

Personalizing the impersonal

Thanks for attending my presentation on personalization in the classroom. Here's a summary of the key points mentioned with reference to the activities used and further reading.

Personalization in ELT

We often take it for granted that personalization is a 'good thing' in ELT but the idea of making language learning *personalized* is relatively recent. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, approaches and methods of teaching and learning such as *grammar-translation* were very impersonal; the content of the lesson didn't attempt to relate to the student. With the humanistic approaches of the sixties and then the emergence of communicative language teaching and student-centred learning, personalization in the classroom seems to have become the norm rather than the exception.

What is personalization?

"When you personalize language, you use it to talk about knowledge, experience and feelings." (Thornbury, 2017). As well as being about the 'content' of a lesson (e.g. talking about your own experiences), personalization is also about taking a personalized approach to learning; in other words, the activities we use in class should include personal choices. For example, Chris Sion's activity (Sion, 2001) called 'Myself from A-Z' asks students to choose letters from the alphabet and create sentences about themselves; e.g. 'A is for Alfie. It's my middle name.'" Students generate content about themselves but also make personal choices as to what letters they choose and what information they choose to reveal.

When do we personalize?

If you observe many teachers' lessons or look at the pages of course books, you'll often find that personalization appears in a lead-in activity. For example, students might look at a picture of someone doing a sport and the teachers asks them to describe what the person is doing. Next, the teachers ask the students to say what they like doing in their own free time. However, personalization should occur throughout a lesson. A beginning-middle-end approach is a useful way to approach it. Start a lesson by personalizing the topic or theme of a lesson. Next, if you teach new vocabulary or grammar in the middle of a lesson, ask students to create sentences about themselves using the new language. At the end of a lesson, finish with a creative speaking or writing task which draws on the students' ideas and feelings.

Why do we personalize?

Among the various reasons given, it's normally said that personalization helps to build rapport and collaboration between the students and with the teacher, it makes the language relevant and helps students to memorize new language. It encourages students to use English authentically and to be more creative. With regards to differentiation, personalization activities lend themselves to working at different levels and abilities.

Shallow and deep personalization

In an article by Dave Dodgson, he describes the classic *Have you ever....?* activity where you introduce the form and then students answer questions like *Have you ever been to Moscow?* While there is nothing wrong with the activity, it is what we might refer to as *shallow personalization*. We are personalizing the language point but, in fact, the content of the student's answer is of less importance to us than whether he or she can answer correctly with *Yes, I have* or *No, I haven't*. Instead, if a student answered, *Yes, I have been to Moscow*. we could follow up with further questioning such as *When did you go? Who did you go with? What did you see? etc.* In other words, we can go *deeper* and make the task more about what actually happened in Moscow rather than whether we use specific target language.

Why do we avoid personalization?

With *deeper personalization* there is the danger we can go too deep and students might feel uncomfortable about talking about aspects of their lives. Of course, this is about knowing your students well and knowing what they are prepared to talk about. For example, when teaching refugees from war-torn countries, you'd probably avoid the topic of talking about families. With teenagers, you might know that some of your students are interested in video gaming but that they might not want to talk about their favourite games in front of 25 other classmates.

Predicting personal and impersonal topics

When we think about topics to personalize with our students, both course books and teachers are sometimes guilty of making assumptions about what students are interested in personalizing. In some research by Siegel (2014), the author compared the appearance of topics about the 'self' in different coursebooks and then analysed the appearance of those same topics in everyday conversation. The difference was 4:1 suggesting that the emphasis on topics about the self' in the coursebook was exaggerated.

How do we personalize the 'impersonal'?

So, personalization is not only about 'safe' topics that we think students are always familiar with or already have knowledge and experience of. We should also look for new subjects; perhaps a reading or listening text on a topic that students wouldn't normally read or listen to. Because personalization is also about taking a text and using it as a springboard for students to create their own text and to make their own choices. Here are some final ideas for such an approach:

- Look at photos on a topic and have students discuss them. Then ask students to take their own photo on a similar for homework and bring it to present at the next class.
- Use a text about the way another culture does something (e.g. a ceremony or ritual) and then ask students to think about how they do the same thing in their culture.
- Use show and tell presentations where students give a short presentation about something important in their own life; e.g. a family photo, a special object, a journey or holiday
- Give students a choice between three activities or give them a choice of tasks for homework.

References and further reading

Activities

'Myself from A-Z' comes from Chris Sion (2001) *Creating Conversation in the class* Delta

There are more practical ideas at <https://www.myetpedia.com/how-to-personalize-lessons>

Books and articles

Aki Siegel; What should we talk about? The authenticity of textbook topics, *ELT Journal*, Volume 68, Issue 4, 1 October 2014, Pages 363–375, <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccu012>

Scott Thornbury's definition is from Thornbury, S. (2017) *The New A-Z of ELT* Macmillan

Blog posts

Dave Dodgson's post is at <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/davedodgson/david-dodgson-defining-personalisation>

For more on personalization by Thornbury, read his blog post about the topic and the discussion that follows at <https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2012/02/12/p-is-for-personalization/>

You can also read my series of blog posts on the topic at

<http://ngl.cengage.com/infocus/index.php/2017/11/21/personalization/>

Philip Kerr's blog <https://adaptivelearninginelt.wordpress.com/about/> includes a number of posts on the use (and misuse) of personalization and technology.