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Small Talk

Velma R. Uriegas

On the second day of school in 1993, I stood near my desk in front of my secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) class, and I said aloud to myself, "Gee, it's the second day of school and I can't believe I still have 'butterflies in my stomach!' " I had verbalized the nervousness I felt about returning to ESL teaching after eight years of teaching "regular" English.

Gina, a second year immigrant from Thailand, looked at my protruding mid-section in horror. For the moment, I did not realize why her gaze fixated on my five-months-pregnant tummy; however, when she continued to stare, I realized that she had overheard my comment and that she REALLY thought I had butterflies in my stomach!

I then had to explain, using gestures and dialogue samples, that I truly meant that I felt nervous. While some members of the class showed interest in my explanation, those who already understood the idiom made fun of those who didn't. Consequently, I found out then how difficult teaching idioms could be, and I realized how problematic they can be for the English language learner.

Rationale

Most ESL students misunderstand and misinterpret common idioms when they hear or read them; however, intermediate and advanced students suffer set-backs in hard-earned self-confi-

dence and/or self-esteem with regard to language acquisition due to the ridicule, the snickering, and non-verbal cues they experience when this occurs.

Idioms are an integral part of the common usage of the English language; thus, they have become a basic component to my ESL curriculum, and I have developed a fun way to teach them. This "Small Talk" method evolved from trial and error and from Stephen Krashen's theory of "The Input Hypothesis." In this theory Krashen states that "language is acquired by understanding messages known as 'comprehensible input' " and that "the learner must have a low Affective Filter" meaning he is ready to learn. The activity engages the students in learning to use the idiom by hearing and "seeing" its use in context through a dramatization that is real world, and it is designed for use with the intermediate and advanced ESL learner already familiar with the English language. I also recommend using this exercise only after the students have been together for a while and have developed some camaraderie and trust among themselves. The affective filter must be minimal.

According to Krashen, language acquisition takes place when the messages are meaningful and relative to the learner's experience. This exercise involves watching and mimicking characters (people) who act and speak according to real world situations. In real world situations,

people do not explain their use of language, they just use it. Students need to do the same—acquire language through its use. When people use idioms, they usually “define” them in the context of the conversation. In other words, they make enough referential statements to explain what the idiom meant.

For example:

A: “Gosh, I’m tired! I need a vacation.”

B: “Yeah, you also need to stop ‘burning the candle at both ends!’ “

A: “I know.”

B: “Why don’t you quit your part-time job? You make plenty of money as a nurse!”

A: “Well, I will soon. I’m just trying to save extra money for my trip to Europe.”

In this conversation, the two speakers discussed the situation enough that even if the listener did not fully understand what the idiom “burning the candle at both ends” meant, he would still understand the context of the conversation and could draw some conclusions on his own about the idiom’s meaning. Moreover, the speakers’ body language and tone would have provided other powerful communication tools from which to draw meaning. Therein lies the reasoning behind the use of dramatization in teaching idioms.

The Lesson

1) In preparing for the lesson, choose some idioms frequently used by the native speakers of the age group you teach. I have used two references from which I have drawn a plethora of phrases, *Catching on to American Idioms* by Ester Ellin-Elmakiss and *English Idioms* by Jennifer Seidl and W. McMordie.

2) Jot down each idiom on a slip of paper. Prepare enough idioms for a class divided into pairs or threes and have extra idioms. For instance, in my class of 12 ESL students, I had ten idioms ready for students working in pairs and about seven for students working in groups of three. This allows the groups some choice if they pick an idiom that they find intimidating.

3) Select the groupings for the lesson. Mixed ability groups work best; combining intermedi-

ates with advanced language learners creates a balance for the groupings and their productivity. You do not want to “stack the deck” by allowing all of the advanced learners to work together. If, however, enough trust and goodwill exist among the class members, allow them to “flock” into their own groups in order to reduce their anxiety level (the Affective Filter).

4) Allow each group to select a slip with an idiom written on it. I usually hold the slips “fanned-out” face down in my hands, otherwise students may recognize an idiom and deliberately choose that one, or I fold them and put them into a cup from which each group pulls one slip. If, for some reason, just reading the idiom presents misgivings, I allow another draw.

5) Allow the individual groups about three minutes to brainstorm what they believe their idiom means. Circulate and make supportive comments as needed.

6) After the three minutes, explain to the class that each group must create a one to two minute dialogue/drama that uses the idiom a minimum of three times. Their dialogue and non-verbal cues must present the idiom in its context so that the rest of the class can hear it, “see” it, and draw meaning from its use. More importantly, everyone in the group must speak.

7) Set your timer for 12 to 15 minutes and allow the groups to “spread out” as necessary to the corners of the room or out into the hall. Twelve to fifteen minutes is more than enough time for each group to create a situation and dialogue for the idiom, but I always go to the groups who have no idea what their idiom means, and I explain it to them using their brainstorming ideas as a “springboard.” I circulate among all of the groups and “coach” them as needed.

8) When preparation time ends, allow groups to volunteer to present. The first time you do this lesson, no one may volunteer, so be supportive and entice them with sweetness like your warm smile or, if you get desperate, candy. In essence, create a non-threatening environment.

9) After each skit, ask the listeners of the class what they believe the specific idiom means. If they can articulate in some way the correct meaning, then the mission has been accomplished!

Results

The goal of the lesson calls for the group to use the idiom in a manner that will allow the rest of the class to figure out what it means. Remember, understanding meaning and experiencing it, leads to language acquisition. In using this lesson I think that you will find, as I did, how much language your students have stored away without use. They will surprise you with comical, sensitive, and astute mimicking of native speakers' conversations. Better yet, they will incorporate other catch phrases or expressions that make the dialogues more natural and which reveal their exposure to American culture.

For example, Jose, a Mexican native, and Juan Carlos, a Columbian native, must create a dialogue using the idiom "You've got what it takes." This is a part of their presentation:

Jose (pretending to be dribbling a basketball): "Give it up Juan Carlos!"

Juan (pretending to block his shot): "Wha?"

Jose: "I say, 'Give it up!' You don't got what it takes to beat me!"

Juan: "You talking trash?"

Jose (taking the shot): "No, I better you. You don't got what it takes to beat me!"

Juan (backing off and shaking his head): "Oh yeah?"

Jose: "Jes. Even Jordan afraid to play me."

Juan (looking confused): "Wha?"

Jose (smiling): "You don't see him here, do you?"

This dialogue exemplifies the wonderful conversation that can result from conducting "Small Talk" dramatizations. I intentionally did not "clean up" the dialogue so that you could "hear" what I heard. Listening to and watching the dialogues also help the teacher decide what other language components need to be addressed.

Variations of this activity could involve different size groupings, decreasing the number of times the idiom is used in the dialogue, increasing the number of idioms to be used in the dialogue (instead of developing a dialogue around one idiom, have them use three idioms), providing the actual settings for dialogue/drama, and tape recording or videotaping the dialogue/dramas so that the presenting groups may view and evaluate their verbal and non-verbal cues.

Evaluation

In order to "keep track" of the idioms we have covered, each group creates a sentence strip using the idiom, and the group members sign it. Remind students not to write a description or definition of the idiom on the strip because the students should remember it best through the dramatization. Many times students will ask about an idiom's meaning, such as "What did 'gave a cold shoulder' mean?" and other students will respond with something like, "Remember when Roberto and Alejandra did the skit about the end of their romance?" BINGO! The language experience comes back to them.

In order to monitor true acquisition, wait a day or two before giving individual students exercises that check their understanding of the idioms. Some of these exercises from Ellin-Elmakiss include, but are not limited to:

- Changing sentences that have idioms in them to sentences that use their own words.

*Ex: They used to **bend over backwards** to please their friends.*

- Underlining words in parentheses that best correspond to the idioms as given in a sentence.

*Ex: They serve **top-notch** oriental food. They serve (excellent, good, fair) oriental food.*

- Completing idioms as used in sentences.

Ex: He must learn to _____ an application before applying for a job.

(keep up, fill out, pick up)

- Writing original sentences or dialogues using the idioms.

*Ex: Write a sentence using "**behind the wheel.**"*

- Write a dialogue using idioms.

Ex: Tell the class why you like your best friend. Use as many idioms as possible.

- Having students listen to or read a dialogue and then respond to questions from the dialogue orally.

Problems

Although I have utilized this technique for three years, there are still obstacles or difficulties that present themselves. I will address those that I have encountered.

- 1) Frequency. I have used this lesson as often as once a week or as little as once in six weeks. It depends completely on the personality make-up of the class and their abilities. As students develop bonds in the classroom, I increase the frequency of the lesson. If students are too intimidated to go to the front of the class and speak aloud, then I reduce the number of times that I use this exercise. Krashen believes that if a lesson is anxiety-provoking, it is ineffective.
- 2) Misinterpretation or misuse of the idiom by the presenting group. If the group presenting modeled an incorrect use of the idiom or if the listeners did not interpret the idiom correctly, the presenting group has the choice of reworking their dialogue/drama or challenging the class to create their own dialogue/drama. This choice "takes the pressure off" the presenting group that may have had difficulties. Many times an inaudible or rapidly speaking partner can create problems. Other times one or more of the speakers' difficulty with articulation may prevent the dialogue/drama from being understood. In my experience, the presenting group often decides to rework their dialogue/drama. After seeing and hearing what others groups present, the group re-establishes their purpose and most often their pride "kicks in" and they *want* to do it correctly. They almost always return with wonderfully effective skits. For those few instances that a new group dramatizes the idiom, the results have also been fantastic and well-received. Most importantly, the groups must understand that grades are **not** a part of their mini-skits, rather that the evaluation of their language acquisition will take place another day on an individual basis.
- 3) Idioms that have more than one meaning. Some idioms may have more than one interpretation. "On the go" may mean "to be very busy" or "going somewhere." I usually let my students know that this particular idiom has more than one meaning, but that they are to focus on only one. This allows the students to hear the idiom and experience at least one aspect of it

without generating confusion. Nevertheless, eventually I go back to the idiom and go through the process again using the second definition.

Conclusion

My students love "Small Talk." There may be times when we go two or three weeks without presenting and they'll start asking to do it.

The teaching through dialogue/drama also goes beyond just acquiring usage of the idioms. Second language learners get to practice conversation with gestures and vocal changes in tone and pitch. They learn to describe and elaborate; they conjugate verbs. They start to understand humorous innuendoes and other idiosyncrasies of the English language. However, the most tremendous impact that "Small Talk" has had in my classroom is that my ESL students exhibit a general willingness to read, speak, and write in English more often, and this attitude transcends other lessons. "Small Talk" allows the ESL student to acquire meaningful language in a safe environment and that should "clear the lines" to communication.

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About the Author

Velma R. Uriegas has taught high school English in San Antonio schools for fourteen years. The first two and the last three years of teaching have included English as a Second Language (ESL).