

Creating Holistic Learning Activities in the Citizenship Classroom: A Step-by-Step Guide

Introduction

Think back to when you were in school to the most memorable learning experiences you had. Chances are that they did not involve sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture while watching a PowerPoint presentation. For learning to go into long-term memory, it has to be memorable.

Teachers of English as a second language (ESL) are usually quite skilled at making a lesson “come alive” due to their natural tendencies to know how to convey a word definition

or concept through the use of non-verbal actions and props. Making these definitions and concepts “stick” involves creating classroom activities that align with how the brain learns best, naturally. Before we discuss the types of activities, however,

we need to discuss the USCIS Citizenship Content Standards located on the Citizenship Resource Center (CRC) at www.uscis.gov/citizenship.



Education Standards

The *Guide to the Adult Citizenship Education Content Standards and Foundation Skills: A Framework for Developing a Comprehensive Curriculum*, assists adult education program administrators and teachers in developing a citizenship curriculum and thematic lessons, choosing textbooks and supplemental materials, and creating effective learning activities. This guide is organized around three naturalization content areas with correlated progress standards. The guide emphasizes the importance of foundation skills necessary for students to learn citizenship-specific content. Using the foundation skills and content standards outlined in this guide, teachers can link the skills and knowledge their students need for the naturalization interview and test with classroom instruction.

It is important for teachers to become familiar with the content and progress standards before creating their lesson plans and classroom activities. The goal of a lesson plan should be to teach one or more of the progress standards, and the goal of a classroom activity should be to help students understand a

concept, learn it, remember it, and know how it fits into the larger theme.

Step 1: Selection

Decide which words and concepts within your lesson could benefit most from classroom activities to reinforce your instruction. Not everything requires an activity, nor would there be sufficient class time to do so. So knowing what words and concepts to reinforce is critical. A few criteria to employ to make the decision is (1) Will my students have to know the word(s) or concept for the interview and at what level? (2) Is this a word(s) or concept that is likely above the English level of the majority of my students? (3) Is the word(s) or concept crucial for the understanding of a broader content area. If the answer is “yes” to one or more, you should consider developing one or more classroom activities.

One example of words that appear together often in the N-400 Application for Naturalization is “have you ever.” Because this verb phrase appears so often and its meaning is so important, you might want to

develop one or more activities to reinforce your relevant interview lesson.

Step 2: Deconstruction

Once you have decided on the word(s) or concepts that will require activities, you will need to deconstruct them by answering the following questions:

For a word or phrase, you will ask:

- What definitions are needed?
- Are there grammatical elements that need to be taught?

For a concept, you will ask:

- What vocabulary words will need to be defined?
- Are there concepts within the concept that will need to be explained?
- Are there grammatical elements that will need to be taught?

Using our example, we know that “have you ever” is a combination of the present perfect and the adverb “ever” as in the sentence, “Have you ever been to Canada?” We know we use the present perfect tense to talk about unfinished actions that began in the past, but continue into the present. For the ESL class, the teacher would emphasize how to form the present perfect tense, how to use it, its meanings and nuances, etc. For the citizenship class, the main goal is for the students to understand that when the USCIS officer asks your student one of the many “have you ever” questions from the N-400, he or she means, “from the time you were born until now.”

Step 3: Development

Once you know the focus of your lesson and all the vocabulary, sub-concepts, and grammatical elements you will need to include in the reinforcement activities, it is time to develop them.

The brain learns best when activities include certain elements, such as getting students up and moving, using patterns and categories, incorporating the five senses, having students work in groups, allowing students to see the meaning in what they are learning, adding color, building on prior knowledge, using music, etc.

When constructing your activities, keep time in mind. First, the activity should not take too much time from

your schedule unless it warrants the time commitment. Second, the brain gets tired and stops learning as efficiently if activities go much beyond 15-20 minutes.

To develop an effective activity for our example, combine movement, building on prior knowledge, patterning, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic into one activity. Using cardstock, the teacher creates a timeline on the white board. When the teacher asks students questions using vocabulary words they have already been taught, each student comes up and draws a line with a colored dry-erase marker starting on the date the activity began, to the date it ended. If the activity is still going on, the student would draw the line to “now” and make it an arrow pointing toward the future. For example, the teacher might ask, “Have you ever studied English?” “Have you ever had a dog?” “Have you ever worked?” If the answer is “no” to any of the questions, the student has to stand and say, “I have never...”

Step 4: Trials

Once you have your activity developed, run through it yourself to make sure your instructions are clear, your handouts are accurate and there are enough, and supplies are on hand. Then try out the activity with your students. Keep mental notes about what is working well and what you would like to work differently.

Using our example again, make sure you have your date cards made, questions prepared, and color dry-erase markers available for students.

Step 5: Revision

After class, jot down what you would like to change about the activity if anything. Make the revisions and try again. Sometimes it takes several tries before the activity works exactly the way you want it to. Even then, due to the varying dynamics of each class, activities may not always have the same results. However, once you have the activity where you want it, you can add it to your activities library connected to the relevant lesson plan(s).

So you tried out your activity and found that some questions worked well and others did not. Because your timeline cards contained only years—1971, 1972, 1973, etc., students were confused when they did an activity containing only one time word within a year. For example, “Did you ever visit the Statue of Liberty?” When

you revise the activity, you may decide that for this activity, students should only be asked questions that would be longer in duration—usually multi-years, or

could be answered with “no.” You can then develop other activities that accommodate shorter periods of time.

To find additional citizenship education materials and instructional resources, visit the **Citizenship Resource Center** at www.uscis.gov/citizenship.



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