

# Making Connections: Language Activities for Creating Interpersonal Tolerance in the Classroom

*If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.*

—Lao-tzu (6th century B.C.)

In many English classrooms throughout the world, there are students who mistrust or even fear each other because they belong to groups with a history of conflict based on national, political, ethnic, or other differences. Intergroup conflict often endures because people do not have the opportunity to interact with each other personally and rely instead on long-standing stereotypes. The actions of governments often make solutions difficult to reach; nevertheless, there are many instances where bridging cultural divides has reduced the tension between conflicting groups. Teachers and nonprofit organizations have long been involved in bringing conflicting groups together in educational contexts

in order to promote mutual acceptance of dissimilar worldviews and cultures. For several reasons, the English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) classroom is an especially ideal setting to deal with intergroup conflict.

Successful language teaching utilizes methods designed to engage students in communicative activities based on their backgrounds, opinions, and other personal characteristics. A classroom composed of students with widely different cultures offers lots of potential for excitement and discovery, as well as for creating empathy and advancing the acquisition of English. This article will describe some ESL/EFL activities that promote this type of interpersonal tolerance between

students who have experienced intergroup conflict. Some of the activities are attributed to specific authors, while others have been disseminated in various forms throughout the years and used by many teachers. Although our students were mostly at the beginning level of English, we have included some variations for learners at higher levels of language ability. As with any communicative method, pertinent grammatical constructs—tenses, structures, and vocabulary—can be purposefully targeted and built into the lessons to reinforce elements of the current curriculum.

### English Camp: Hispaniola

The activities described in this article took place at an English camp for 40 secondary school students in the northern border area of Hispaniola, the Caribbean island shared by the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The 40 students—20 from each country—studied English in the mornings and did group work and camp activities in the afternoons and evenings. Although they share an island, Haitians and Dominicans speak different languages and have different cultures, colonial pasts, and socioeconomic realities; they also have a long history of conflict.

A main objective of the camp was to stimulate intergroup communication in English, the students' only common language. Therefore, they were divided into four groups of ten students each that consisted of five Haitians and five Dominicans. Many of the English lessons entailed pair work with partners from different countries so that students would learn about each other, which was another major objective. Students were aware from the beginning that the goal of the camp was for students from the two countries to get to know each other. They eagerly accepted this idea and during the two weeks of the camp had the opportunity to work with many different partners from the other country.

In planning for the camp activities, the instructors and counselors drew from their experiences as language teachers and trainers in many parts of the world. In addition, we had input from the staff of similar camps administered by the nonprofit organization World Learning ([www.worldlearning.org](http://www.worldlearning.org)) and from the Seeds of Peace program, which has experience in bringing young people from Palestine and Israel together ([www.seedsofpeace.org](http://www.seedsofpeace.org)). The

United States Institute of Peace materials in *Creating a Culture of Peace in the English Language Classroom* (Milofsky 2008) were also a valuable source of ideas.

### Four levels of cultural awareness

The focus of the following activities is on the idea that cultural awareness is advanced through mutual reflection and interaction at four levels: (1) self, (2) family, (3) community, and (4) the region and world at large. Figure 1 represents these levels with circles that expand at each level. Specific activities designed for each level lead not only to self-awareness, but also to mutual considerations of how similar topics are understood by other students. The activities at each level allow students to learn about each other in a neutral, relaxed, non-threatening setting where stereotypes and prejudices are reduced. The following 12 activities are divided among the self, family, community, and region/world levels. They can be adapted for different ages and proficiencies in ESL/EFL classrooms, summer English camps, or any setting where personal interactions will create a productive learning environment and increase tolerance and cooperation.

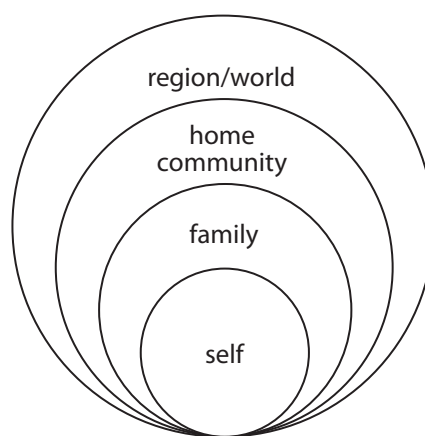


Figure 1. Four levels of cultural awareness

#### Levels 1 and 2: Self and family

The activities from the first two circles depicted in Figure 1 provide opportunities for students to talk about themselves and their families. Students share information about themselves while noticing aspects that they have in common with their peers. For beginning learners of English, these basic language routines encourage participation and help students feel confident.

### Activity 1: Name Pantomime

This activity is used on the first day to help the students learn each other's names and can be done in groups of up to ten students. It is personalized, as most learners enjoy the chance to talk about themselves in a nonthreatening, social, and interesting environment. Also, because little language production is involved, the activity is fun and less intimidating. To begin, each person in the group says his or her name while making a gesture or action. Before dividing the students into groups, the teacher should model the activity clearly, including the dramatization of possible arbitrary gestures or actions that will be required (waving, jumping, saluting, etc.). This activity has two parts:

1. Students stand in a circle, arm-distance apart. After each student says his or her name and performs an action, the entire group repeats the name and action in unison.
2. Once everyone has had a turn, the group forms a chain. Again, each person says his or her name and makes a gesture or action, but this time each student repeats the names and performs the actions of the students who have already spoken. For example, the third student in the chain will repeat two names and actions before stating his or her name and performing an action, the fourth student will repeat three names and actions, and so on. This should be a cooperative game, not a competition or a memory test. Students are encouraged to help each other when they cannot remember a name or a gesture.

At the camp, we used this activity on the first evening with groups of ten students—five Haitians and five Dominicans. It was an

effective icebreaker, and the students had fun making silly gestures and seeing the group repeat them.

**Variations:** For intermediate students, instead of a gesture, students can add a favorite activity to their introduction (e.g., “My name is Susan. I like to read”), or an activity that begins with the same letter as their first name (e.g., “My name is Susan. I like to swim”). Advanced students can complete more challenging tasks, such as explaining the meaning and origin of their names.

### Activity 2: What do you usually eat for breakfast?

Students first fill out the Breakfast Grid in Figure 2 and then share the information with a partner. The pairs compare and contrast their answers, then report their findings with everyone in a whole-group discussion. Often students do not realize that their habits and customs may be different (but not better or worse) from those of other students. This activity helps them see their partners as unique individuals while providing communicative practice using the vocabulary of food in the present tense. Although the “Why?” question requires higher language skills, we found that students working together in mixed ability groups across language levels could successfully express their opinions, even if only with a few words.

This activity revealed the many things that the Haitian and Dominican students have in common. Since they knew so little about each other before coming to the camp, they were surprised to learn that in many cases they ate and drank the same things, although sometimes in different ways. For example, in Haiti oatmeal is often eaten in the evening, whereas in the Dominican Republic, it is often eaten in the morning.

Name	What do you eat and drink for breakfast?	How do you eat it (when, where, with whom)?	Why do you have this for breakfast?	What do you think about these breakfast selections?
<i>Me</i>				
<i>My Partner</i>				

Figure 2. Breakfast Grid

Category 1: Family Size	Category 2: Name
Corner 1: You have 0 brothers and sisters Corner 2: You have 1–3 brothers/sisters Corner 3: You have 4–5 brothers/sisters Corner 4: You have more than 5 brothers/sisters	Corner 1: First name beginning with A–F Corner 2: First name beginning with G–L Corner 3: First name beginning with M–R Corner 4: First name beginning with S–Z
Category 3: Favorite Sport	Category 4: Favorite Pastime
Corner 1: Soccer (football) Corner 2: Basketball Corner 3: Volleyball Corner 4: Baseball	Corner 1: Listening to music Corner 2: Reading books Corner 3: Playing sports Corner 4: Watching TV or films

**Figure 3. Four Corners categories**

**Variations:** Advanced students can compare their answers and make statements using pertinent grammatical structures: “We both eat \_\_\_\_\_”; “I eat \_\_\_\_\_, but my partner eats \_\_\_\_\_”; and “Neither of us eats \_\_\_\_\_.” Moran (2001) suggests topics other than food that may interest the students: “What do you wear to school, to a party, to a special occasion?” “What sports do you play?” “What music do you listen to?” and “What subjects do you study in school, and which do you like best/least?”

### Activity 3: Four Corners

The teacher selects one of the four categories in Figure 3, and students gather in the appropriate corner according to their membership in the category designations. While in the corners, they share information for a few minutes and then answer questions posed by the teacher. For example, the teacher could ask the students in Category 1, “How do you feel about your family size?” At a basic level, a student might answer, “I am happy to have two brothers and one sister.” At an intermediate or higher level, students can give more details about their families or explain why they like a certain sport.

Rather than going to the corners, students could form groups on one side of the room or the other depending on their preferences for a food or pastime (e.g., those on the left side prefer salty food, and those on the right prefer sweet food). Other “prefer or not prefer” choices might be dogs or cats, the beach or the mountains, or math or English.

**Variations:** Advanced students can answer more in-depth questions; for example, in Category 1, students might ask each other, “Are

you the oldest or youngest?” “What are the advantages or disadvantages of your position in the family?” or “How many children do you hope to have?” More advanced students can also follow up in pairs or small groups and discuss why they made their choices.

This activity helped the Haitian and Dominican students awaken to how much they had in common with their counterparts from the other country. Even with basic English skills, students were able to exchange information, and this activity gave them a great chance to communicate relevant information about themselves and their families, as well as to make new friends with similar tastes in music or sports.

### Activity 4: Self-Portrait

Groups of four students fill in nine blanks line by line. The finished product resembles a poem (see the template in Figure 4). The students then read their poems to the other members of the group. Learners choose one line of each person’s poem to comment on and answer one of these questions: “What was your favorite line?” “What is something you didn’t know about the reader?” “What is something you share in ‘loves’ or ‘dislikes’?” Students work together with their groupmates and the teacher to check spelling and grammar. Using colored paper and markers, they rewrite and decorate their poems, then post the poems around the room so everyone can read them.

This activity draws attention to things that individuals and groups have in common and gives them a chance to talk about personal opinions and aspirations. As the students corrected and improved the language of their work and made attractive copies of the poems, they collaborated with their peers to produce a piece of

Line 1: Your first name
Line 2: Four adjectives that describe you
Line 3: Your relationship to someone (mother of ____, son of ____, friend of __)
Line 4: Speaker of _____ (languages you speak)
Line 5: Three things you love (name three things)
Line 6: Three things you dislike (name three things)
Line 7: Three things/places/people you would like to see
Line 8: Your profession, or your dream profession
Line 9: Your last name

**Figure 4. Self-Portrait poem template**

writing of which they were proud. In addition, students who were not strong in language used their artistic abilities to express themselves.

**Activity 5: My Hand**

Students trace their hands on colored construction paper, cut out the paper hands, and write their individual characteristics on each finger (e.g., soccer player, math lover, tall, happy, Creole speaker). The teacher collects the hands, mixes them up, and redistributes them. Students take turns reading the words on the paper they receive, and other students guess whose hands they are. Hands are then put together in a collage entitled “Let’s make the world a brighter place!”

**Level 3: Community**

Moving from the focus on one’s self and family, the students begin to consider their relationship to the community in the classroom and the larger community around them, which includes the school and the local area where they live.

**Activity 6: Language Experience Approach**

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) to literacy instruction is based on stories that originate from the learners’ shared personal experiences. In the LEA, students work in pairs or small groups to write a story with the help of the teacher about a common experience. This story is then read to the whole group. The shared experience can be a field trip, time spent in the sports field, or even a previous class.

**Variations:** Students can draw scenes on picture cards, put them in the correct narrative order, and then write their stories. (Examples of excellent picture stories are available in Heyer [1994], Ligon, Tannenbaum, and Rodgers [1992], and other sources.) At an advanced

level, students can work in groups without the teacher, using language that they have generated about their common experience to write the story. Finally, they work on sentence structure, spelling, and grammar points.

One day the students went on a trip to a river, and during the next class different groups of students discussed the trip, drew pictures of their experiences, and finally wrote about them. The groups shared their pictures and stories with other classes by posting them in the dining hall. Because all students had participated in the trip, they were interested to see what aspects of the trip were mentioned in the other groups’ stories. While all described the same experience, each group had written from a slightly different perspective, which led to an awareness of how people interpret the same event in their own way. In addition, the teachers used the topic to focus on the past tense and the use of sequence words to compose a story. Here is an example of a story written by one of the groups:

Yesterday we went to Loma Cabrera. First we sang a song and talked about the rules. We took three buses. We brought our bags and some balls. In the buses we had fun with each other. We saw many trees and many cars and many cows and goats. In the town we saw a park, a church and beautiful houses.

At the river Mathieu took a bath. José Luis swam. Charlo and Ernesto swam too. So did Juan Carlos. Jymmy visited the river. Lucie, Wilma, Diana and Juana played volleyball in the water. Eddy and Mathieu played soccer with their

friends. Many people danced bachata, compas, and meringue. At 4:30 we got on the buses and came back to camp. It was a wonderful day!

### Activity 7: Mapping

The teacher models a map of the classroom on the board with the help of the students. Students form small groups and are sent out to draw a map of a designated part of the school, schoolyard, or neighborhood. They return to class, and all groups combine their maps while working on new vocabulary associated with the places they visited. The large combined map can be displayed in the classroom and used in future lessons to practice giving directions or using prepositions of location. Because each group is responsible for a part of the whole map, the students need to listen to each other and collaborate in order to complete the task. The need to be precise and pay attention to detail necessitates the use of important English structures and vocabulary.

**Variations:** Rather than making one “class map” when the groups return to the classroom, each student can join a student from another group to create their own smaller map. In our camp, student pairs (one Haitian and one Dominican) were assigned specific parts of the camp to draw. This arrangement created a space for them to work together cooperatively on a joint product that was shared with others when it was done. Because this was drawn, rather than written, even those with lower-level English worked successfully with their partners.

### Activity 8: Interviews

Students are assigned to interview someone outside the classroom, asking questions based on the topics of previous lessons (e.g., food, leisure activities, music). In class, the students first work on the questions they want to ask (practicing *Wh-* and other question forms), and for homework they interview people (friends, family members, neighbors, etc.). They bring in the results of their interviews the next day and discuss the results in small groups before sharing them with the whole class. Students begin to perceive common elements among themselves, their peers, and the interviewees. As they report on the results, they naturally compare the information submitted by their own family with that from other families. In addition to helping

them learn more about others in their respective communities, this activity affords valuable practice using correct question forms and quantity words (e.g., *some, most, all, none*).

**Note:** If finding English speakers outside of class is not easy, the exercise still has language-learning value, as students can be assigned to translate the native language rendition into English before they report the results to the whole group.

Because we had several Peace Corps volunteers working as counselors in the camp, the students asked them the interview questions. In doing so, the students learned about U.S. culture and habits. This fostered an awareness that cultural and social differences and similarities exist not only between people from Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but also among a third culture, and by extension, all others.

### Activity 9: Islamabad Procedure

This activity is based on the Islamabad Procedure described by Stevick (1980). It is a communicative activity in which one student at a time describes a place that he or she knows from personal experience and cares about, while the other students observe. The student doing the describing draws (or uses Cuisenaire rods of different colors and lengths) to make a visual representation of the place as he or she describes it. The activity works best when no one else in the class has seen the place.

First the teacher asks for a volunteer to sit at a table or on the floor. The rest of the class gathers around while the teacher explains the procedure, emphasizing the importance of following it closely. The teacher also confirms that no one has seen the place the student is about to describe, then follows these steps:

1. The student describes the location while drawing or using available materials to make a visual representation. The rest of the students watch in silence.
2. After every three or four sentences, the teacher summarizes the information. This summary shows the student that the teacher is listening and wants to hear more. It is also the way the teacher “corrects” errors—by recasting in correct grammar what the describer has said.
3. The observers retell the describer any portions of the description they remember. The teacher’s role is to keep the students on task and to listen for mistakes.



The teacher corrects the mistakes indirectly, by recasting what the observers say in a conversational, nonjudgmental tone. The teacher corrects only language mistakes. During this phase the observers are not allowed to ask questions or to talk about other places.

4. The observers ask questions to get more details about the place described. The procedure is then repeated with another student in the role of describer.

**Variation:** After a lesson on houses, furniture, and the different rooms, students describe the topic using the same four steps.

After hearing about one student's favorite park in Cap-Haitien, Haiti, one of the Dominican students said, "I would really like to see your park—it sounds beautiful!" This activity helped students visualize the environment where the others lived and see it through their eyes.

#### **Level 4: Region/World**

Finally, students extend their cultural awareness to their roles as not only individuals and members of several small communities, but also as participants in a larger region and the world. Seeing their place in this larger context is important to building an identity and a sense of shared responsibility as citizens of the same world.

#### **Activity 10: Stories**

By listening to or reading stories, then retelling and discussing the themes, students make connections between their values and those of others. Any story with a theme interesting to the students is appropriate. Stories that work well are simplified versions of *Aesop's Fables*, or other folk tales or fairy tales, as well as stories taken from ESL/EFL textbooks. Below is one procedure that uses the pre-, during, post- (PDP) framework for a reading lesson (see Baker and Westrup [2000] for more information on the PDP framework for teaching the receptive listening and reading skills):

1. After students form pairs, the teacher introduces the topic of the text and elicits familiar vocabulary from the students. If the story is illustrated, the teacher shows the pictures to the students and has the pairs or whole class discuss them. Key vocabulary (the words students need to know in order to understand the story)

is introduced and defined, and students use the new words to guess what the story will be about.

2. Students listen to or read the text and check with their partner to see if their guesses were correct.
3. The teacher hands out some true/false or multiple-choice questions about the text. Students listen to or read the story again to find the answers to the questions. They share their answers with a partner and finally with the whole class.
4. The teacher asks more detailed questions about the text or gives students a graphic organizer to complete. After listening to or reading the story a third time, student pairs discuss their answers. Students clarify anything that they are unsure about and retell the story to their partners.
5. Once the teacher is sure that the story has been understood, students state their opinions about what happened in the text, provide a different ending, or tell or write about their own experience on a similar theme, using the text as a model.

The story we used was "A Love Story" (Heyer 1994), which led to discussions about parents who do not approve of their children's choice of partners. Two texts we used for discussing the underlying cultural basis for different values and points of view were Heyer (1994)—and several other books by the same author—and Ligon, Tannenbaum, and Rodgers (1992). For example, in "The Wallet," a story by Ligon, Tannenbaum, and Rodgers (1992), a dilemma is posed by the question, "What would you do if you found a wallet with money in it?" Another book we have found useful for stories is Cassriel and Reynolds (2006).

The story activity led to lively discussions on topics of interest to the students. In talking about their reactions to the stories and possible solutions to the dilemmas posed, students realized that both Haitians and Dominicans share many basic values, such as the importance of family, obedience, and honesty.

#### **Activity 11: Songs and chants**

One aspect of culture that all students share is a love of music. While not all songs are appropriate for use in the classroom, a lesson based on a song is almost always popular

with students. A song lesson also provides an opportunity to reinforce previously learned vocabulary and grammar structures, or to introduce some new aspect of language. During a song lesson using the aforementioned PDP framework, students will:

1. predict the song from pictures;
2. learn key vocabulary and listen for those specific words;
3. put together the lyrics while listening;
4. work on pronunciation, stress, and intonation by singing the song together; and
5. discuss the song's theme or write a new verse using the rhyme and rhythm of the song.

Songs from *Jazz Chants* by Graham (1978) are effective in improving students' intonation and stress patterns. They also provide a chance to have fun and encourage participation. "Hi, How Are You?" and "How's Jack?" are good for beginners and can lead to the creation or adaptation of additional jazz chants by the students and teachers.

Students also enjoy traditional camp and ESL/EFL songs with easy lyrics, such as "If You're Happy and You Know It"; "Hokey Pokey"; "The More We Get Together"; and "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes." Other songs that have been used with great success are "Stand by Me," "Here Comes the Sun," "We Are Family," and "What a Wonderful World." Lyrics and most of the music for these songs are readily available on the Internet.

During the camp, we found that a sure way to get all students to participate actively was to use music from the students' region of the world. Since we were in the Caribbean, we played Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds." The realization that both the Haitians and the Dominicans loved reggae music and the rhythms of the Caribbean sparked their interest in sharing their favorite music outside the classroom and built bonds of common interest.

Jazz chants were also a highlight for the students and led to the expression of their feelings about the camp. For example, one adaptation of a chant went like this:

We went to Haiti one fine day and what did we find? What did we find?

Warm loving people with hearts so kind!

We went to the DR one fine day and what did we find? What did we find?

Warm loving people with hearts so kind!

## Activity 12: Movies

It is often a challenge to find movies that are appropriate for the age group and that are easy to understand. One such movie is *Up* (Docter 2009), which we showed one evening in camp. The following day in class, students retold the story and then focused on descriptive adjectives using the personalities and physical traits of the characters. We found this movie especially successful for teaching abstract vocabulary because students had been introduced to the characters through visuals in the movie. Students could then connect traits of the characters to their own personalities and use these words in their "My Hand" activity (described above) in a later class.

## Conclusion

On the last day of the camp, parents were invited to attend a graduation ceremony where students sang and spoke about their experiences. For many of the parents, it was the first time that they had found a reason to mingle socially with people from the other side of the border. The camp gave all of us—trainers, counselors, teachers, parents, and participants—the opportunity to learn a valuable lesson: how bridging the misconceptions about one another through positive interactions is one way to achieve peaceful and respectful co-existence.

Did the students return home after two weeks at the camp with greatly improved English skills? Although there was no direct assessment of their achievement, the sight of students chattering enthusiastically in English with their new friends was a strong indicator that their confidence in speaking English had grown by leaps and bounds.

We feel that these activities are a fundamental addition to any classroom where students will profit from nurturing interpersonal tolerance among groups who have a history of conflict—that is, in every classroom around the world.

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