**9-21-22 Ways to Get to Know Your Students and Build a Classroom Community**

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

6 Ways to Get to Know Your Students and Build a Classroom Community

Teachers can build rapport with students by starting the year with activities that encourage sharing of interests, and by connecting those interests to curriculum.

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Knowing about your students’ interests can go a long way, since research has shown that it’s [easier to remember new information](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnbeh.2013.00139/full) when it’s related to something we already know. Your students are already interested in something and are doing it. Learn what it is, and find a way to connect it to your school subject. Consider the [walkways around the Oval at Ohio State University](https://library.osu.edu/site/archives/2014/11/25/the-ovals-long-walk-has-paved-the-way-for-students-for-a-century/), which were paved based on the students’ desired paths.

When students feel that what they are learning actually relates to their lives, it helps to foster their inner motivation. Getting to know your students may also advance community building and help with establishing rapport.

I’ve tried the following six activities with different groups of middle school students in our English as a second language lessons. These community-oriented activities may be of help if you are looking to enhance your students’ inner motivation and retention by learning a bit more about their interests and by connecting your curriculum to those interests.

**1. TWO THINGS YOU LIKE AND ONE THING YOU DON’T**

This is my go-to activity that I use with new groups. It doesn’t take much time or require extra preparation, yet it gives you an opportunity to immediately connect with your students. This simple task not only provides you with some insights into your students’ interests but also sparks authentic reactions in the classroom. It helps with finding common ground for your students, as well as with bonding over some usual dislikes (licorice: “Yuck, right?” or “Not!”).

A good tip is to remind the students to be respectful and try to react without judgment. I would also suggest modeling this activity first in order to show the level of openness you are looking for. If you have a large class, take notes so that it is easier to use this information in preparation for your future lessons.

**2. A (DIGITAL OR PAPER) ‘UNITY QUILT’**

Each student creates their own personalized square on a joint unity quilt. I got inspired by the notable unity quilt that Leslie Knope, the main character in the series *Parks and Recreation*, made in order to ease the tension among her future in-laws. We never sewed a quilt in class (although it might be an option for those who enjoy the challenge) but assembled it digitally instead, using the online collaborative whiteboard platform [Miro](https://miro.com/).

Each square looked like a collage with images representing varied interests of every student. Later on, the classmates guessed whom each square belonged to. This project gives the teacher an opportunity to have a bird’s-eye view of the most common interests in the class and to connect some of the curriculum to them. For instance, I found out that all my students enjoy watching YouTube videos and anime, which informed my teaching further on in the year.

**3. JUDGE BY THE COVER ACTIVITY**

This activity can also act as a handy tool to promote reading and to get the students interested in lesser-known items from the library. The getting-to-know-you task revolves around a handful of picked books. It doesn’t matter what they are, although it could be helpful to suggest books of the appropriate reading level and length, so that students feel inspired and actually carry on reading (fingers crossed) even after this activity is over. The students choose a book from the selection that best describes them in any way imaginable, and afterward they explain their choice to the rest of the class.

Students can pick a book based on its relatable title, its color scheme, its cover layout, or the name of the author—anything will do. Allow enough time for sharing (I would suggest a minimum of three minutes per student), as the explanations can prompt further discussions. It may be a good idea to choose some books that suggest common student interests in the title, like football, camping, or traveling, for example.

**4. TIME TRAVELER ACTIVITY**

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary has a [Time Traveler webpage](https://www.merriam-webster.com/time-traveler/2021), where you can choose a year and see which words appeared in the dictionary for the first time. The idea of this getting-to-know-you task is to ask your students to pick a word from their year of birth—the word should somehow be connected to their lives. For instance, if you were born in 1990 but still feel younger than your age at heart, the word *twentysomething*, which first appeared in the dictionary in 1990, may just fit the bill.

This is a fun activity that promotes literacy and also sparks creativity, because students have to think about the ways these random words can be connected to their lives. This activity is best suited for the older students and may require additional pre-moderation, as some of the dictionary words may not be school-appropriate.

**5. TOP SONG**

In her book *Ghosts,* Dolly Alderton describes how the main character starts her birthday by listening to the pop song that was number one on the day she was born—which gave me an idea for this getting-to-know-you-better exercise. Students are asked to research the number one song on the day they were born and choose one line from the song that somehow relates to their lives.

This activity also promotes literacy, as it aims at developing reading skills and may initiate some interesting discussions based on the reasoning that the students provide. It is also a gateway to the world of former hits, so be ready for a possible impromptu disco party!

**6. ‘HI, THIS IS ME’ VIDEO**

We used “[Kids of New York City](https://www.nytimes.com/video/multimedia/100000004720228/kids-of-new-york-city.html)” from *The New York Times* as a starting point for our own video projects about our typical days. After watching those examples, the students were asked to film bits of their days and narrate them as they went or later on with a voice-over.

We used smartphones for this activity. We also have stationary desktop computers and iPads available at our school, so students can access them during lessons to work on such projects if they don’t have their own equipment. We’ve used the built-in camera and voice recorder and edited everything later in iMovie. Making and watching these almost turned into a film festival. We learned a lot about ourselves (for example, that some of the students were natural-born editors). This is a creative task that also supports digital literacy.