

# 3

## The learners

### 1 Learning names

*I suddenly realised this morning that I didn't know the name of about four or five children in class ... and I wasn't completely sure about some of the others.*

#### Aim

To learn and remember the names of all students in your class as quickly as possible.

#### Introduction

Some teachers do not learn students' names and do not see this as important. 'Too many students' is a common complaint, or 'It takes too long to learn so many names'. I'm not sure that either of these excuses stands up well. Even if your memory isn't good, it really isn't very hard to do, and it makes an important difference.

If you don't know their names, students are just anonymous members of class. Knowing and using a name acknowledges each person as an individual, someone you pay attention to and are interested in.

Similarly, it's important for class members to know each other's names so that they can get on better together and work better together. If you teach in a secondary school where students have been together in the same class for some time, this isn't a problem, but in other teaching situations, perhaps with short-term classes and a lot of turnover in student numbers, this becomes very important.

The techniques in this unit will help you learn and remember the students' names. If your class also needs to learn names, many of these techniques will also be useful for them.

#### Technique: Preparing to meet your class

Before you meet a new class, study the list of student names. Ask advice from other teachers on pronunciations you're not sure of. Learn the names if at all possible. Doing all of this will make it easier to connect name to person when you do meet your new students.

**Technique: Name cards or labels**

Ask students to take pieces of paper and fold them in half to make stand-up name cards and to place these at the front of their desks. Alternatively, get students to write names on sticky labels and wear them.

**Technique: Individualised cards/labels**

Instead of having students write their names, ask them to prepare a card with a picture or diagram that characterises themselves in some way, e.g. a favourite hobby, an item they possess, a food they like, a sport they play, a personal characteristic, etc. The students then introduce themselves, explaining why they drew the picture they did. You can make notes listing names and pictures (which can be referred to later on whenever you forget a name). Having only a picture on the students' cards forces you to do a little bit more work to recall their names, but this may help you remember the names better in the long-term.

**Technique: Turning the cards around**

Rather than being embarrassed at the fact that you haven't yet got everyone's names, make the fact that you are trying to learn names open and transparent. This allows you and the class to laugh at times when you get names wrong, rather than it being awkward. One way of doing this is a variation on the name-card idea (above). When you think you know someone's name, ask that student to turn their card around so that you can't see the name from the front of the room. The class will enjoy watching you make progress and seeing if you can remember all the names they have turned away from you.

**Technique: Room map**

Draw a simple sketch plan of the room and the seats, desks or tables. Write the names of each student at the place they are sitting in the room. Use this as a handheld reference when you talk with students. Also use it to help you to learn the names (see *Testing yourself* below).

**Technique: Noting memorable characteristics**

When you meet students and first hear their names (e.g. when you go through a register), keep a note of something that will help you to recognise that person again (e.g. has brown glasses, fair hair, has a large green bag, etc.).

### Technique: Photo poster or booklet

Ask each student to bring in a photo of themselves or email you a digital copy. Stick these down on a large sheet of paper to make a poster, or make them into a digital collage or booklet. Add names to each picture. The resulting poster or booklet can be put up on the classroom wall, or a copy given to each class member.

### Technique: Put a photo with a commentary on the Internet

If your class has a web site, ask each student to upload a photo and a short recording (e.g. made on a phone) of them introducing themselves. Alternatively, use public websites that are set up for such exchanges, or get students to send emails or messages to each other. (This idea was suggested by Russell Stannard in *Modern English Teacher* magazine.)

### Technique: Class photo

If school guidelines (e.g. signed permission from parents) allow you to, take one or more photos of the class on the first day. After you have printed out a copy, annotate it with students' names, and keep it with your class documentation ready for quick reference. As with the previous idea, the picture could be displayed.

### Technique: Testing yourself

Whatever method of collecting name information you choose, it's vital that you take some time going over your list/plan and testing yourself, e.g. covering up names, looking at the class and seeing if you can name each person, referring back to the list/plan only when necessary.

### Technique: New English names

If you work with students within your own culture, the following point is not likely to be an issue. However, if you are a teacher with a multicultural class, or if you are working in a country other than your own, then there will probably be a number of names that are difficult for you to say or which you are completely unfamiliar with. Perhaps some of them will look deceptively familiar to you, but may be pronounced very differently to the equivalent English name.

I wonder how you feel about this exchange from a teacher who is just starting to work in China:

Teacher: And what's your name?

Student: Xiao Lee.

Teacher: Phew ... that's a weird name (makes a garbled effort to say the name), a bit too difficult for me I'm afraid! Sounds a bit like Sheila! Is it OK if I call you Sheila?

Arguably the solution of giving an English name is better than the teacher repeatedly mangling the pronunciation of the student's Chinese name – and certainly, there are many classes around the world where students all adopt English names. In China, students often do this as a long-term practice, taking a new name from class to class through their language learning (and possibly on into their career). I'm never entirely comfortable with this, as I feel that someone's given name is personal, important and not to be lightly given up.

If you adopt the idea of students taking on new English names, you can either assign these names yourself or let students choose them. If you let students choose, you may need to offer some guidance, perhaps by:

- Offering an initial list of good, possible names that students can choose from.
- Indicating which names are male and which female, and which are typically surnames rather than first names.
- Suggesting names that sound similar to their own name, or which have similar meanings or connotations.
- Helping students choose names, perhaps based on writers, musicians or film stars they like.
- Advising as to what might be considered odd or unsuitable names (e.g. adjectives like 'lovely' or names from fantasy games on their consoles).

### Technique: Learning the right names

If a student's name sounds complex to you and near impossible to pronounce, don't immediately give up. The default position for some teachers seems to be 'hear the student say their name twice, repeat it as best you can (perhaps wrongly), despair, continue using the wrongly pronounced version for as long as the student is in your class'.

But it's worth the extra effort to get closer to a good pronunciation of someone's name. Showing that you are interested in trying to get it right also demonstrates that you are interested in the person. It also shows that you too are a language learner and one who, like them, doesn't necessarily get things right on the first attempt.

To get better at saying a name:

- 1 Ask the student to say their name again. Listen carefully.
- 2 Ask detail questions about the pronunciation, e.g. What is the first sound? How many syllables are there? Could you say the second syllable again? Where is the main stress?
- 3 Talk a bit about the name, e.g. Does it mean anything in the student's mother tongue? Is it a name that other family members have? Is there a short version?
- 4 Try saying the whole name or parts of it, but get feedback, e.g. Did I say the first sound right? What did I get wrong? Help me to say it better and so on.
- 5 If you can't get it within a reasonable time, apologise, but make it clear that you will come back to it. In future lessons, or after class, go on working on the name until you feel that the student is really happy with how you are saying it.
- 6 You may find it helpful to record student pronunciation of names (many phones now have easily accessible voice-recording facilities) so that you can replay them later for practice at home.

### Technique: Anagrams

After showing an example anagram or two using your name or some famous people's names, e.g. MIJ (Jim), RPICEN RAHRY (Prince Harry), invite each student to make an anagram of their name and write it on a slip of paper. Collect these slips together at the front of the room. When ready, invite a student to come to the board, choose a random slip and write the name up. The class should try to guess which student's name it is. When it has been correctly guessed, the student whose name it was comes out and picks the next slip ... and so on.

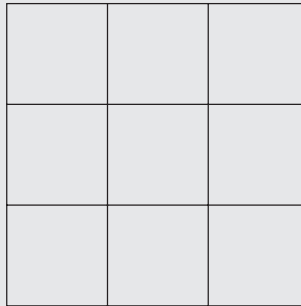
### Technique: Mnemonics

Ask students to think of something true and memorable about themselves that includes the first letter of their name, e.g. 'I'm Jim, and I'm quite jolly!'; 'I'm Fatimah, and I hate people talking about football!'

The class should mingle – including you as teacher – meeting up and introducing each other (e.g. 'This is Untidy Ursula, and here's Chandra who likes chocolate'). Everyone has the task of collecting a list of the whole class's memorable sentences. Afterwards, in the same lesson, and in future ones, have fun seeing if people can recall the phrases for each person.

### Technique: Bingo names

Get students to call out their names one by one, and write them all on the board. Then ask them to each draw a three-by-three grid (i.e. like tic-tac-toe):



Students (and you) should select nine different names from the list on the board and write one name in each square. Having done this, you now have a choice of doing one or more of these activities:

- 1 Students stand up, mingle and chat with other students. They have a brief chat with each person they meet ('Hello! What's your name?' etc.), trying to find the people they have on their grid.
- 2 Ask all students to stand up. You call out names randomly. When students hear a name, they have to all indicate the correct student (who can then sit down). Students cross out any names they hear if they are on their own grid.

- 3 Get students into groups of three. In each group, one student shows their grid to one of the others, who has to identify which people in the room have those nine names. That student gets a score for the number they get correct. He or she then passes their grid to the next person in the group to test them in the same way (and so on).

### Questions for reflection

- Would any of the techniques here work better than your current way of learning names?
- How well do your students know each other's names?

## 2 Helping the group to work together

*My class just isn't gelling. When I try to get them to work together, they just look sullen, and then they hardly talk to each other.*

### Aim

To help a class to become a group and work together.

### Introduction

Within a lesson, you may form a number of short-lived groups for specific tasks, but the one big group, the class itself, goes on from day to day, month to month.

A class can have an identity, life and energy that are more than the sum of its component parts. Many teachers will have experienced the sense that a class has a distinct character quite apart from that of the individuals in it: that it may live and have moods just as humans do, that it can focus or lose focus, get excited or lose interest, love or dislike things, be friendly and helpful or sour and unfriendly. Beyond the obvious central job of teaching language, part of the teacher's job is to help create the feeling that everyone is working together in a coherent group.

### Techniques: Getting to know you

Getting To Know You (GTKY) activities, sometimes referred to as *icebreakers*, tend to work well if they follow these guidelines:

- 1 Make sure students learn each other's names and feel comfortable using them (see Chapter 3 Unit 1).
- 2 Get students standing up, mingling and talking with as many others as possible. Use tasks that combine speaking practice with finding out not-too-intrusive pieces of personal information (e.g. the classic 'Find someone who': a list of cues that get students to mingle, talk and find people in the room who '... have seen a kangaroo', '... can play the guitar ...', 'would never go bungee jumping', etc.).

It's also important to get students to feel comfortable and a part of both small groups and the class as a whole. Do this by setting tasks that:

- 1 Are more discussion based than language focussed (but still have tangible 'take-away' value, i.e. learners feel that they have learnt something useful).
- 2 Require groups to work together to come to compromise or fully discussed solutions.
- 3 Are likely to be enjoyable and provoke laughter and creative responses.
- 4 Encourage learners to work together for a combined goal (e.g. team quizzes and competitions) – though be wary of activities that might pick out individual students as either strong or weak.

- 5 Include personal elements that encourage learners to reveal some aspects of their life, interests and tastes.
- 6 Get students thinking and comparing ideas about the course to come, what they hope for, how they want to work and what they would like to achieve.

Try to engineer opportunities for each student to work with a wide variety of other students, mixing groups up on different tasks. And, most importantly, include some facilitated whole-class discussion that allows a wide range of different voices to be heard.

### Techniques: Creating a sense of community and purpose

A group becomes a group when it gels, which comes when a sense of collective identity and purpose starts to appear. It comes when learners really listen to and show tangible support for each other. It comes when, as well as working to get wherever they want individually, people also work together to achieve things. Some of these ideas may help a group to gel:

- 1 As well as the more normal work on language and skills, also keep mixing in work that doesn't have overt language goals, but, instead, aims to build the group and the quality of relationship and interaction.
- 2 Take the risk of adding in occasional activities that invite (but do not require) a greater level of personal revelation (e.g. drawing a 'road of my life' with key events marked, which can then be introduced to a partner and discussed).
- 3 Start an ongoing group project that runs through a period of the course – for a month, a term or longer. The project should be one that is only achievable when the class work together, one where everyone has a role, or a number of responsibilities, but they build together to make a single group achievement. This might be:
  - A school news and discussion magazine (or website or blog) that could be distributed or sold to the school as a whole.
  - A class play or film, written and acted by all the students, performed for another class or maybe for the whole school.
  - A fund-raising project, selecting a charity, collecting information, planning and running one or more fund-raising events.

When the project is worked on in lessons, take time to help reinforce the group-building goals.

### Technique: Creating synergy

The term *synergy* refers to the energy and achievement that comes when people combine their abilities and efforts to work together, seemingly achieving more than the sum of what all the individuals could achieve on their own. Here is an example: Student A (who is good at spelling, but poor at grammar) is working together with Student B (who is good at grammar, but poor at spelling) on a written practice exercise. It is likely that this will produce a better result than either of them working on their own. While they could in theory agree together on wrong spellings and grammar and, therefore, achieve a worse exercise than either would



do on their own, it is more probable that each individual student's confidence in what they consider to be correct would influence their final consensus answers.

For a whole group to achieve synergy, it seems likely that the following conditions are met:

- 1 Participants listen to and respect each other; they do not ignore, dismiss or ridicule what others say.
- 2 Because members feel valued, trusted and safe within the group, they are more willing to state their own opinions, make their case robustly, argue positions, take risks, make odd suggestions, offer to take on difficult duties, rethink their views, change tack when things don't work, etc.
- 3 They are task-focussed, working towards achieving the goal that has been set or agreed.
- 4 They are process-focussed, showing awareness as to how the work affects individual group members and aiming to make sure that all are involved and that things are done fairly.
- 5 Their teacher believes and trusts that they can achieve more than they think they can.

To achieve synergy doesn't necessarily mean that no one in a group should disagree with others or that all will be sweetness and light. Part of the success of effective groups comes from working through different ideas, arguments and challenges to discover complementary skills, insights and ways forward to solutions and task achievements.

Here is an example of a whole-class activity that encourages synergy: *dictogloss* – a one-time, one-sentence dictation.

- The teacher chooses a text to read. It should be interesting, easy to understand and use language that the students are familiar with.
- In class, the teacher explains that students will hear a short dictation and that he or she will read it only once. The teacher tells them that he or she expects the class will be able to write the whole text correctly, despite only hearing it once! He or she also tells them how many words it will be (e.g. 20 words) and ignores their protests about the impossibility of the task!
- The teacher warns them to listen carefully (without writing anything) while he or she is reading the dictation. As soon as the teacher has finished reading, each individual starts writing everything they can recall (without discussing with others). Of course, the students will not believe that it is possible for any of them to recall a whole text that they have only heard once – and, unless they have exceptional memories, it's very unlikely that any student would be able to do it.
- After each student has written whatever they can recall (maybe just six or seven words – or a chunk or two), the teacher invites them to pair up and compare. They are likely to find that each of the two students in a pair have remembered different bits and that, by putting them together, they end with a slightly longer text.
- When the teacher now invites pairs to meet up with other pairs, the same effect happens. Eventually, he or she asks the whole class to try and work together to reconstruct the entire original text on the board.

Amazingly, classes can often do this, getting a complete (or very nearly complete) version of the text. The ability of the whole group was significantly greater than what individuals could achieve. A seemingly impossible task was achieved through collaborative effort.

### Techniques: Quick fixes to change the class mood

Classes have moods. Teachers sometimes come into the staff room talking about how the group came across. Often this is positive:

- ‘They all seemed really interested. I’ve never seen the class so quiet and focussed.’
- ‘They’re full of beans this morning, almost bouncing off the light fittings!’

But sometimes their descriptions are more negative: Do any of the following ring a bell?

- ‘It’s like stirring mud in there today.’
- ‘They just didn’t seem on my side in that lesson.’

When your class seems temporarily sluggish, tired, uninterested or downright hostile (perhaps when you have no idea as to the cause), what can you do to brighten them up, get them enthused and working happily? I’m not thinking of long-term attitude or behaviour issues, which is a different kind of problem, but that unexpected change of mood that appears suddenly, gets in the way of everything you want to do and sends you back into the staff room saying, ‘I’ve no idea what’s got into them today. I thought they’d love this activity ...’.

The ideas below are not long-lasting solutions; they are quick fixes. They are also pretty hit and miss.

If your class mood is really wrong, try one of these. If it doesn’t work, try another!

- 1 Pause the current activity. Say in a humorous way what you have noticed about how they are, as clearly and unambiguously as you can. Ask them if your interpretation is correct. (Don’t immediately ask, ‘What’s wrong?’ as this can lead to students clamming up and saying nothing. Start with checking whether they agree that they have a mood.)
- 2 Stop the current activity. Whatever it is. Do something different. Watch their amazement as you abandon something half way through. Don’t explain until or unless they ask. Then you can say, ‘You didn’t seem to be enjoying it’.
- 3 Start an activity that creates a sudden, dramatic change of pace. The obvious way to go is *faster* – getting students to take part in a task that is time-pressured.
- 4 Start an activity that gets students moving. Standing up and moving around is often a quick cure to students who have got tired of sitting down and listening for too long.

### Technique: Recognising stages in a group’s life

Here are two different writers’ descriptions of the stages a group moves through from first meeting to saying goodbye. They most obviously apply to a relatively short-lived group (say over an intensive two-week course), or one which has a limited number of focussed tasks to do, but, even so, the descriptions are useful for helping us to think about the longer life of a class, say, over a year.

### 1 The rhyming stages

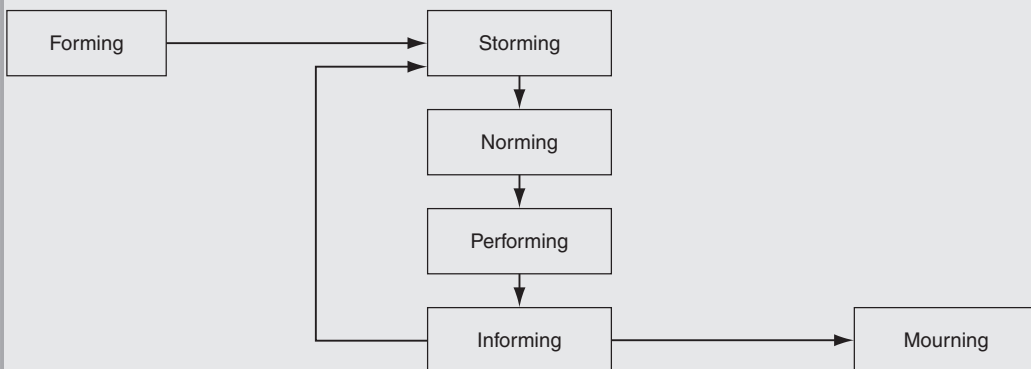
Bruce Tuckman suggested the following typical stages of group development:

- **Forming** People come together as a group. Individuals arrive with many personal worries about their own likely successes or contributions. They tentatively check out other members and start to find how they fit into the group as a whole, probably seeking not to get involved in conflict at this point.
- **Storming** Once the immediate initial personal worries are calming down, the group can start to attack the task(s) they have. A lot of ideas and attitudes will fill the air. There may be a lot of energy, and perhaps disagreements and uncertainties, as working relationships are established. Leadership and other roles will establish themselves, and there may be arguments about what to do and how to do it.
- **Norming** Things begin to settle down. Arguments and disagreements subside. People start to agree what it is they need to do and how to do it. They start engaging with their own responsibilities for the task at hand, collaborating and supporting others where necessary.
- **Performing** This is the stage (which may last a long time) when the group is functioning at its peak, doing the task well, moving towards its goal. Engagement and achievement is high. Everyone is working to their best ability.

Different writers and speakers have suggested variations on what comes next. I think the following two are helpful additions:

- **Informing** (Lawrence, quoted in Jaques and Salmon): ‘The group starts to give voice to the outside world, communicating ...’ This is the passing on of whatever has been achieved – telling others what you have done.
- **Mourning** (Tuckman and Jensen, quoted in Petty) ‘As the group’s lifespan comes to an end, and breakup is imminent, a strong sense of sadness and loss colours the remaining work. People find their own ways to say goodbye and to leave the work and relationships behind, before moving on.’

In terms of a school class’s existence over a term or a year, these stages may still be recognisable. However, we may need to imagine the storming–norming–performing stages as a sub-cycle, repeated many times over the life of the class, as different people assert themselves, different attitudes rise and wane, and different needs and new aims become important. The class has to take a step back, renew and reinvigorate itself at various points:



## 2 The four seasons

An attractive alternative description from John Heron uses a metaphor of the four seasons:

- **Winter** ‘The ground may be frozen and the weather stormy.’ As a new group begins, there are various tensions and a lot of defensiveness.
- **Spring** ‘New life starts to break through the surface crust.’ People start to trust each other and feel less anxious. Protective defensive attitudes start to relax.
- **Summer** ‘There is an abundance of growth, and the sun is high.’ People are much more trusting and open, working together to fulfil their goals.
- **Autumn** ‘The fruit is harvested and stored; the harvesters give thanks and go their way.’ The achievements are made and reviewed. People prepare to leave the group to go back to their outside lives.

This description has the added bonus of allowing us to also see the students and teacher’s role in a metaphorical way. If the teacher is a farmer and the students farm workers, we can see that he or she has the job of preparing the ground, welcoming the workers and making them feel comfortable, initially inducting and training them in the tasks they need to do, showing them how to plant and nurture the crops and encouraging them to work together to achieve tasks. As time goes on, he or she will need to be able to let them do their work without a lot of monitoring and supervision, and as they become more autonomous and capable, perhaps he or she will even consider passing the whole farm over to them.

### Questions for reflection

- Have you ever noticed synergy in class activities? Which activities do you use that seem to foster synergy? Which new activities could you try to encourage it?
- How aware have you been of the life cycle of classes you have worked with? Were there noticeable changes in class character over time?
- Which of the two descriptions of a group’s life cycle appeals most to you?