

Using the Power of Language to Foster Community

by CHRISTA BIXBY



The process of learning a second language requires vulnerability, and vulnerability demands trust. To put students into a language-learning environment where they are unsure of their abilities, do not know their classmates, and are getting a grade for their performance can lead to an atmosphere of hesitation and fear. It has been said that “words are the voice of the heart” (Confucius), and to ask our students to allow others to see their inner thoughts and heart is a hefty request and one that should be approached delicately and with intentionality.

One way to create a safe environment for sharing, collaborating, and vulnerability is to foster an authentic community within the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. This does not need to be something we must add to our list of things to do but rather something that, with a bit of thoughtfulness

in our planning, can be cultivated through the practice of the English language.

I have used a lesson on adjectives to promote a sense of community while reinforcing the ability of students to use adjectives authentically. This activity can be adapted for use with adults and children alike. This particular lesson was done in Los Angeles, California, with an adult group of beginning, intermediate, and advanced ESL learners from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. I taught a standard lesson on adjectives with presentation, practice, and production phases. However, in the production phase, I tweaked the activity to give my students the chance to use language to empower one another. I spoke to my students about the power of language and how easily it can be used to either build up or tear down others. Furthermore, we discussed how we are all one community

working towards the same goal, albeit with our own individual struggles, and how as a class we need to encourage one another in the process.

I had the class get into a large circle and allowed the students to go get the food and drinks I brought in (hoping to create a more relaxed atmosphere). After we were all sitting, I started with the student sitting to my left, and I asked each student to describe him, using adjectives to say what he or she appreciated or liked about that student. Students could think of their own adjectives or use ones on an adjective list we had created earlier in the lesson. Every individual in the circle had a chance to speak. We did this with every student. Students used adjective lists they had created to search for the perfect words to describe their peers and even took the initiative to write down adjectives they heard classmates using. This activity became deeply personal and relevant; language became a medium of meaning as students were enthralled and engaged while describing their admiration for one another and listening to how others perceived them. It is rare that we stop to verbalize how much we appreciate those around us, and it is easy to allow doubts to fill our minds when we wonder how we are perceived by others. Through the use of adjectives, students were able to silence some of those doubts and use language to make an immediate difference in the lives of those around them.

THE ACTIVITY

Time: 1½ to 2 hours (including introductions of adjectives, pre-activity, and activity)

Preparation

1. Discuss with students how to use adjectives to describe people and their personalities.
2. Show how to use adjectives grammatically (either after a linking verb or before a noun).
3. Have students get into pairs.

4. Give each pair a worksheet with adjectives that can be used to describe persons; the adjectives can be scattered randomly across the top of the page. (See the Appendix for example adjective lists.) Teachers unable to photocopy worksheets can write adjectives in random order on the board.
5. Have students in pairs sort the adjectives into columns (Positive, Negative, or Both) in their notebooks. Allow students to use their phones or dictionaries if they do not recognize a particular word.
6. As a class and on the board, create lists of positive and negative adjectives. For more advanced learners, discuss connotations of each word as well as synonyms that could be used. Identify each word as formal or informal, as appropriate. With advanced learners, you can also discuss how the same adjective could be positive in one context and negative in another, depending upon the intention of the speaker.

Procedure

1. Use the separation of positive and negative personality adjectives listed on the board to begin the discussion on the power of language. Have a discussion about how important using language to empower one another is and how much of a difference it can make.
2. Have the students arrange their chairs into a large circle. (If you have brought food, invite students to go and help themselves to food before you begin the activity.)
3. Once everyone is sitting, tell students they are going to have the chance to use the adjectives they just learned to encourage their classmates. Explain the directions: They will start with the student on your left (e.g., John); every person in the circle will say one thing he or she likes about John.

4. Ask the student sitting to the left of John to begin. Allow each student in the circle to comment on John. Help the flow of who is next by using hand gestures, not your voice. (Do not correct grammatical mistakes; let students speak freely and focus on meaning.)

Make sure you participate in this encouragement circle. Tell your students authentically what you appreciate about them.

5. After the circle is completed, discuss with students how they can empower themselves through language. Explain to the class why you value them as a collective whole. Remind them that they all have the power to use language to make a positive difference.

VARIATIONS

If bringing food into the classroom is not possible, consider creating a more comfortable, inviting setting by meeting outdoors or in a different room, or simply by adding a decorative touch to the classroom. (It is always a good idea to check with the administration or management before bringing in food or changing classrooms.)

To have students practice writing instead of speaking, create a card for each student, writing the student's name at the top of the card. Instead of speaking in the circle, students pass the cards around the circle and write one positive adjective on each card for each person in the class.

To include practice of both the negative and positive adjectives learned, you can pre-teach that the use of *never* before a negative adjective can produce a positive meaning. For example, "You are never stubborn." Students can use this formation when they describe others during the circle activity.

CONSIDERATIONS

This activity can be used for a variety of levels and environments. However, before implementing the activity, consider: What is

the objective of my class? (This type of activity might not be suitable for a Business English or English for Nursing course, for example.) What time is best to incorporate this type of communicative technique? (Is there a big test coming up? Would it cause students stress to not be doing more academically focused work? Choose a time when students have a relatively low level of stress and can fully participate in the activity without being distracted.) How large is my class? (If you have a large class, consider dividing the students into groups to maximize the amount of speaking per student.)

CONCLUSION

This activity built trust, inspired depth of thought, broke down barriers, and created an environment of appreciation and encouragement in my classroom. A crucial element I wish to reiterate is that this activity was not one that was done simply to build community; it had a language focus. It was a simple lesson on adjectives, and yet it was transformational. I continued to incorporate activities like this in my classes throughout the year, but this one activity in particular was the start of a welcome change from being a *class* to becoming a *community*.

I became a teacher because I believe wholeheartedly in empowerment, and I believe empowerment comes through not only intellectual development but personal development as well. I hope incorporating activities like this one taps into the hearts of students, as they are valued for not only what they can do, but who they are.

Christa Bixby is an Adjunct Professor of TESOL and is currently an English Language Fellow working with the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. She has been teaching in the TESOL field for the past five years both abroad and in the United States.

APPENDIX

Example Lists of Adjectives

Teacher's Copy

Teachers can choose the adjectives they would like their students to learn and use throughout this activity. Example adjective lists for intermediate and advanced levels appear below. (When conducting the activity, scatter the words across the board or across the top of a handout, and ask the students to put them into the columns for Positive, Negative, or Both.)

INTERMEDIATE ADJECTIVE LIST

| Positive | Negative | Both |
|--|---|---|
| sincere friendly enthusiastic organized powerful intelligent gorgeous accommodating mature open | critical annoying awkward stubborn stern strict careless aggressive average | interesting unique talkative introverted |

ADVANCED ADJECTIVE LIST

| Positive | Negative | Both |
|---|---|---|
| persevering creative efficient genuine energetic innovative extroverted tolerant ingenious courteous | cunning suspicious domineering headstrong defensive fickle flakey quick-tempered | different determined quiet solemn frank |