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Getting Students to Do Your Prep

Student Activities for Creating Materials



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Methods and activities for more effective teaching with less preparation

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Introduction

Good language teachers will often spend many hours preparing classroom materials for their students. These teachers are trying to make their classes more interesting and involving for the students. They create material for activities and games which they think will be particularly useful for their students. They do this because they feel that the material found in coursebooks and activity books is generic and they know that they can tailor similar material to their students which will better serve their needs and interests. For example, many teachers start the first class with a “Find someone who” icebreaker from a book. The activity in the book will be generic and a teacher may see the value in changing it to make it more interesting and useful for the students. For instance, activity books have the ubiquitous “Find someone who has been to ...” instruction. The teacher may adapt it to his/her students by changing it to some location that is in the relative vicinity of the school or city that the students are living in.

But in some cases, it makes more sense to get the students to decide what is relevant to them rather than have the teacher make this decision for them. Whenever you, as a teacher, find yourself thinking up activities or material to use in the classroom, ask yourself this question: Would my students get more value out of creating this than I would? This is especially relevant when the material or activity has a linguistic focus. To go back to “Find Someone Who” again, many teachers use it for getting students to practice asking and answering questions with the present perfect. But do teachers benefit from sitting at their desks trying to think of different questions that feature the present perfect? On the other hand, students would get valuable practice not only composing the instructions for the questions, where they would have to pay attention to the correct form for the present perfect, but they would also have to pay attention to meaning when they think of situations and/or actions to which the present perfect would apply. And once you’ve made the decision to turn the creation of an activity over to the students, you can tailor it even more to make sure they get maximum benefit out of creating it. For example, to make sure students don’t write a group of “Find someone who has *been* to...”, you could specify that each FSW instruction must use a different verb (e.g., has eaten..., has learned..., has watched..., etc.).

In the affective realm, there are even more reasons to hand over the creation of class materials to the students. Students relish the opportunity to be creative with the language, especially with something that is going to be used in some way in the class. They will get a sense of ownership from it and will strive to make it as effective as possible. To have the other students use and enjoy the material they create is intrinsically motivating and students will get a sense of pride when their material is used successfully, if not enthusiastically, in the classroom. Finally, giving students input into creating material often allows them to utilize their sense of humour and it seems that students, regardless of their background, often recognize what their fellow students find amusing much more than the teacher can.

Activities

Find Someone Who



Speaking

Vocabulary



Listening

Grammar



Reading

Pronunciation



Writing

Warmer/Icebreaker

This is a standard warmer but it can actually be used to practice all kinds of grammar and vocabulary if it is “planted” in the “Find someone who” commands. Rather than compose the commands yourself, you can give students valuable practice by having them think about using the target language in a realistic context.

First you need to make sure students understand how the activity works. Let them know that they will get a list of “Find someone who” commands and they have to find a different person for each one and then write their name beside the command when they find them. You can make it competitive by telling them whoever finds the most people will win.

Once you’ve told the students what grammar or vocabulary you want them to practice, put them in pairs and have them compose the commands. You can have them write their own commands or you can make it more interesting by telling them to write them for other students in the class. Establish how many commands they need to have. Then give each student a paper and make sure both students in each pair write an identical list of commands. You can monitor to check for accuracy while they are writing. When all the students have finished writing, tell the pairs to label their two lists A and B. Then collect all the papers and redistribute them – it doesn’t matter if someone ends up with their own paper. Then tell A’s to get on one side of the class and B’s on the other. Divide the class in two with the A’s on one side and the B’s on the other. You can instruct them to both ask and answer their questions using the target language, if you wish.

When you stop the activity, get students to find the student on the other side of the class who has the same list of questions. They then compare lists to see how many they got in total. You can elicit their totals to determine a winner.

This activity can also be used as an icebreaker or warmer where no particular grammar or vocabulary is involved. Students merely have to think of general “find someone who” commands.

Find someone who...

has been to New York. *Hassan*

has eaten snails.

has been on a ship.

has seen a hockey game. *Jana*

Sample sheet for present perfect

Vocabulary or Grammar Hot Seat



Speaking
Vocabulary



Listening
Grammar



Reading
Pronunciation



Writing
Warmer/Icebreaker

This is a lively activity which gets students to enthusiastically review grammar or vocabulary that's already been taught, either in a previous lesson or earlier in that lesson. It is based on a popular game where someone gets a teammate to guess a word from clues but they are not allowed to say the actual word. In this version, students get their teammate to guess a whole sentence, albeit a short one. Normally, teachers would be supplying the sentences but in this case, it's the students.

To begin, establish what grammar or vocabulary you want students to practice. Then ask each student in the class to write a short sentence containing a target word, phrase or grammatical structure. As other students will have to guess the sentence word by word, you may want to establish a word limit to keep the activity from being too difficult. Below are some sample simple sentences for some grammar points and vocabulary. Note that contractions have been avoided. If you are dealing with vocabulary, write the list of words or phrases on the board and have students come up to the board and cross off the one they are going to use. If you have more students than words, you can allow students to choose one that has already been crossed off.

- I have seen Titanic. (present perfect)
- If I was home, I would be happy. (2nd conditional)
- I have put off my dentist appointment. (phrasal verb)
- He has a splitting headache (vocabulary/collocation)

When all students have finished writing their sentences, put them into two teams which assemble on the two sides of the class. Put two chairs in front of the board, facing the class. Each team sends a member to sit in the chair facing the class. Those students cannot look at the board. One student from one of the teams comes up and writes their sentence on the board. If there are errors in it, correct them on the board without saying anything. Then the members of each team try to get their teammate in the hot seat to say the sentence. They cannot use any of the words in the sentence but they can give clues like the part of speech and synonyms. The following illustrates the type of clues that could be provided for "I have seen Titanic".

- pronoun, first person singular
- auxiliary verb meaning to possess.
- what you do with your eyes – past participle
- a famous ship that sunk – made into a movie

The first student in the hot seat to get the whole sentence gets a point for their team. Then a member of the other team comes up and writes a sentence on the board and two new students sit in the hot seats. This activity is a great warmer but it can be used at any point in the class to practice or review grammar and/or vocabulary.