

Creating Classroom Community with *English-- No Problem!*

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Introduction

In my recurring adult ESL teacher nightmare, I find myself standing at the front of a cavernous classroom. The first few rows of desks are empty, and the learners in this class are scattered around the rest of the room. Not only are they isolated from me, they are also isolated from each other. A few empty desks surround each individual, forming a protective shell. I'm not exactly sure, since I haven't taken attendance yet, but I have the definite impression that some faces I'd seen on previous occasions are not among those present this evening. Where have the others gone?

I am there to teach them English, so possibly their limited English proficiency accounts for the hush. What is particularly troublesome, though, is that they don't seem to recognize me, and they don't seem to have the slightest interest in each other, either. I have to do something quickly, before the lethargy swallows us whole, in which case the rest of the desks will be empty next time which would effectively put an end to this class, which would mean that I would have no job, which ...

So I grab the pile of glossy textbooks from atop my table and stride around the room distributing them. In this textbook, for the next few months, we will be following the lives of a cast of characters in and around Perfect Adult ESL Class in Perfect Adult ESL School. The nice clean classroom in our textbook is located in a nice clean town, in a nice clean state. It is filled with young, attractive, upbeat students. They are unattached and free of such distractions as jobs that don't pay, spouses that don't pull their weight, children who don't care to speak their language, and neighborhoods that offer little in the way of security or comfort. The learners in our text happen to be uniformly well-off and uniformly intrigued by all things related to the U.S. Amazingly, every single one of them hails from a different country. And while they are unscathed by the mundane cares of adult life, they've all got lots on their minds. There's Carmen from Venezuela and Ali from Morocco, sitting in a café planning a surprise birthday party for Pham from Vietnam, while Wojtek from Poland looks up from his computer, wondering if Marie-Claire from France would say yes if he asked her out for a burger and a Coke. In the next chapter, Marco from Mexico and Lee from China are recruiting for a soccer team to represent the school. Meanwhile, Olga from Russia, together with her pals Axel from Germany and Mina from India, can be seen checking out the pages of the newspaper, planning an expedition to the latest action flick at the movie theater downtown. As we glide through the next sixteen chapters, there will be a succession of surprise parties, picnics, and entertainment choices to keep them occupied. We can rest assured that they will all come through intact, with an increased appreciation for life in the U.S. and impressively improved English. And their teacher, the bespectacled and slightly paunchy Mr. Peterson, will be there to offer wise words of guidance, should expert advice about the way things are done in the U.S. be required.

When I look up to check if my adult learners have all opened the text to the designated page, I discover that they're slumped over at their desks. Some of them are actually snoring! Or is that me?

Finding Community in the ESL Class

Waking from my nightmare, I realize what is missing in the scenario. My adult learners live and work in a different world from that of the characters in the idealized world of the textbook. Unable to identify with those characters, the learners have little reason to focus on the situations in which those characters find themselves. Lacking motivation to communicate about the material in the text lessons, the students isolate themselves from each other, cutting off both reason and opportunity for any true interaction.

In contrast to this picture of isolation and indifference, the New Readers Press series *English - No Problem!* provides an effective tool for stimulating learner involvement and authentic communication. There are two distinct sets of characters appearing in the series, neither of whom bears much resemblance to the inhabitants of my Nightmare English textbook. The first set of characters includes the protagonists of the units of the series. Many of these protagonists are relative newcomers to the U.S., but there are also some who have lived in the U.S. all or most of their lives. The collective picture painted in the series is of a society with challenges and rewards, in which informed action does not always yield definitive or positive answers, but tends to produce better results than passivity and gullibility. Whether or not any one of the protagonists mirrors the exact cultural and personal dynamics of a given adult learner is not of particular importance. What matters is that there is an honest attempt to include the ambiguities and implications of an issue and to provide learners with activities for learning English in the context of dilemmas or situations that will ring true for adult learners living in the U.S. today.

These protagonists make their appearance in a unit and then exit gracefully. By contrast, the second set of characters stick around for the duration of the cycle of instruction. These characters are the ones that truly bring the series to life. The stuff of their lives is the antidote to my Nightmare English classroom. These characters are the adult learners themselves.

The Chat feature of the *English - No Problem!* series taps into this, the most important resource within the adult ESL classroom. This feature provides a powerful mechanism for creating a lively, interactive classroom community. The Chats involve learners moving around the room for brief pair interactions, exchanging information with each other about themselves and their lives. Class, Group, and Partner Chats provide variety in the interactions and the conversational dynamics. The learning that takes place when learners are engaged in these Chats is "real world" communication precisely because learners are asking for new information and responding with true and personal information. Since the learners have a natural curiosity about each other, the classroom becomes a social unit in which there is intrinsic interest among the learners to find out more about their classmates and their teacher. The subject matter of the Chats

corresponds to the types of questions learners need to be able to ask and answer beyond the classroom.

Using Chats to Create Classroom Community

Class, Group, and Partner Chats are included at every level of the *English - No Problem!* series. At the most basic level, learners might be asking each class member – including the teacher – “What’s your name? Can you spell that, please?” At a high beginning level, learners might be asking each other about their skills and strengths as they prepare for a job search. At higher levels, learners might conduct multi-part interviews about preferences, experiences, and suggestions, with different class members concentrating on different segments of an inquiry. The text provides conversational models to structure the Chats, as well as duplicable graphic organizers to use in processing the responses, at all levels.

Chats further contribute to the creation of an effective learning environment by raising the energy level of the class. They generate the type of activity that stirs things up; they are particularly effective for jump-starting learners (and teachers) who are reporting to class at 6:00 p.m. after a hard day of work. The controlled chaos of having each learner purposefully moving around the room, recording and providing information, breaks down the isolation and lethargy that characterizes my nightmare classroom and that may have even existed in some actual classrooms I have observed or been responsible for myself.

The following are a few suggestions for using Chats effectively:

- Model the activity for the first few times it is used and whenever a new element is introduced.
- Keep up a quick pace of work, ensuring that the interest level stays high.
- Take steps to ensure that people who normally tend to stay together do not become each other’s exclusive or even principal partners. The aim is for everyone to work with as many people as possible.
- Whenever possible, participate in the activity in the same way as the learners, asking and answering questions. This interaction forms a good basis for relating to the class as a fellow adult with a life on the outside world.
- Once learners develop familiarity with the activity, and it becomes self-perpetuating, take advantage of the opportunity to do some one-on-one assessment of learners and conferencing, particularly with those who might be experiencing difficulty with a given task.
- Establish a flow by not over-burdening learners with large quantities of written responses to record.
- Have easier related tasks available for those who experience difficulty with an activity by modifying existing Chats; make sure there are additional Chat questions or more complex activities (including One Step Up activities found throughout the series) available for those who finish sooner.
- Continuously monitor the activity. If necessary, pause it to give a mini-lesson on whatever is causing difficulty: pronunciation, grammar, spelling.

- Extend the activity beyond the classroom, encouraging learners to “chat” with people in other classes or school offices, and even as homework involving family members, neighbors, co-workers, etc.
- Use information collected to involve math in the classroom by calculating different types of totals and averages that arise from the data.

Overall, the friendships and networking opportunities gained by being part of the relaxed and supportive atmosphere of a classroom community emerge as instrumental in keeping adult learners coming to class. This can be particularly true for the many learners whose connections to this country are tenuous because they have rarely, if ever, been in situations where they could meet anyone outside of their families or most familiar social circles. When used to full advantage, Class Chats will become a central feature of the type of classroom that learners will enjoy coming to day after day.