

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, like when we make a *faux pas* or wish that we had not said something. 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. Of course, we may have delivered it how we intended and discover that the recipient did not interpret our message the way that we intended.

To help us understand a bit of the complexity of language we must see that language is composed not only of sounds, grammar and vocabulary but also of functions, purposes and intentions. When we can see or 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. 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 . The pictures 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

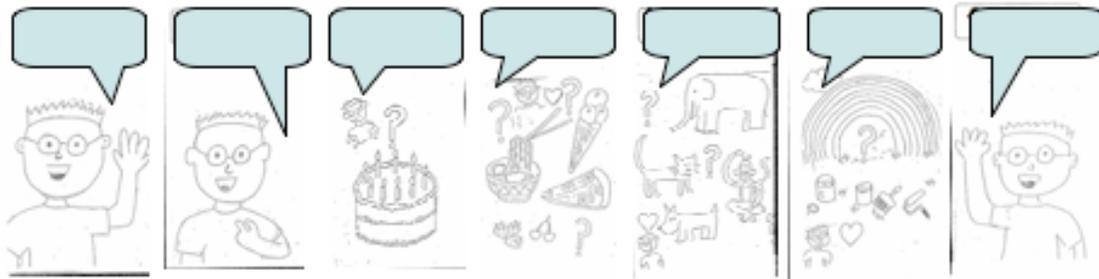
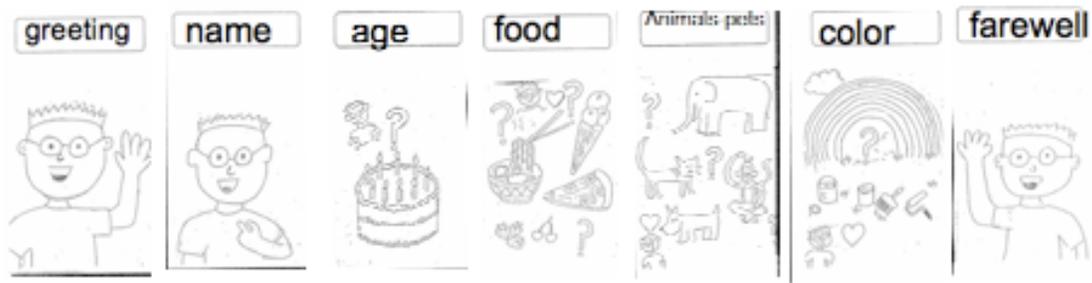


Figure C



Each purpose can be expressed through many different words or phrases.

Once students are clear about the purpose or topic of each sentence they can choose which words to say. Just as a noun represents many many words so a function, notion or topic be expressed through many 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

<i>GREETING</i>	<i>NAME</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>WHERE YOU LIVE</i>	<i>FOOD</i>
Hello Hi Good day Good morning Good afternoon Good evening	My name is I am		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
<i>ANIMALS</i>	<i>SCHOOL SUBJECTS</i>	<i>HOBBIES</i>	<i>COLOURS</i>	<i>Farewell</i>
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.

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 this vocabulary is recycled and new vocabulary integrated. 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 also help students speak with more confidence and speed.

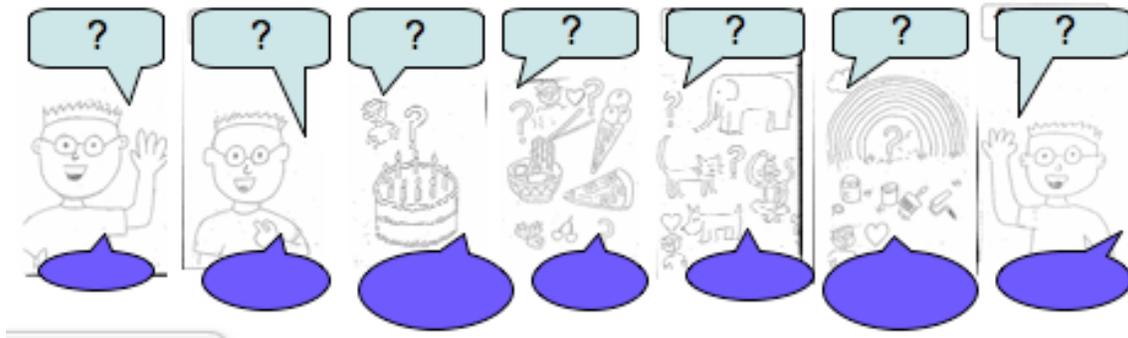
Figure E



The teacher can make large picture cards and put them on the board or wall to give students cues as to what to say:

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 can easily be converted into an interview. Student A asks the question prompted by the picture topic and Student B answers the question. The Student B reciprocates with Student A. See Figure F.

Figure F: Using picture cues for an Interview



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.

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.

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 HL:

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 HL 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 highly motivational.

Have a GREAT school year!