

TRAINER BACKGROUND

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Creative Calling

Somewhere along the way I picked up the idea of “creative calling”. I don’t know where I first learned it or from whom, but I’ve come to use it quite regularly and I believe it has the following benefits:

- it increases students’ passive knowledge of vocabulary: new vocabulary can be introduced in a readily deducible context and old vocabulary can be recycled again and again
- it develops listening comprehension; and it is not passive because the students in question must respond to the “call”
- it keeps students attentive and concentrating to see if they are being called
- perhaps most importantly, it contributes to a feeling of community and intimacy in the classroom.

Instead of calling on a student by name, to answer a question, write on the board, or whatever, the teacher can describe the person she or he wants to call on. At an elementary level, then, instead of “Answer, please, Maria,” the teacher could say, “Answer, please, the girl in the green shirt” or “the person with big silver earrings”. Spatial prepositions with objects in the room work well for this technique, too: “The boy near the blackboard, please”, “The girl under the clock” or “The boy behind Claudia”.



Other possibilities include left/right, ordinal numbers (“The girl in the fourth row, on the left”), and hair or eye colours. No doubt the creative teacher can think of many others.

As the students in the class (and the teacher) get to know one another better, the teacher can also work in descriptions such as, “The student who likes to ski”, “The student who plays the flute”, “The student who hates dictation”, “The student who went to Egypt at Christmas”, “The student who has never been on a plane”. These kinds of descriptions tend to affirm the individual. Each student in turn becomes the “star” about which some interesting fact is revealed. Suddenly other students know that the timid girl who sits in the back is a fantastic painter, for instance. I often work in “inside” jokes with classes that are fairly intimate. Students seem to appreciate understanding humour in the target language and even more the fact that the humour is about them (providing, of course, that it’s a very gentle, affirming humour, not “putting down” humour).

Many teachers, especially after the first 30 or so hours of learning, find it useful to involve students more and more in the responsibility for what happens in class. By giving students the more active role, they realize, students get more practice. So at a certain point, many activities which have been traditionally teacher-directed (asking comprehension questions, explaining vocabulary, giving directions, etc.) are given over to students, with the teacher listening in and helping where necessary. If a student is running an exercise in the traditional role of the teacher, she or he could also use creative calling, providing practice in describing people, in using relative pronouns, in stretching his or her vocabulary and in general fluency. To get students using creative calling, I simply tell them not to use names when calling on other students. They usually follow the same patterns I use in my calling, but often come up with new possibilities. Quicker students have the opportunity to provide detailed descriptions, while slower learners usually stick to “the person on my right” and “the person in the red sweater”.

One word of caution about using this technique of calling on students. The teacher should be very careful not to use descriptions that could be embarrassing for the student. “The short girl” or even “The boy with glasses”, may make the students being described feel self-conscious. It depends on the individuals, of course, but when in doubt it’s better to stick to more neutral descriptions, like hair colour or clothes, things which everyone possesses.

At the time of writing, Jacqueline Smith was a writer for “The Reporter” and was editor of ‘Teaching English’ in Italy. She holds an M.A. in TESOL from Teachers’ College, Columbia University, and was teaching adult students in Italy.