

Self introductions

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The beginning of a new school year brings lots of energy and enthusiasm to teachers, students and parents and it is a great time to practice self introductions. This article presents two ways to do self introductions and also shows how the groundwork of an oral self introduction can be scaffolded into other oral and written activities.

Language is complex and sentences have purpose

Language is a complex phenomenon and process. It is indeed multidimensional – there is the language that we understand but can not use actively, such as when we listen or read. There is the language that goes on in our minds that sometimes comes out like we planned, but sometimes does not, such as in writing or speaking. There is the emotional delivery of a message which shows kindness, consideration or anger along with words. Sometimes we have the right words but do not deliver the message in the way that we wanted, like when we make a *faux pas* or wish that we had not said something. Of course, because messages always involve more than one person, we learn that we may have delivered the message how we intended but discover that the recipient did not interpret our message the same way.

To help us understand a bit of the complexity of language and communication we must see that language is composed not only of sounds, grammar and vocabulary but also of functions, purposes and intentions. When we can understand the underlying purpose of a message and its parts we can better respond and communicate.

To enable second language learners to move beyond vocabulary and grammar to the functional dimension of messages it is helpful for them to learn the *parts of a text*. Traditionally teachers help students analyze a sentence according to its parts: subject, verb, object, conjunction, etc. OR article, adjective, noun, verb, question marker, etc. Every sentence in a paragraph could be analyzed this way. However, if we take the same series of sentences (instead of words in each sentence) and analyze them for their purpose we see something different. Take the following message as an example. Imagine that Olivia is giving a self introduction at a volleyball camp:

Hi! My name is Olivia. I am 12 years old. I live in Edmonton with my parents and brothers. I am in grade 6. I like social studies and math. After school I take dancing lessons, swimming and violin. I like cats and monkeys. My favorite colour is pink and my favorite food is tortillas. I want to learn how to play volleyball better.

Each of the sentences in Olivia's self introduction is composed of words. Each sentence has a grammatical structure. But, her message is more than just subjects, verbs and objects. Each sentence has a purpose or topic. The topics are:

Hi,- GREETING

My name is Olivia. - NAME

I am 12 years old. - AGE

I live in Edmonton – WHERE YOU LIVE

with my parents and brothers. – FAMILY

I am in grade 6. – GRADE

I like social studies and math. – SUBJECTS

After school I take dancing lessons, swimming and violin. – HOBBIES

I like cats and monkeys. – ANIMALS

My favorite colour is pink- COLOUR

and my favorite food is tortillas. - FOOD

I want to learn how to play volleyball better.- DESIRE/WANT/PURPOSE FOR BEING AT CAMP

Thank you.- CLOSING

Now, if you let your students listen to Olivia's volleyball camp self introduction again along with several other examples AND the list of purposes for each sentence you will find that your students will more clearly understand what they can do or say in a self introduction and what is expected of them. Since it is important to set realistic expectations, only use as many topics as students can comfortably present. This might include only GREETING, NAME, AGE, WHERE YOU LIVE, ANIMAL, COLOUR, FAMILY and FAREWELL, as in the following examples. The purposes can then be listed through key words as in Figure A or in picture cues as in Figure B or both as in Figure C. By placing large sized versions on the blackboard or wall, the picture cues or key words offer some students the support they need in order to be successful at the task of giving a self introduction.

Figure A



Figure B



Figure C



A purpose or topic can be expressed through many different words or phrases.

Once students are clear about the purpose or topic of each sentence in a self introduction they can choose which words to say. Just as a noun represents many many words so can a function, notion or topic be expressed through a variety of different words, sentences or expressions. This means that the students are not memorizing a text or dialogue by following the key topics, but using the topic as cues to CHOOSE their own words to deliver the message. For example, Figure D shows a variety of possible ways to express an idea according to each of the above topics.

Figure D

GREETING	NAME	AGE	WHERE YOU LIVE	FOOD
Hello Hi Good day Good morning Good afternoon Good evening	My name is I am	I am ___ years old	I live in I am from I come from	I like I enjoy I am fond of I love I find ___ enjoyable My favorite is
ANIMALS	SCHOOL SUBJECTS	HOBBIES	COLOURS	Farewell

I like I enjoy I am fond of I love I find ___ enjoyable My favorite __is	I like I enjoy I am fond of I love I find ___ enjoyable My favorite __is	I like I enjoy I am fond of I love I find ___ enjoyable My favorite is	I like I enjoy I am fond of I love I find ___ enjoyable My favorite __is	Nice to meet you! Thank you! I hope to talk with you more soon.
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Using the self introduction picture cues throughout the year

Self introductions can also be scaffolded or expanded into other activities throughout the school year so that learners recycle familiar vocabulary and integrate new vocabulary. As Figure E shows, a self introduction can get longer and longer by adding new things that students can talk about: greeting, name, age, where you are from, food, animal, music, hobbies/sports, family, closing. Picture cues ‘remind’ students what to talk about and enable them to find the words they want to say at their own pace.

Note that students should NOT write down a sentence for each topic and then read the sentence aloud for this is reading aloud and not speaking. Speaking is characterized by the shortest possible time between what a second language learner is thinking and what s/he is saying. By looking at the topic word or picture cue students SAY what is in their mind about the topic. Strong students may give complex and detailed answers while more beginner learners give short and simple sentences for each cue. Thus this approach serves multi-level classes well. Using picture cues regularly over time can also help students speak with more confidence and speed.

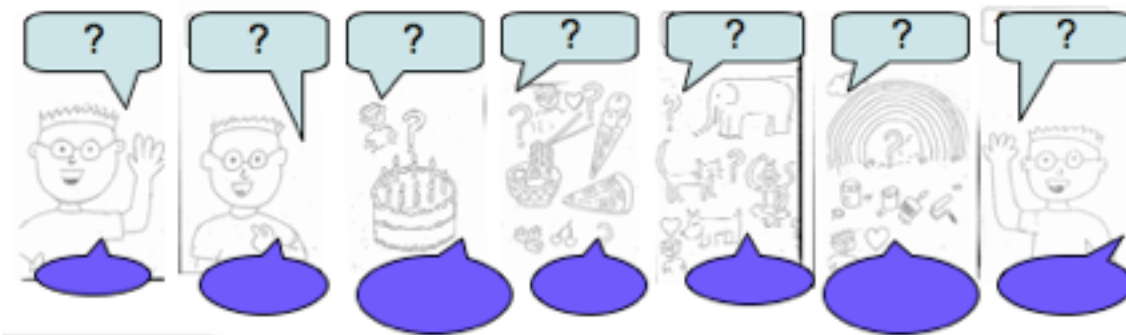
Figure E



From a self introduction to an Interview

A self introduction gives students a chance to reveal how much they can say about themselves at one time. Most of the self introduction is in the “I” form. By using each picture or topic cue to make a question, the series the series of picture cues can easily be converted into an interview. Student A asks the question prompted by the picture topic and Student B answers the question. Then Student B reciprocates with Student A. See Figure F.

Figure F: Using picture cues for an Interview



The interview might sound like this:

Student A	Student B
Hello!	Hello!
What's your name?	My name is _____
How old are you?	I'm _ years old.
What food do you like?	I like _____.
What animals do you like?	I like _____s.
What colours do you like?	I like _____.
Thank you. Good bye.	Bye.

Using the Interview for a peer introduction

From the information collected during the interview Student A can now introduce Student B to another student (and vice versa). As students work in two pairs they practice a peer introduction and begin using the “she” or “he” form. For example,

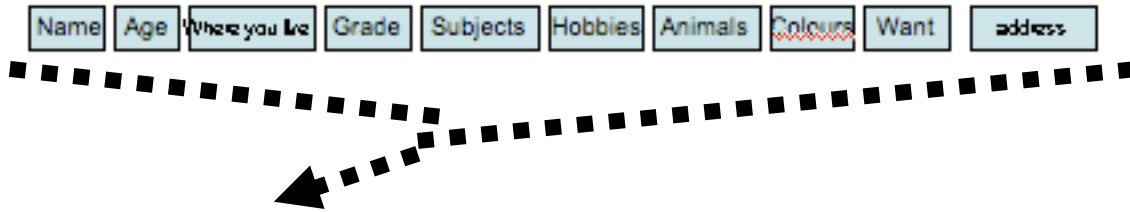
Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D
Hello!	<i>Stands quietly.</i>	<i>Stands quietly.</i>	<i>Stands quietly.</i>
This is _____			
S/he is _ years old.			
S/he likes _____.			
S/he likes _____s.			
S/he likes _____.			
Please say hello		Nice to meet you.	Nice to meet you.

Pat: Hi Jolene. This is Kim. She is 12 years old. She likes pizza and pumpkin pie. She has a dog and horse. Her favorite colour is green.

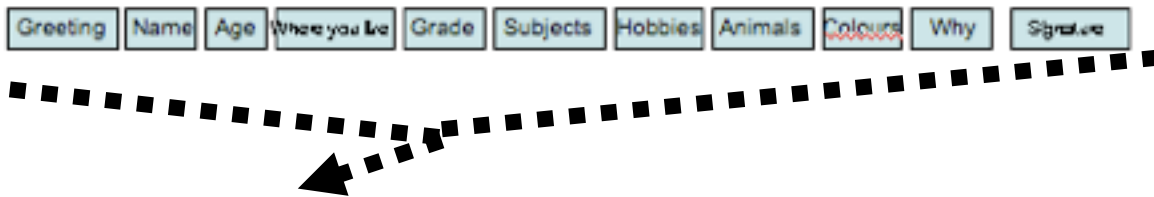
Jolene: Nice to meet you, Kim.

After students have given oral self introductions the topic words and/or picture cues can also be used for writing. Students could follow the same ones to write a 'penpal wanted' advertisement or a first letter or email to a penpal. See Examples below.

Penpal wanted



My name is Olivia. I am 12 years old. I live in Edmonton. I am in grade 6. I like social studies and math. After school I take dancing lessons, swimming and violin. I also like volleyball. I like cats and monkeys. My favorite colour is pink. I want a penpal to be my friend. Please write: olivia12@hotmail.com

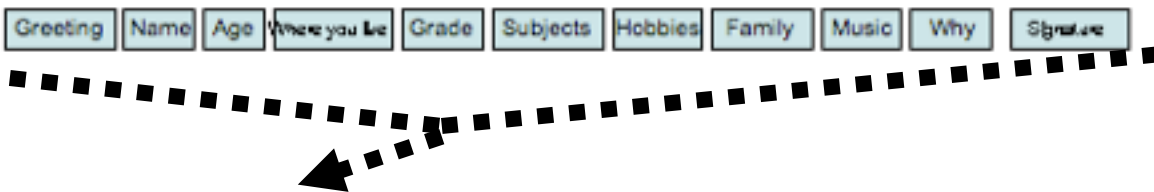


Dear Kenji,

My name is Olivia. I am 12 years old. I live in Edmonton. I am in grade 6. I like social studies and math. After school I take dancing lessons, swimming and violin. I also like volleyball. I like cats and monkeys. My favorite colour is pink. I want to learn about you.

Please write soon.

Olivia



Dear Kenji,

My name is Olivia. I am 12 years old. I live in Edmonton. I am in grade 6. I like social studies and math. After school I take dancing lessons, swimming and violin. I also like volleyball. I live with my parents and two brothers. One is older and one is younger. I like Alanis Morissette. I want to learn about you.

Please write soon.

Olivia

Advanced Self Introduction

If your students are more advanced you can give them an activity that will enable you to assess their use of present, past and future tenses and learn about some of their past experiences and future aspirations. Give each student a large sheet of paper and ask them to write the following in their SL:

NAME	
Five years ago	One year ago
One year from now	Five years from now



Then ask them to draw a simple picture about each sentence. Give them about 10-15 minutes to draw their pictures. Note that they should not write any words in the boxes because students are not really speaking when they are reading aloud what they wrote. *(Speaking requires a very short time between what they are thinking and what they are*

saying.) After all of the drawings are completed each student presents him- or herself according to the information and pictures. I recommend that you save the set of pictures drawn by students and do the activity again each year. When the students are ready to graduate you can show them the pictures of the previous years as a keepsake or reminder of their years at the SL school.

Large picture cues can be used to elicit vocabulary while small ones can be used for practice.

Self introductions are a natural oral form that can help you assess your students' confidence, vocabulary, grammar, attitude and also help you get to know them. With parents' permission you might also video record each self introduction at the beginning of the school year and then again towards the middle or end of the year. Let students see themselves back to back (which takes a bit of editing know-how!) so that they can HEAR the progress that they have made over the year! By building student awareness of their progress they also increase their feeling of success which is higSLy motivational.

Have a GREAT school year!