

An On-going Ice-breaker

Ruth Wajnryb

One class I teach is on Thursday mornings. The rest of the week the students have other teachers and from Thursday to Thursday I don't have any contact with them. This means that the inevitable ice-breaker on Day One tends to need re-vitalising each time we meet. The idea of doing a fresh, full-scale ice-breaker every week didn't appeal, so I ended up extending the original ice-breaker I had used on Day One into an on-going, next-exciting-episode version of the original.

Procedure

The idea comes from Gertrude Moskowitz' famous *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom* (Newbury House, 1978) where it is called "Identity Cards". The procedure, as I use it, is as follows:

1. Each student fills out an individual identity card following a model put up on the board by the teacher. (See Fig. 1). I demonstrate how to do

Your favourite place in Sydney

The name of the person you're closest to

Your name

What you did last night

Where you'll be one year from now

Figure 1

it by using myself and my life as an example in the first instance (see Fig. 2). Using oneself here has obvious plusses—such as the fact that students are always interested in the “private” side of a teacher and also the fact that they see (and are reassured by) the limits of the risk involved.

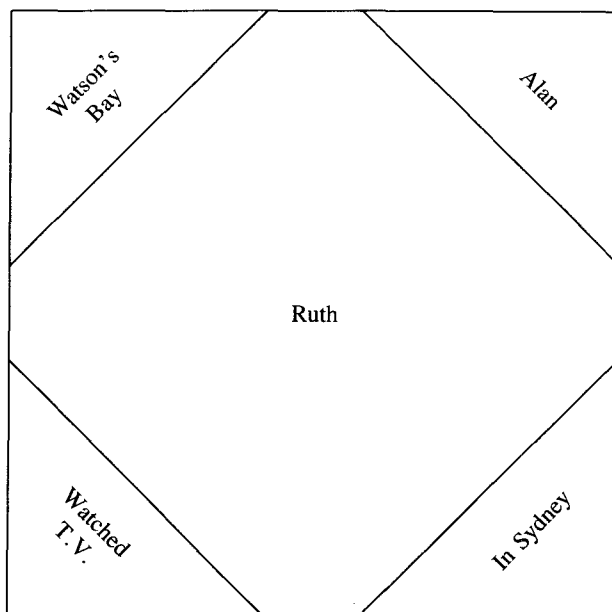


Figure 2

2. The students then get up and mix and mingle, sharing their identity cards with each other and responding to the inevitable questions that the trigger remarks spontaneously generate: (following my own model). Where's Watson's Bay? Why do you like it so much? Who's Alan? How long have you known him? What did you watch? Do you like police shows? How do you know you'll be in Sydney next year? What kind of work? etc. etc.

The unstructured chatting goes on until the ice is broken.

Why it's a good activity

1. *The adrenalin factor*: it gets the students off their chairs, up and mixing.
2. *The resource factor*: it gets them talking about themselves, their (and the teacher's) best learning resource.

3. *The safety factor*: the students become their own censors; the activity allows them the safe option of only sharing what they choose to share.
4. *The interactive factor*: on a linguistic level, the activity forces questions and forces students to interact to the information that their interlocutor is providing.
5. *The "economy of effort" factor*: the activity is self-adjusting to each language-learner level, making it "portable" enough to be used by almost any class who inevitably takes it to the boundaries of their own proficiency.

An on-going ice-breaker

Come Week 2, the second Thursday, and my reluctance to use a new ice-breaker, I decided to continue with the same one, given that the students knew the ropes and knew that the risks were minimal, the gains worth it. I simply "changed the corners" (See Fig. 3) and they were off and at it immediately. Likewise, Week 3 brought new corner prompts (see

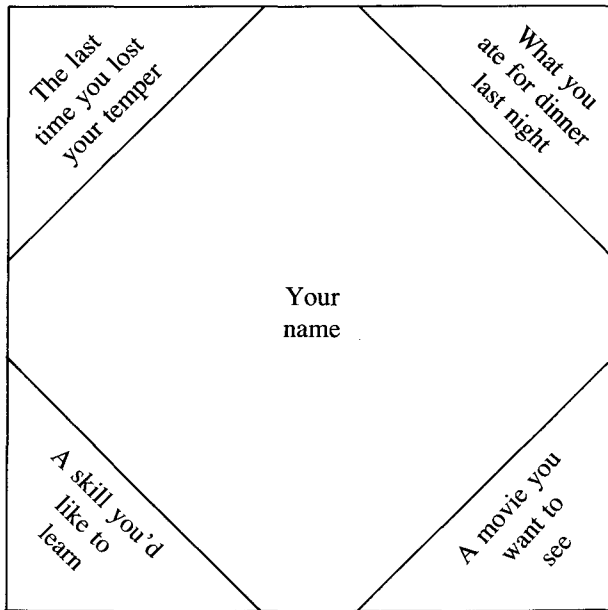
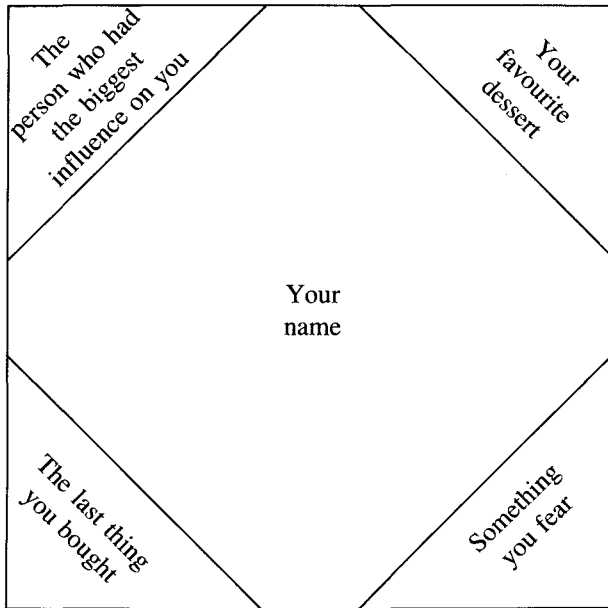


Figure 3

Fig. 4) by which time the students swung into gear immediately. In Week 4, I thought I'd try a variation and drew "an empty card" (a large square) on the board asking them to create the corner triggers themselves by



Some alternatives:

- Your best feature
- The last thing you tried to learn
- The animal you most identify with
- Your position in the family (oldest child, youngest, middle, only child)
- A person you'd like to spend the day with
- The last book you read
- The best year of your life

Figure 4

consensus. (From a language point of view, of course, this task has its own hidden agenda). See Fig. 5 for what they came up with. (Where there is not over-all consensus, two large-ish groups can have their own).

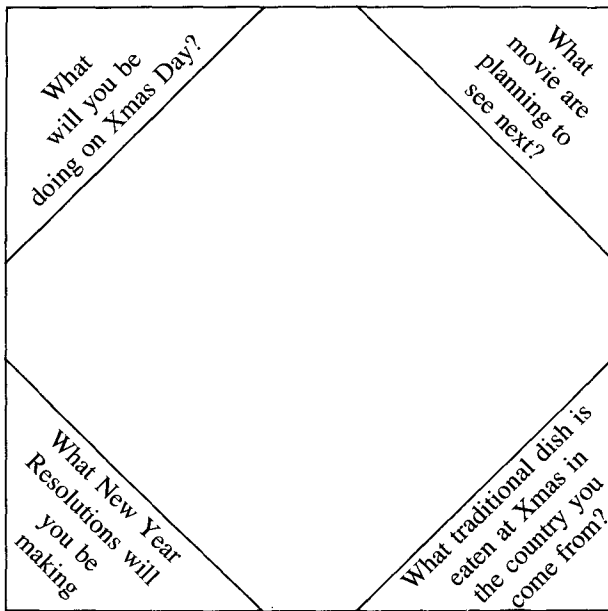


Figure 5

Conclusion

This activity suits the adolescent and adult learner groups and can be used at all levels from low intermediate to advanced. It serves nicely as a Day One ice-breaker and as well creates cohesion across the weeks of a course, a useful exercise when, as in my case, there are not many face-to-face hours between one teacher and the class (although it doesn't need this contingency in order to work well!). What's nice to notice is how, from week to week, there is greater spontaneity and intimacy, themselves reliable indicators of a positive group dynamic and a healthy learning community.

THE AUTHOR

Ruth Wajnryb is Head of Teacher Training at the Institute of Languages, University of New South Wales, Australia. She has an M.A. in Applied Linguistics. Most of her T.E.S.O.L. experience has been in adult teaching in Australia, Europe, the Middle East and South America. Her books *Grammar Workout* (1986) and *Grammar Workout 2* (1988) are based on the Dictogloss method.