Teaching Ideas: A Life Map

Making the Most out of Students’ Lives: A Life Map Icebreaker for EFL Composition Classes

James Brawn
The Catholic University of Korea

Introduction
I believe that the first week of the semester is very important. The mood or tone that you create that first week will often carry over till the end of the semester. Thus, the icebreaking activity you use is like a pebble thrown into a pond. The seemingly insignificant activity creates ripples, and these ripples get magnified as the semester progresses.

EFL composition courses, unlike EFL conversation courses, are lacking in good icebreaking activities. Conversation courses have seemingly thousands of possible icebreaking and opening activities that are not only fun, but are also effective communicative activities that are well matched to course objectives. This, however, is not true for EFL composition courses.

Due to this scarcity, I have often had to use icebreaking activities developed for conversation courses in my composition course. Although these opening activities are fun they do not set the right mood or tone because they do not match the course objectives well.

Life Map
In this article I would like to introduce an icebreaking activity that has not only been fun, but has also established the right tone and mood by easing the students into the objectives required in a task-based composition course. There are several reasons that the Life Map (Sebranek, Mayer & Kemper 1995) as I use it matches my overarching course objectives well.

First I want to use activities and tasks that build upon what my students already know, but at the same time present them with a situation that challenges them to re-evaluate that knowledge (Wells 1986). Second I believe that language learning involves meaning making, i.e., “language is primarily used to serve functional purposes, and...patterns of language development depend on the needs of the [students] to make meaningful expressions”(Grabe & Kaplan 1996, p. 103). Third, as a teacher I want to be nondirective and non-prescriptive so that my students feel free to find their own voices. As Johns (1990) noted: “Teachers advocating the expressivist view are nondirective; they facilitate classroom activities designed to promote writing fluency and power over the writing act” (p. 25). Finally, I want students engaged in specific tasks, so that they can collect these tasks in their writing portfolios. Portfolios provide students the ability to "represent themselves in the best possible light" (Grabe & Kaplan 1996, p. 420), and make their writing development something tangible.

Another reason for my use of the Life Map is that it matches an environmental mode of composition instruction (Hillock 1986). According to Dyer (1996): “In the environmental mode the instructor plans activities that result in high levels of student interaction concerning specific, structured, problem-solving activities, and tasks with clear objectives; multiple drafts and peer revision are a part of the classroom activity, but explicit criteria for evaluation are considered” (p.314). Although Sebranek, Mayer & Kemper originally conceived of it as a prewriting activity, I have adapted the Life Map activity to follow the environmental mode of instruction.

A Life Map is a visual representation of an individual’s life, such that there is only one road. The road starts with a person’s birth and ends at the present. Along the road, an individual will illustrate and label certain significant events (see figure 1 for an example).

Figure 1.

The first task is for my students to complete their Life Map. After my students have completed their Life Maps, I then have them get into groups of three. In their groups they have three tasks that they need to complete. The first task is to exchange Life Maps and ask their partners questions about the events that they have chosen to label and illustrate.

The second task builds upon the first. After they have spent ten to fifteen minutes asking and answering questions, I distribute a form that they need to fill out. The form creates a written record of the events on the student’s Life Map about which their partners asked questions, as well as records of what kinds of questions
they were asked.

The third and final task is to choose, with the help of their partners, one event on their own Life Map to write about. I encourage them to write about something that their partners are interested in because they will share their paragraphs with each other in the future. I also remind them to consider the questions their partners asked about the chosen event when they write.

Besides getting the students interacting with each other, the exercise also gets the students thinking about the idea of audience in a very real way. Most textbooks teach the concept of audience in very abstract and technical terms. I find that this does not usually have any immediate or lasting effect upon my students’ writing; however, the question and answer session about each student’s Life Map does. After the question and answer session, filling out the form, and choosing an event to write about, the students believe they know exactly who their audience is. They leave class thinking: “I’m writing my Life Map paragraph for Mi-Young and Ji-Eun.”

In the follow-up exercise, however, I will put them into different groups. The objective behind this group reorganization is to keep the students thinking about the concept of audience. In their new groups they will once again exchange Life Maps, ask and answer questions about their Life Maps, fill out the form that records which events were questioned and what kinds of questions were asked, and then they will share the paragraph that they wrote about one of their Life Map events with their new group members.

Although different groups often pick different events to ask questions about, the type of questions they ask are often quite similar. Furthermore, after the individuals in the new group read each other’s paragraphs they often ask more questions, and these questions are often quite similar to the questions the first group asked about the same event.

This follow-up activity takes place about a week later, and at this point the students have had time to practice brainstorming, organizing lists, and making outlines. The next step is to revise their first paragraph, and apply the prewriting and organizing skills they have learned. This seemingly “out of sequence” activity emphasizes the recursive nature of writing; prewriting and planning can occur at any time during the writing process (Swenson 1997). The students remain in their groups and I encourage them to help each other by asking questions, providing vocabulary, etc. This series of activities and tasks teaches my students in a very real way about the nature of their audience, they learn that certain kinds of information are more important to their readers than other kinds of information, and finally they learn through practice that the writing process is recursive.

**Conclusion**

Learning to write in English is not a mystery that the EFL teacher needs to solve alone; there are typically several knowledgeable student-detectives ready to help solve the mystery. The EFL teacher’s role is to facilitate the gathering of clues, to help the detectives with interviewing the suspects, to assist them in organizing the evidence and to celebrate their victories in solving the mystery.

There is no formula or model that you can prescribe, because each class has its own mystery to solve, clues to gather, suspects to interview, evidence to organize and victories to celebrate. One can, however, provide the activities, tasks, and the right environment for students to learn, practice and succeed. The Life Map and the subsequent activities that I have used successfully in my classes is a good place to begin.

**References**


