Using Routines to Maximize Language Acquisition

By Lynn Johnston

Effective routines maximize language acquisition. They create opportunities for comprehensible input and output and enable students to maintain the target language in the classroom. We all have daily routines. The order in which you get ready in the morning is a routine. How you get to and from school is a routine. The way a class starts and ends is a routine. Everyone has a class routine but is it as effective as it can be? Re-examine your routines. Here are some suggestions to keep your classroom comprehensible, repetitive, and interesting from bell to bell.

**The Greeting** happens every day, every class period in my room. The first day of school in September I greet my classes enthusiastically with the following exchange. It goes like this:

Prof: Bonjour Class

Students: Bonjour Madame

Prof : Comment allez-vous aujourd’hui?

Students: Tres bien, merci et vous?

This is followed by the day, date, weather, time, and temperature in Fahrenheit and Celsius. I model this for the first month. The students start in October and take turns as “the greeter” for the rest of the year. After the scripted greeting the class asks the greeter at least five questions and we get to know each other and practice asking and answering questions and expressing interest. It also personalizes the class and allows students to talk about their favorite topic…themselves.

On the first class day of each month we make **The Class Calendar** together. This is good for practicing the alphabet, spelling the days and the months, it also reinforces numbers. The students get lots of comprehensible input as we add the birthdays, holidays, tests, school activities, days off, and schedule the daily greeters for the month. The students turn to the calendar in their binder each day and record the weather and temperatures. I can give calendar quizzes and ask questions like what day of the week is November 21st? How many days in March were sunny or above 50 degrees? How many people have a birthday in the month October? What was the weather like on June 15th? The possibilities are endless.

Immediately after the greeting each day is **The Song of the Week**. On Mondays I teach a song that they listen to each day that week. The songs are usually related to the topics being studied and include classic children’s and popular songs from the cultures studied. YouTube is my favorite resource when looking for music. In my Spanish classes my students cannot get enough of Senor Wooly. Check out [www.senorwooly.com](http://www.senorwooly.com). I also like the Lyric Language series by Family Circus and the Sing, Dance, Laugh and Eat Quiche, (Tacos, Strudel) songs by Barbara MacArthur. <http://www.singdancelaugh.com/>

**The Hook or Bell Ringer** activity sets up learning for the day or connects learning from the day before. Some ideas to gain attention and activate prior knowledge are: copying the objectives for the day, illustrating vocabulary to be learned, researching or reading silently, or practicing with a partner. I often have students prepare their answer for the Question and Answer Whip Around. I like to ask a question related to the current theme we are studying. Who is the most important person in your life and why? What are you going to do this weekend? What do you have to do this weekend? We then whip around the room and every student gives a short answer. There are great ideas for hooks in the book Teach Like a Pirate by Dave Burgess. Try opinion meter line-ups, bring in a prop, dress like a character, or post an interesting phrase. I like the mystery box approach. I use a backpack, suitcase, grocery bag, or mystery box and pull items out and describe them and ask questions about each item. Be sure to put in a few kooky novelty items just for fun.

**The attention getters** are techniques to ensure rapid transitions. How do you get their attention? Some teachers raise their hand or give another signal like flashing the lights. I collect instruments from the target cultures like maracas, flutes, and whistles. I also like to use chants. We have a chant we teach all the kids in our school where we say “Alderwood give me three” and the students clap three times. Is there a cultural way to get someone attention in the language that you teach?

**The group and partner formers** save time and are important so that all students feel included. Students need structured opportunities to interact with all other class members. Even as an adult it can be awkward in a workshop when the instructor says find a partner and does not give instructions on how exactly that should be accomplished. Frequently someone is left out and does not participate. The Maps of French and Speaking countries are used to prearrange partners. These are also good for learning geography and where the target language is spoken. There are free partner maps available for Spanish at [www.Brycehedstrom.com](http://www.Brycehedstrom.com). There is a French speaking Africa partner map available at [www.Teacherspayteachers.com](http://www.Teacherspayteachers.com) for $1. You can easily make your own from a blank world map. Index cards, Popsicle sticks, bingo balls are also useful for forming random groups.

**The collection of evidence i**s another routine to consider. How do you collect evidence of student growth? How do you handle the movement of students, papers, and devices? I have five trays on a table each labeled in order by class period. Students are instructed by groups to walk, dance, hop, or swim to the trays to turn in their papers. Other routines to consider include:What do you do for students seeking help and getting make up work? What do students do when they are done?

**The Closing Activities** increase retention and provide feedback. Students in our school are required to have planners. They record homework and a short summary of what we learned that day. Sometimes I use exit slips. One of the student’s favorite activities is to “Popcorn Down.” They all stand and say a word or phrase we learned that day. There is no order but two students cannot talk at the same time or everyone must stand and start over. It makes them really listen to each other.

I like to round them up in the class circle. There is something about a circle that makes everyone feel equal and included. It is a special thing if done correctly. I like to circle kids up to count, give quick answers, and play games. I especially like to circle them up at the end of the class and discuss our learning of the day and homework. I point to the posted learning objective and say how did we achieve our goal today on a scale of 1-10?Another favorite closing question is what do you tell mom and dad we did today if they asked at dinner? Sometimes I choose a reporter at random to summarize. I like to close with a good bye song, chant, or rap. Without a closing activity students like to pack up five minutes early and hangout around the door. One Friday afternoon when we all were tired, the students were just about to do that when in strolled the principal. I quickly asked the students to tell me one thing they learned today. They looked at me like I was crazy at first and then they began to raise their hands and tell me phrases we had learned. The bell rang and the principal said to me “nice job of closure!”