Recalling the Roll:
Techniques for Learning Students' Names

The semester opens. With attendance roster in hand, the teacher looks across the sea of nameless faces, wondering how she will ever learn to put the right name to each student's face. Learning the names of any class can be a daunting task, and the problem intensifies when a teacher from one country attempts to master unfamiliar sounding names in another. The task of name learning recently inspired a discussion among KOTESOL's Teacher Education and Development Special Interest Group (TED-SIG) members, who shared the following ideas and strategies.

Name learning contributes toward a positive classroom environment. "It makes students feel accountable and strengthens your control of the classroom," commented Heidi Vande Voort Nam. Joe Walther added, "If you first learn the names of the few students who are likely to cause problems, and call on them a lot, they are less likely to be a problem. In addition to this, it simply makes things more personal. Calling on the students by name builds a better rapport with them, and they are more likely to take chances in class." Greg Matheson raises the point that "the more able the student, the more likely they are to think the teacher knows their name."

So how do you go about learning names? One method is using photographs of students. Walther wrote, "I take a few group photos of each class and label them. I then use these when I call on them in class." If you take or collect pictures of individual students, Nam suggested that you can "use the pictures as flashcards to drill yourself on the names." David D.I. Kim contributed this technique: "I insert their photos into an MS Word document. In order to keep track of the photos and who they are, I created a sign-up sheet where students put down their name(s)." Kim advises laminating the sheet of student pictures and names so that the teacher can refer to it while "calling roll, or walking around during a conversation class, or assigning class participation grades." He went on to observe that "you can also write up comments on the lamination or mark it up with symbols for when they are deserving of extra credit, etc."

As an alternative to photographs, Pat Copeman offered this idea: "I had the students write their names on place cards. They have the place cards on their desk so I can refer to that rather than the seating arrangement, which is much faster for me. When I hand [place cards] out, I try to match the student with the name. It is making it easier for me to learn the names, and the students get a big kick out of watching me try to match names to faces." For more practice matching names to faces, Nam recommends that you "use names frequently" and "make eye contact whenever you call the roll or hand back assignments."

Teachniques

By Heidi Vande Voort Nam

Of course, some classes are so large and meet so infrequently that the task of learning all of the names can be overwhelming. Nam encouraged teachers not to give up. She advised, "If the class is too large, and your memory is too small for all of the students, keep trying to learn a few names each week throughout the semester." In order to do this, she suggests that you "choose a few different names to practice each class period."

The value of learning names extends beyond classroom management: It can deepen the teacher's understanding of the language learning process. Matheson noted that learning names is "the closest and easiest way we have of modeling what [students] are doing [when] learning vocabulary."

The discussion of names on the TED-SIG board continues. Members have weighed in on the merits of using English nicknames, alternative Romanizations of Korean names, and honorifics. To read the discussion or join in yourself, visit the TED-SIG discussion board at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/KoTESOL_TED_SIG/.

Contributors:
Pat Copeman: Okgye Middle School, Okgye and Geumjin Elementary Schools
David D. I. Kim: Kangnam University
Greg Matheson: Chinmin Institute of Technology, Taiwan
Heidi Vande Voort Nam: Chongshin University