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Collaboration Using Sentence Strips

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Introduction

The follow activity has worked well for me for a number of years at my school, where English is taught to non-native speakers who are looking to enter American colleges. It is probably best used in the first week of a session, and can be used to find out who the class leaders are and how motivated the students are, both individually and as a class. It can, however, be utilized at any time during a session as just a change-of-pace activity. It uses listening, speaking and critical thinking skills, and if you desire you can mix in a brief history lesson.

It is best for fairly advanced levels of English, and is best for classes of 9-16 students, although it can be adapted to larger groups simply by splitting the class into groups of 9-16 and having the groups do the activity simultaneously, perhaps as a competition. Not every sentence has to be used. For instance, in the first option below, you can cut out the 4th, 6th, 12th, 15th and/or 16th sentence and not lose the flow of the story.

Each student is handed a strip of paper containing one of the below sentences printed on it. Students usually select the strips at random. However, if there are clearly weaker students they can be handed the easier sentences. If there are fewer than 10 students I usually take one of the papers and act as a student.

Other than the ubiquitous “English only” rule, I only give two instructions. First, students may not use any writing instruments or dictionaries at any time. Second, students may not show their paper to any other student. They may only speak and listen. I am very conscientious about enforcing this rule. They

are free to leave their seats and walk around. In more advanced classes I give them a few minutes to memorize the sentence and then I have them pocket their sentences.

Usually, I do not even tell students the object of the activity, which is to put the story together in chronological order. Usually, the first thing students do is ask what the goal is. I shrug my shoulders. After a short time, students start reading their sentences aloud, or at least to the person next to them. Eventually, students figure out the goal and start putting the story in order.

In the five years or so I have done this activity, only one class has failed to grasp the goal. In that class, students shared in pairs the information that they had, but nobody was willing to share in any group larger than two people. This was the only class where I had to do more than the bare minimum to get them pointed in the right direction. Not surprisingly, this group of students struggled at times throughout the semester in other work, too.

By not explaining the objective, it is easier to spot the students with leadership skills. The leaders are the students who first speak out and proffer suggestions as to what the objective might be and how to reach it. They are also the vocal ones who first offer changes/corrections if the class goes off course.

The first example below is a brief history of America. Many students don't know when the Revolutionary or Civil Wars happened, but in five years of teaching post secondary students from around 20 countries, mostly Asian, I never had a class unable to finish the task as at least two or three people always had sufficient knowledge of American history.

Usually, students will not get the order correctly on their first try. If I have heard students have a lengthy discussion about a particular sentence, and that is the sentence which is out of order, I don't tell them which

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sentence is wrong. I would only tell them in this case that two or more sentences are out of order.

If students don't seem to have much of an idea of which sentence is out of order, I will say, for example, "Sentence number seven is out of order." They usually get it on the second or third try, and feel a real sense of accomplishment when they are finished.

Usually, after the students get the correct order, I go over each sentence and add some details about history which my students, who will soon enter American colleges, will be expected to know. Having world and US maps is helpful in explaining the details.

The activity usually takes between 30-45 minutes, depending on the students. If there is time, I go over the sentences one by one and give additional details which all native college students in America are presumed to know. With very few exceptions, the students seem to understand that this is important information and I have never really had any problem with students' attention spans during this activity or its aftermath.

Teachers can obviously add details of their own states or anything else they deem important for their students to know. There can be a second hour spent on subjects such as the Revolutionary or Civil War, why people wanted to move to the "new world," the cost and causes of the Civil War, the westward growth of America or the life of Abraham Lincoln.

The activity can be adapted to almost any historical or even personal events.

As I noted, most of my students are from Asia so I once adapted this activity (see example two, below) to include a trip I took which started in San Francisco, and went through Korea to China and Mongolia, then back to Korea and home again with a stop in Japan.

I used a lot of city names and landmarks that were unfamiliar to students not native to that particular country. This way, even the shy or less advanced students would advance the cause by speaking up if they thought they might be the only ones to have the knowledge of that particular place.

One of the strips in this activity was, "I was there only one day, then took a 25-hour boat

ride to Tianjin." Chinese students all know Tianjin, and they will say it is on the southeast coast of China. Korean students might be able to figure out that Incheon is close to Tianjin...maybe about a 25-hour boat ride.

Students would figure out that Chingis Kahn Airport would be in Mongolia, even if they hadn't know the name of the airport. Also in example two, I used a Korean name (Jinock) to help determine what country I was in. Mt. Fuji and sushi are obvious references to Japan. "This time" gives a hint that I had been to Korea two times on this trip, and of course there was one sentence (the last sentence) involving the international date line.

Example 1: Journey to Statehood

Christopher Columbus sailed from Spain in 1492. He was looking for a way to get from Spain to India.

When he landed on an island near the east coast of America, he thought he was in India, so he called the people he saw Indians.

Later, many more people from Europe came to this "New World."

Many of these people wanted religious freedom.

In 1776, America went to war with England to win its independence. Not everybody in America wanted to break away from England.

In fact, about one-third of Americans wanted to remain a part of England.

About 85 years later, America got into its most bloody war ever. More people died in this war than any other war in American history.

It was called the Civil War, and was a war between the states in the north of America and the states of the south of America.

At the time this war started, there were only 34 states, including California.

California had become a state in 1850.

Abraham Lincoln was the president when the war ended, but he was killed a few months later while attending a play.

He was shot in the head by a famous actor named John Wilkes Booth.

America continued to grow. At the turn of the next century, America had 45 states.

From that time, it has added five more states - Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska and Hawaii.

The flag was changed from 48 to 50 stars when both Alaska and Hawaii were added in 1959.

Some people think California will split into two or three states in the next 10 years. If that happens, the flag will change again.

Example 1: Asian Vacation

Recently, I took a four-week vacation and headed to Asia.

I left on a Wednesday afternoon. Twelve hours later, I landed in Asia.

I was in that country only one day, then took a 25-hour boat ride to Tianjin.

After a three-hour bus ride, I was in Beijing. I almost had to spend the night at KFC!

I visited friends in China, then got on a train early one morning.

Thirty hours later I arrived in Ulan Bataar, the capital of a large country.

I spent four or five days there, riding a horse, enjoying the countryside and eating Mongolian food.

About the author: Marshall Hughes currently teaches English at GyeongAn Boys High School in Andong, South Korea. He has 12 years experience in Japan at the junior high, high school and university level. He has a B.A. in Journalism-Public Relations, an M.A. in Communication, and a TEFL Certificate. He has also taught as a volunteer in China and started an English program at an NGO in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. Long, long ago he taught Journalism at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Then I flew from Chingis Kahn Airport to Seoul.

This time, I spent one week there. I saw an old IEC student of mine named Jinock.

She was a great student here. I had her in Intermediate B Listening/Speaking.

Next, I took a short flight to the country where I lived for 12 years.*

I saw many old friends there and had fun eating sushi and climbing Mt. Fuji.

Finally, I had to come back to work. I had to teach my great, new Advanced A Listening and Speaking class.

I got on a plane on a Wednesday afternoon, and after a long flight I landed Wednesday morning.

(*Note: I had told my students in my self-introduction that I lived in Japan for 12 years.)

Conclusion

All in all, this is a fun activity for the students, it gives the teacher some insight into his/her students' motivation levels and it can be done with little preparation.