _____ playing from the speakers above, putting a little bounce in our step. We continued to walk up and down the aisles and, in addition to getting a drink, picked up a delicious snack of _____. As we approached the counter to pay, we were surprised to see that the actress _____ was there buying some candy. Since I thought this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I asked for an autograph, excited to meet my favorite movie star. Soon though we were back outside in the heat, but at least refreshed from the cool and quenching drink. With little time to spare before the start of the television program _____, I decided we'd catch a ride home in a _____ so that we wouldn't be late. Arriving at home tired, I thought about my afternoon, amazed at what had transpired. Hoping for a relaxing evening, I took a rest, knowing that tomorrow my job as a _____ would be hard, with a long week ahead.

NOTES

- The story can be shorter, depending on the number and level of students you have and other varying circumstances. (See the simplified sample at the end of the article.)
- Fill in the blanks with your own creative ideas to demonstrate; then have students fill in their own ideas.
- You might want to highlight new vocabulary words and phrases for your students.

Sample Story (Simplified)

My pet _____ and I walked through the city of _____. We became tired. "I need something to drink," I thought. I saw a market that sold my favorite drink, delicious _____. (Pet) and I went inside. In the store, we heard the song _____ playing from the speakers. We found the drink and a delicious snack of _____. While we waited to pay, we saw the actress _____ buying some candy. I was excited to meet my favorite movie star and asked for an autograph. But it was almost time for the television program _____. (Pet) and I rode home in a _____ so that we wouldn't be late. After the program, I took a rest, knowing that tomorrow my job as a _____ would be hard.

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Group Grammar

by KAREN ADAMS

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Taki has gone river rafting.

Before becoming a teacher of English to speakers of other languages, I taught French, and too often I saw that impersonal grammar exercises about "Jacques" and "Nathalie" were meaningless to the students. Worse, those exercises led to apathy and stagnation. So I decided to do grammar activities in which students used each other's names, instead of random ones, and used the grammar to express ideas about their own lives. I hoped that instead of grammar being impersonal and meaningless, it would become a tool to help students get to know one another better. Now, I incorporate group grammar techniques into my lesson whenever possible. In the following activity, I describe ways to use group grammar effectively. In this activity, students practice using the target grammar to do something they naturally enjoy: learning about each other.

WHAT DID YOU DO OVER THE WEEKEND?

This activity is done after teaching the simple past. Sometimes, I do it on a Monday as an icebreaker to reengage the students after a long weekend. It is a way to review and practice the simple past, but mainly, it is a way for students to learn more about each other, each other's weekend activities, and even the local community.

First, I tell students to silently write down four to six activities they did over the weekend, using the simple past tense to reply to the question "What did you do over the weekend?" I give them about three minutes to do this. If they have trouble remembering their weekend, I tell them to think chronologically, starting with Friday evening all the way to Sunday night, and list the activities in order. I remind them that no weekend activity is too boring to report. To model this, I give them an example from my own not-so-exciting weekend: "Friday, I went grocery shopping and made a stew. Saturday, I stayed in bed until noon because I graded papers until two in the morning the night before."

While students are writing their sentences, I circulate around the room to offer help with

vocabulary. I let the students know that they can also ask classmates for help or consult their dictionaries.

When they have finished writing their sentences, I put students into groups. I tell them they must work together to make a master list of all the activities the group members did over the weekend. I tell students that there are two important rules:

1. Do not repeat any simple past verb; each verb can be used only once.

2. You must include the name of each group member an equal number of times.

I give them a specific amount of time to compile their group list, say five or six minutes. Group members will need to decide which group member will write the sentences for the group. The master list may look something like this:

Patricia played tennis.

Akmed saw a great movie.

Taki made sushi for his friends.

Sylvie had a headache.

Patricia ate a burrito.

Akmed did his homework.

Taki wrote an essay for his English class.

Sylvie took a walk.

(This group would have eight correct sentences.)

To determine the winner, I simply ask the groups to read their sentences aloud while the rest of the class counts the number of correct simple past statements. Although incorrect sentences are not counted, during this time we correct them together as a class. The group with the longest list of correct sentences wins.

For larger classes, you can have two or three groups get together and read their sentences, with the "listening" groups counting the number of correct sentences.

Along with giving students a chance to practice the simple past and learn about one another, this activity can help students get ideas about what activities are fun and interesting to do in their community. Some students may discover similar interests and decide later to do things together. For example, maybe Patricia learns that Akmed also loves tennis and will invite him to play a game with her. This interaction builds community in the classroom and makes learning more rewarding and fun.

ANOTHER PROMPT

This activity can be modified to cover various grammar points. For example, as an icebreaker at the beginning of the term, the prompt could be "List new and unfamiliar activities you have experienced since you arrived in your host country" (or "since you started studying here" or "since the semester started"). The students' sentences might look like this:

Patricia has eaten a burrito.

Akmed has seen snow for the first time.

Taki has gone river rafting.

Sylvie has tried zumba class.

Group grammar activities engage and motivate students because these activities put people and ideas before grammar and correctness. They also help in building a close, friendly classroom environment that includes and values everyone while giving students opportunities to use the target grammar.

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MY CLASSROOM MOLDOVA

Aliona Podolean knew from the moment she started teaching English that she had found what she wanted to do. "Teaching arrested me during my first teaching practice at the university," said Ms. Podolean, a Senior Lecturer at Shevchenko State University. "I remember that day so vividly. I was running home after my first lesson to inform my family that I would be a teacher, but, before that day, I had assured everybody I would be an interpreter."

Aliona Podolean at her desk

Photo by Eve Smith

Ms. Podolean believes that she is "standing on the shoulders" (Hunter 2013) of several teachers whom she had the privilege to work with as a student. The two teachers she has modeled herself after, Tatiana Vergazova and Svetlana Morozova, are inspiring and engaging. You would not know that Rybnitsa, Transnistria, two hours from Chisinau (Moldova's capital), is a powerhouse for teachers. Transnistria is sandwiched between the River Dniester and the Moldovan border with Ukraine.

Ms. Podolean's approach for her entire 22-hours-a-week teaching schedule is to teach every lesson as if it were her last. This responsibility to her students shows in her commitment to continuing her education as a teacher through classroom observations and by participating in webinars and conferences at home and abroad. "I am always in search for challenging ideas and creative approaches in teaching and learning; that is why I do hope to be a valuable instructor for my students," she said. During workshops, she has been exposed to different methodologies and said, "I am really fond of TEAM work as I do believe it makes wonders as Together Everybody Achieves More success." She sums up her teaching philosophy by saying, "We are like boats floating in the rough ocean, seeking the effective routes."

Ms. Podolean is fortunate to be teaching groups of 10 to 15 students, an ideal number. "That's why we may enjoy seating in circles or semicircles, creating a cozy and friendly atmosphere," she said. "The only case to change the seating is when we have classes in another wing of our building, which is arranged for larger groups from the science and economics departments." She mentioned that when the weather warms up and spring bursts through, students and teachers take advantage of the beautiful park in front of the university building, and sometimes they hold classes outside. After a cold, dark winter, being outside for class is a welcome change from the normal classroom environment of wooden desks, wooden chairs, and a blackboard. The school building has a few multimedia rooms with computers, speakers, and projectors; however, most of the classrooms do not have this equipment.

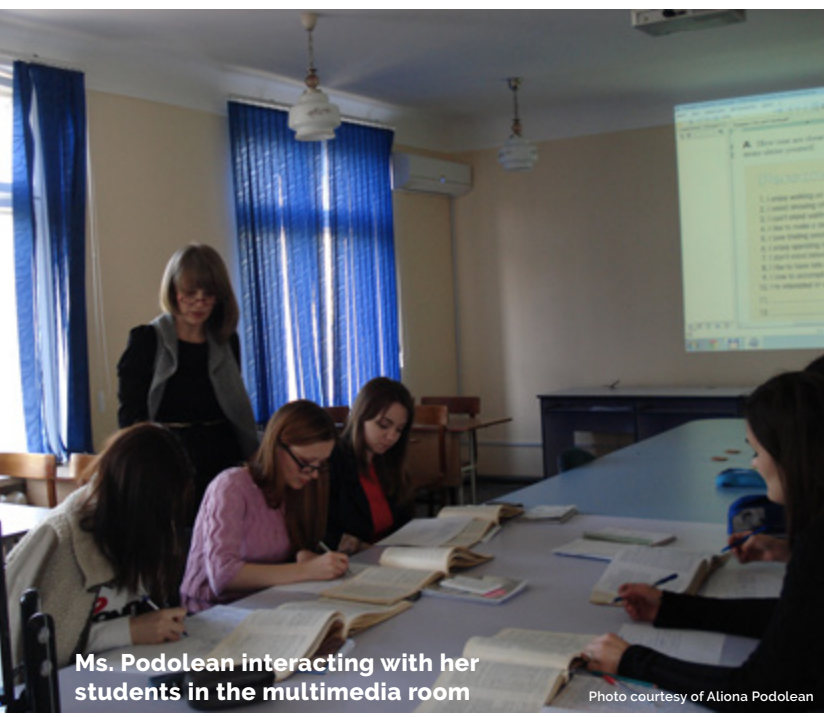
During 80-minute classes, Ms. Podolean uses a student-centered approach. She explained, "I can describe one of my recent classes. It was with intermediate students on the theme 'we are different,' taken from our textbook. The goal of it was to have students practice speaking, listening, and writing by using imagination and critical thinking skills. At the beginning of the class, each student made

The park in front of the university

Photo by Eve Smith

up two false and one true sentence on the basis of the text studied during the previous class. Then they exchanged the sentences and corrected the false ones. Having warmed up, we approached the main aim of the class—speaking about different characteristics of people and our attitude to them. Students formed mini groups to share their opinions on their home task using Venn diagrams."

Ms. Podolean explained how the class then flowed to individual work with students answering a questionnaire, and then to pair work to practice agreement and disagreement on the topic. While this description represents only a small part of the class period, it is clear from the structure and the students' engagement—which is a top priority for her—that Ms. Podolean is committed to encouraging learner autonomy. She strives to "encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, as our educational standard urges learning autonomy, but students do little outside the classroom." She reflects on this problem, and she tries to address it within the classroom. All of her lessons are structured to teach students how to learn English on their own since she considers the development of learning autonomy her biggest teaching challenge.



Ms. Podolean interacting with her students in the multimedia room

Photo courtesy of Aliona Podolean

"Today, our teachers face real difficulties connected with the low level of students' autonomy," she said. Along with attempting to guide her students to build learning autonomy, Ms. Podolean works to improve their motivation levels by integrating realia into the classroom. She said, "All the sources taken together reflect real-world situations and contexts, as well as demonstrate what students can actually do with the language." She believes that when students see what they can do, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their learning process.

Ms. Podolean and her colleagues work hard to ensure that they create the best classroom environment possible for their students. She feels particularly proud of two elements in her lessons: "First, efficiency—when everybody is engaged and eager to share their knowledge, experience, and feelings. Second, creativity, because my major target of a class is reinforcing integrating and producing rather than recalling and reproducing." These principles have helped her work effectively within a changing environment. Although she has to follow a set curriculum, she pointed out that new education standards are being implemented throughout her region.

Ms. Podolean's interactions with students and colleagues demonstrate that she is continuing the legacy of her esteemed mentor teachers. Students glow when they talk to her. Returning to Transnistria ten years from now, or visiting it then for the first time, one would not be surprised to find a local teacher who mentions Ms. Podolean as a model teacher and mentor.

REFERENCE

Hunter, J. "Solving for X: Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Essentials." Plenary presented at TESOL International Convention, Dallas, Texas, March 2013.

This article was written by **Eve Smith**, the Senior English Language Fellow in Tbilisi, Georgia, for the 2014–2015 academic year. She loves writing and scuba diving.

How Was Your Weekend?

LEVEL: Upper Beginner, Lower Intermediate, and above

TIME REQUIRED: 15–30 minutes

GOALS: To ask and answer small-talk questions about weekend activities

MATERIALS: Chalk and blackboard, or markers and whiteboard; strips of paper with weekend activities written on them (see Preparation section for details)

OVERVIEW: This activity is a kind of mingle. In a mingle, students move individually from classmate to classmate, usually with a question to ask or specific information to find. After talking to each other long enough to complete the task, the two students move on to other classmates and repeat the process.

Although mingles can be noisy and sometimes look disorganized, they typically have a specific language focus. In this activity, students practice asking classmates about their weekend activities. As they move from classmate to classmate, they use the targeted language structure over and over. At the same time, they also need to listen to their classmates' replies so they can react and respond appropriately.

PREPARATION:

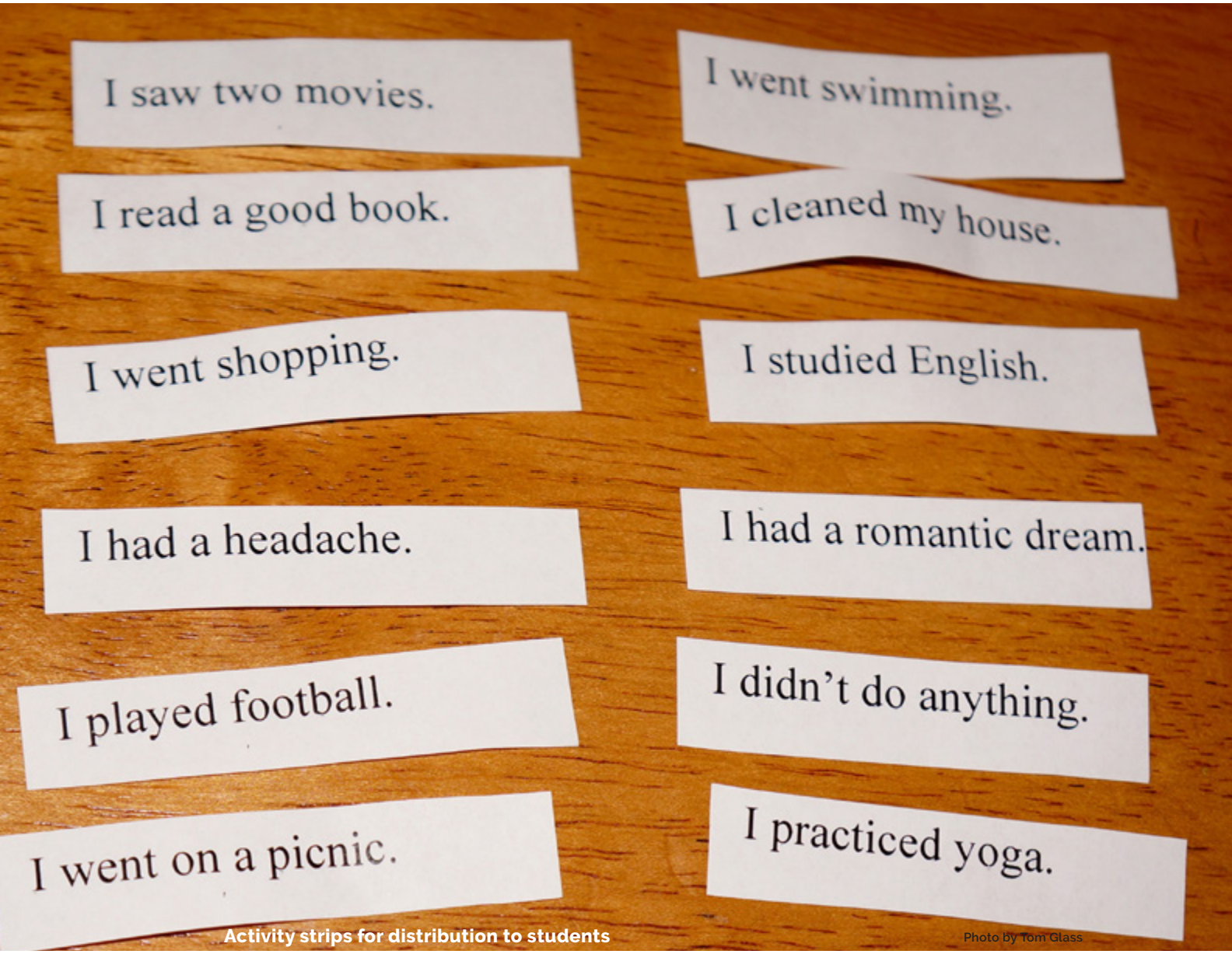
1. Create a list of activities that people might do on a weekend. The activities do not have to be realistic! Use your imagination to think of activities that would be fun for your students to talk about. For ideas, refer to the Weekend Activities list.

Weekend Activities

I saw two movies.	I studied English.
I read a good book.	I went to _____.
I lost five dollars.	I had a romantic dream.
I found five dollars.	I met _____.
I went shopping.	I didn't do anything.
I had a headache.	I practiced yoga.
I played football.	I went camping.
I ate _____.	I cooked _____.
I cleaned my house.	I hurt my finger.
I went on a picnic.	I danced.
I baked two cakes.	I went swimming.

Please feel free to adapt these activities to your teaching context. For example, you can change "I lost five dollars" and "I found five dollars" so that they mention your local currency. You can complete "I met _____" with the name of a popular singer or other celebrity whom students would be excited to meet. You can complete "I cooked _____" with an interesting kind of food, and "I went to _____" with the name of a place that your students like to visit. You can add your own activity ideas to the list as well, as appropriate for your students: *I flew in a helicopter. I sang on TV. I smiled a lot. I ran a marathon. I bought a new car*. Making the activities interesting will help students enjoy talking about them with their classmates.

Instead of strips of paper with the activities written on them, you can use photos showing weekend activities. See Variations near the end of the article for suggestions.



Activity strips for distribution to students

Photo by Tom Glass

2. Cut the activities list into small strips of paper, with one activity on each strip. You should prepare one strip for each student in your class. If you have a large class, make more than one set of activity strips and plan to divide your class into groups; prepare a set of strips for each group. The number of students in each group should not be more than the number of activity strips you have. In other words, if you have 15 activity strips, you should not have more than 15 students in any of the groups.

3. Prepare two extra strips of paper to use if you want to demonstrate the activity to the class. One strip could say, "I visited some friends." The other strip could say, "I went to a birthday party."

PROCEDURES:

1. Tell students that they will do an activity that gives them a chance to ask about each other's weekend activities. Say, "You will talk to many of your classmates. But first, we will practice the question and answers you will use."

2. Begin creating the How Was Your Weekend? chart by writing the question, "How was your weekend?" on the board. Tell students that this is a question people often ask when they see their friends on Monday—or whichever day follows the weekend. Tell students that people usually give a short greeting before asking this question: "Hi, [Name]. How was your weekend?" Tell students, "This is a friendly question. When people ask, 'How was your weekend?' they do not expect long answers."

3. Tell students, "Usually, people answer this question with short answers. They tell about one thing they did, or one thing that happened, over the weekend." Explain that people often answer this question with one or two sentences. The first sentence describes the weekend in general: *It was great*. The second sentence gives more detail: *I went to a birthday party*. Or *My cousins came to visit*.

4. On the board, continue developing the How Was Your Weekend? chart by writing possible responses to the question. If the weekend was good, people often say, "It was great/exciting/wonderful." You can ask students to suggest other words they could use in the sentence. If the weekend was not really good, but not bad either, people might say, "It was so-so."

   If the weekend was not so good, people respond by saying, "It was boring/pretty bad/terrible." However, since the question "How was your weekend?" is part of a friendly exchange, people *usually* respond with a friendly answer focusing on something good that happened.

5. Tell students that now the person who asked, "How was your weekend?" must respond. If the other person had a good weekend, the questioner can answer with one of these sentences:

   - "That sounds like fun."
   - "That sounds nice!"
   - "Lucky you!"

   If the other person's weekend was so-so or not very good, the questioner can say,

How Was Your Weekend?

A: "Hi, [Name]. How was your weekend?"		
B: If your weekend was good, you can say …	B: If your weekend was neither good nor bad, you can say …	B: If your weekend wasn't good, you can say …
"It was great." "It was fantastic." "It was wonderful." Then tell why.	"It was so-so." "I didn't do much." Then tell why.	"It was boring." "It wasn't very good." "It was terrible." Then tell why.
A: "That sounds like fun!" "That sounds great!" "Lucky you!"	A: "That's too bad." "I'm sorry to hear that."	

Note: Other responses are possible. You can ask your students to contribute suggestions.

- "That's too bad."
- "I'm sorry to hear that."

6. Tell students they will get a chance to practice this question and these answers—but for this activity, they will not talk about what they really did over the weekend; instead, they will choose a piece of paper with an activity written on it. Hold up a strip of paper and say, "I know this is not what you really did over the weekend. But for the next ten minutes, we will pretend that this is what you did."

7. Model an example of a conversation for the class. Choose a student to be your partner. Give the student the strip of paper that says, "I went to a birthday party." Keep the strip of paper that says, "I visited some friends." Hold up your paper and tell the class, "My piece of paper says, 'I visited some friends.'" Ask your student/partner to read his or her strip to the class. Then model the conversation.

   With Upper Beginner students, the conversation might go something like this:

   YOU: Hi, [Student's name]! How was your weekend?

   STUDENT: It was great. I went to a birthday party.

   YOU: That sounds like fun!

   Have the student continue the conversation by asking you about your weekend:

   STUDENT: How was your weekend?

   YOU: It was fun. I visited some friends.

   STUDENT: That sounds great!

   The immediate goal should be for students to (a) ask the question, (b) answer appropriately, and (c) react with an appropriate response.

   (For a longer model conversation you can use with students at the Lower Intermediate level and above, see Extensions near the end of this article.)

8. Divide students into groups, if necessary.

9. Make sure everyone understands the activity. Tell students, "Everyone will get a piece of paper. Read the activity on the paper silently. Decide how you will answer the question, 'How was your weekend?' when your classmates ask you."

10. Hand out the strips of paper to students. Give one set of activity strips to each group. Students should not look at the strips before choosing one. Add interest by putting the strips in a box or bowl and have students close their eyes when they pick their strips. They should read the activity on the strip to themselves, but they shouldn't tell anyone else yet what the strip says.

11. Start the activity. Tell students to stand up. Then say, "When I say, 'Begin,' find a partner. Ask each other about your weekends. When you finish your conversation, find a new partner and have another conversation about your weekends. Keep talking to different people in your group and finding out what they did over the weekend!" Then say, "Begin!"

12. Stop the activity when students have had a chance to talk to most of the people in their group but before everyone has finished; you don't want them to be bored.

13. Bring the whole class together. If you like, you can have a few students ask other students about their weekend activities. Encourage anyone in the class to ask follow-up questions.

You and the class can demonstrate the use and importance of follow-up questions like this: Suppose that when a student named Marie is asked about her weekend, she says, "It was great. I saw two movies." Write "I saw two movies" on the board, and then ask the class, "What would you like to ask Marie about the movies?" Students might ask, "What movies did you see?" or "Where did you see them?" or "Who did you see them with?" or "Did you like them?" (Students at lower levels might simply ask, "What?" or "Where?" That's fine; they are expressing their curiosity.) You can write these questions on the board if you want; you can also have Marie give pretend answers.

Do the same thing with other activities —write the student's activity on the board, then elicit follow-up questions that students naturally want to ask about that activity. This is a good chance to bring students' attention to the use of question words and an opportunity for students to engage further in natural communication.

EXTENSIONS

Lower Intermediate students

With students at the Lower Intermediate level and above, you can have them extend the conversation. The conversation should include the following parts:

(a) greet the partner

(b) ask the question

(c) answer appropriately

(d) react with an appropriate response

(e) transition to the second partner asking the question and the first partner responding

(f) take leave (say good-bye)

Students might also be able to ask follow-up questions about each other's weekend activity.

A model conversation might be something like this:

STUDENT A: Hi, [Student B's name]! How was your weekend?

STUDENT B: It was great. I went to a birthday party.

STUDENT A: That sounds like fun!

At this point, you can elicit possible follow-up questions from the class if you want. Suggestions include "Whose birthday was it?" and "What did you do at the party?" Otherwise, the conversation continues:

STUDENT B: Yes, it was. What about you? How was your weekend?

STUDENT A: It was good, too. I visited some friends.

STUDENT B: That sounds like fun.

Again, you could elicit follow-up questions from the class. Suggestions include "Where do your friends live?" and "What did you and your friends do?" Otherwise, the conversation could continue:

STUDENT A: Yes, it was.

STUDENT B: Well, I have to go now. Nice seeing you!

STUDENT A: Bye.

You could elicit other things that friends might say when they part after a small-talk conversation. Suggestions include "See you," "See you later," "Take care," and "Have a good one." ("Have a good one" is a less formal way of saying, "Have a good day.")

Future classes

The following Monday—or in the next class you have after a weekend—repeat the mingle, but this time have students ask one another about what they really did over the weekend.

Or let your students make up their own "pretend" activities.

After a break or vacation, students can mingle again and ask, "How was your break?" or "How was your vacation?"

VARIATIONS

1. You can conduct this mingle using photos. Instead of preparing strips of paper, prepare photos showing possible weekend activities. The photos might show people swimming, camping, cooking, having a picnic, etc. In class, you might have to review the related vocabulary with the class and introduce new words as needed. Then distribute the photos to students. They will have to find a way to describe the activity (using the past tense)—so there is additional language practice involved when you use photos.

   If you have a large class and not enough photos for everyone, that's not a problem. Suppose you have 45 students but only 15 photos. Simply ask students to get together in mini-groups of three, and give each mini-group one photo. Together, the three students discuss the language they can use to talk about the activity shown in their photo. Then ask students in each mini-group to pick a color: red, blue, or yellow. Form three larger groups: the red group, the blue group, and the yellow group. After that, the How Was Your Weekend? mingle can begin, with each group having its own mingle.

2. When you use mingles, sometimes you can vary the activity by having students exchange strips of paper after their conversation. That is, Student A and Student B have a conversation based on the strips of paper they chose, but when they finish their conversation, Student A takes Student B's strip of paper, and Student B takes Student A's. Then they find new partners. Each person will then have a new activity to talk about in his or her next conversation. Students keep exchanging strips of paper throughout the activity; they may get the same strip of paper two or three times! But exchanging the strips of paper in this way gives students a chance to talk about different activities—and use different language—instead of giving the same answer and describing the same activity to everyone they meet. (On the other hand, keeping the same strip of paper and giving the same answer in each conversation could increase students' confidence as the activity progresses.)

SCAFFOLDING

1. You might want to explain to students that the first person asks, "How was your weekend?" in a normal questioning tone, but when the second person asks the same question back, he or she will stress the word *your*: "How was *your* weekend?" The same kind of stress is used in the shorter question "How are you?" A person who is asked this question will often respond by saying, "I am fine, thank you. How are *you*?"

2. Students ought to know that they should ask, "How was your weekend?" to people they already know after not seeing them over the weekend. It would not be an appropriate question to ask someone they have never met before.

3. People often say "Thanks" or "Thank you" when they respond to the question "How was your weekend?" For example, they might say, "It was great; thank you!" or "It was fantastic; thanks!" Feel free to incorporate "Thanks" or "Thank you" into the chart and your model conversation if you want.

This activity was written by **Tom Glass**, Assistant Editor of *English Teaching Forum*.

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Small Talk

"Small talk" refers to short, friendly conversations about topics that are not serious. Below are nine "opener" questions that can start small-talk conversations. In each question, a word is missing. Complete each question by choosing the most appropriate word from the List of Words. Then, choose the most appropriate small-talk topic for each question from the List of Small-Talk Topics.

	Opener	Small-Talk Topic
1.	It looks like _____, doesn't it?	_____
2.	Did you watch the _____ yesterday?	_____
3.	How's _____ going?	_____
4.	How's your _____?	_____
5.	Have you seen any good _____ lately?	_____
6.	Do you have any _____ for the weekend?	_____
7.	The _____ sure is crowded today, isn't it?	_____
8.	Are you _____ anything interesting these days?	_____
9.	Wow, you got a new _____! How do you like it?	_____

List of Words

game	movies	reading
bus	school	plans
phone	rain	sister

List of Small-Talk Topics

family	weather	sports
studying	books	free time
technology	surroundings	entertainment

Answers on page 29

Answers to *The Lighter Side*

Small Talk

1. rain (topic: weather)
2. game (topic: sports)
3. school (topic: studying)
4. sister (topic: family)
5. movies (topic: entertainment)
6. plans (topic: free time)
7. bus (topic: surroundings)
8. reading (topic: books)
9. phone (topic: technology)