

# Action Research:

## A case for task based language teaching

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### Introduction

It is every teacher's goal to optimize his or her student's learning potential. This is particularly true in the second language classroom where in most cases teachers encourage their students to actively participate in classroom activities which are designed to facilitate the students' acquisition of the second language. However, as second language teachers strive to create the "perfect" learning environment in the classroom, all teachers can attest to the fact that most classes fall short of this lofty goal. Quite often the contrary is true in that for some reason students are not learning to the teacher's expectations or fail to actively participate in classroom activities. Naturally teachers have limitations: they can influence but they cannot ultimately control factors such as motivation or aptitude. No two classes are alike and a one-size-fits-all approach seldom works in the second language classroom and often an activity which is successful in one class may fall flat in another. With so many things to worry about, language teacher often miss important cues or clues that may give the answer as to why a particular class is not responding according to the teacher's expectations.

For the most part teachers must rely on their common sense and their own bag of tricks when problems arise in the classroom or when students are not

living up to the teacher's expectations. Also, as mentioned before, teachers are often focusing their energy on other aspects of the class and may fail to notice clues indicating that there is a problem before it is too late. Here lies the paradox: if teachers are unable to identify potential problems in the classroom, then how are they able to rectify these problems? Fortunately there is a practical approach to identifying and solving potential problems in the classroom: Action Research (AR). AR is a systematic method for identifying a potential problem in the classroom by observations and subsequent data collection to specify the problem. After a diagnosis has been made, a plan is implemented to try and rectify the problem. AR in many cases may consist of several cycles of problem identification, data collection, and rectification. AR is defined by Nunan (1993) as,

"... the systematic investigation of problems, issues, or puzzles in language classrooms by teachers. It is language professionals seeking answers to classroom challenges by collecting and interpreting data from the contexts in which they conduct their daily professional lives." (p. 15)

AR has been around for some time in classrooms particularly in the public school system and it has several applications such as identifying a problem in the classroom and implementing a plan to remedy the problem; providing in-service training for teachers to hone teaching skills; gathering information on a specific program with the possibility of improving upon an existing curriculum, and improving the link between teachers and academic research and theory. Only recently has AR become common in second language classrooms and is usually intended for reflective teaching and dealing with every day practical problems rather than a methodology for researching theoretical issues.

The AR project reported here concerns the first point: identifying a problem

in the classroom and implementing a plan to remedy the problem. This AR project followed the procedure outlined by Nunan (1993) in which he includes six key steps. The first step is when the teacher identifies a problem in the classroom. The next step involves a preliminary investigation where the teacher observes and records the class over several days. With this information the teacher forms a hypothesis (third step) and implements a plan to remedy the problem (fourth step). The fifth step is observing the outcome or effect of the planned intervention. Finally the sixth step is reporting the AR project so that other teachers can benefit from the research. The sixth step in this case is the submission of this project for publication in this journal.

### **Class Back Ground Information**

As pointed out by Chamot (1994) some background information on the students is a necessary component when defining the parameters of an AR project. The particular class involved is an intermediate level second year class at a *semmon gakko* in Tokyo, Kanda Gaigo Gakuin, which is a vocational school that specializes in the study of foreign languages. The students in this class are all either 19 or 20 years old and of the 18 students in the class, 17 are female and 1 male. The students are all native speakers of Japanese and probably do not use English outside of the classroom. The placement of students is decided by their TOEIC scores and the average score in this class is approximately 450. The speaking ability of students varies significantly; however, most students could be considered upper beginners or pre-intermediates. Future employment opportunities is the main reason given by students when asked why they are studying English; however, this goal seems rather vague since most students lack motivation.

The program the students are enrolled in is called 'English for International

Communication (EIC)'; however, it is basically English for non-specific reasons. This is a two-year program which runs three-12 week terms a year and is designed to give students general language skills which they may use in future employment. There are three general levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced and students are usually placed according to their TOEIC scores as mentioned previously. The curriculum is designed to follow a set of in-house textbooks and teachers are expected to base lessons around the textbooks but are free to select which units to cover and supplement the text as they feel appropriate. The text is organized around a structure-topically syllabus but there has been an attempt to include some communicative activities. Also the text includes activities to cover all four language skills.

## **Action Research**

### **Step One: The Problem**

As mentioned earlier, the first step in an action research project is to identify a problem or something the teacher finds puzzling in the classroom. I have taught this particular class for a month and the most fundamental problem is that the students are speaking too much Japanese in class and generally seem to be disinterested in learning English. Possible reasons for this could be a lack of motivation as a result of having no real purpose to learn or speak English; the students find the lesson and lesson content boring; or student are reluctant to speak English due to external influences such as peer pressure (i.e., it's not cool or embarrassing to speak to fellow classmates in English). However, before we can decide on a hypothesis, more information is required to help to examine the problem.

## **Step Two: Preliminary Investigation**

The purpose of this stage is to gather and document data to confirm or disconfirm the assumptions made in the problem identification stage and determine the extent of the problem if it does indeed exist. The data is gathered by a number of classroom observations which help clarify or specify the problem and allow the teacher to gain more insight on the students and their responses to particular classroom activities and interactions.

Here Nunan (1990) recommends selecting a partner for peer observations. Obviously this is probably the preferred approach; however, I was unable to find a peer who had free time at the same time as my lesson to observe my lesson. I considered video taping my lesson and having a peer view it later; however, I decided against that idea as the students would probably become unnerved and act unnaturally. Some of the problems with video taping lessons as a tool for classroom observations are discussed by Murphy (2001) in which he states that, "The presence of any recording device in a classroom inevitably has some impact on lesson events." (p.511) I concluded that this would particularly be the case since the students are young and sensitive to anything they may find threatening.

In the end, I decided to conduct my own in-class observations according to the attached observation sheets (see appendix). I taught the class how I would regularly teach and observed and recorded the students' behavior over a period of one week (four 90 minute lessons). The first three observations were based on activities in unit 6: "Wish You Were Here" of the text of which the topic is travel. In the fourth observed lesson, we started a new unit, unit 10: "Twice As Nice" which is about personality traits and appearance.

The results of the observations are summarized in Table One: A summary of the occurrence of student behaviors indicating disinterest and a lack of participation in classroom activities and the average of group English speaking rating. The English speaking rating is a rating system based on a scale of one to five where five indicates very active participation using exclusively English whereas a rating of one indicates little or no participation and little or no use of English (examples of this would be speaking Japanese on an unrelated topic, sleeping or sending email via mobile phone, etc). The behaviors listed are general behaviors I identified as being general indicators of disinterest and a lack of participation in class activities.

**Table One: A summary of the occurrence of student behaviors indicating disinterest and a lack of participation in classroom activities and the average of group English speaking rating**

Day	Use of Japanese unrelated to the activity	Playing with mobile phone (including email)	Looking out the window	Sleeping or attempting to sleep in class	Textbook closed or opened at the wrong page	Average of group English speaking rating (1 to 5)
1	33	6	3	2	7	2.75
2	24	13	3	4	4	2.82
3	15	8	4	2	0	2.88
4	7	9	2	6	5	2.88
Average	20	9	3	4	4	2.83

The data from observations confirms the problem that students are using too much Japanese in class and seem to be disinterested in learning English. The important indicators here are the average English speaking rating and the tally of student behavior indicating boredom. The overall language use rating was low, 2.83 as an average of all the speaking activities over the four-day

observation period; however, there was substantial variation between different activities indicating that student participated more in some activities than in others.

Observations for day three were quite revealing because the data indicates that the students are capable of participating well if they are interested in the activity. In the first half of the class the students seemed bored and language use rating was 2.3 indicating low participation. The number of acts indicating boredom was high: actually, I counted 27! In contrast the students' participation in the second half was much higher (3.5) with very few acts of boredom (6). My conclusion is that the students preferred the second activity because they were given a more specific task and the nature of the activity forced them to communicate.

### **Step 3: Hypothesis**

As discussed earlier, there are a number of possibilities as to why the students are disinterested and hesitate to speak English; however, the most probable reason is that students are bored with the lessons and lesson content. In particular the factors that seem to influence student participation are: type of activity, group size, pacing of activity, and goal of activity. I believe other important contributing factors can be attributed to the students' age, relative lack of motivation, and short attention span. This assessment may seem overly critical; however, the students are young adults and do seem to have an "entertain me" attitude and soon become bored.

The variations observed in language use, participation and behavior according to the type of activity suggests students have a preference towards certain types of speaking activities used in class. Many sections of the text are

set up in a traditional presentation-practice-production lesson format where the actual production activity may seem quite interesting and stimulating to the teacher; however, as the students lack motivation they often fade before reaching the production stage. Also the production activities seem to involve too much preparation and are a little difficult to set up to keep students focused through out the activity. This was the case with the first step in the travel agent role-play on day three: it was a good activity but needed to be broken down more in steps. During the four-day observation period, students tended to participate more in activities that involved more than one partner and had a clear purpose. An example of this would be 'find your partner a partner' activity on day one.

Also due to the students' short attention spans, pacing seemed to be an important factor. Students lost interest quickly if an activity took long to set up, involved too many steps or was too complicated. At this level students are usually able to follow classroom instructions although it is still necessary to use comprehension checks occasionally. The biggest problem again is the short attention spans: students soon lose interest and drift in unrelated conversation with their partners in Japanese. There is definitely a need to make activities well defined, better and easier to set up and better paced.

Another problem is that many of the activities, such as structure drills and dialogue practice, lack clear goals and seem to be there for rote language practice only. For adult students, usually this kind of language practice is justifiable; however, for these students there needs to be a clearer objective to use language. There needs to a greater urgency among students to use English in order to communicate and accomplish a communicative function or goal.

#### **Step Four: Planned Intervention**

As mentioned in the hypothesis stage, the main problems identified in this action research project relate to: type of activities, group size, pacing, and goals of the activities. In order to address all of these issues at once, I propose initiating a more communicative lesson style that will focus on communicating meaning rather than form. Students need activities where they work in groups to achieve goals or a specific outcome. The best approach in my opinion which would go far to solve these problems would be to try and observe the results of a task-based lesson.

#### **Introduction: Task Based Language Teaching**

In designing task-based lessons, according to Lee (2000), it is useful to get a clear definition of the meaning of task in a task-based lesson since the term task is open to various interpretations. The definition of task used in this project is taken from Lee:

“A task is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has (a) an objective attainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/ or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans.” (p. 32)

The underlying purpose of task is to promote language acquisition by allowing students to communicate and negotiate in the second language in groups of two or more to achieve a specific outcome where the teacher is more of a mediator than an active participant. Students take the main role in communicating with each other in terms of expression of ideas and opinions,

interpretation of events, and the negotiation of meaning. The emphasis is on using language to express meaning rather than a focus on linguistic forms; however, I am in agreement with Long and Crookes (1992) in that some focus on form is necessary to draw students' attention to language that can assist them in completing a task.

The topic of this task based lesson, describing appearance and personality, was chosen to correspond with the current unit of study in the course textbook as previously mention in the class background information. Some of the material from the text book was adapted and used in this task based lesson. Other important considerations were task design, arrangement of tasks, selection of task types, and task variation.

The underlying guiding principles used in designing this task base lesson are those outlined by Lee. His four main criteria are as follows: identification of a desired informational outcome, break down of the topic into subtopics, creating and sequencing concrete tasks for learners to do, and build in linguistic support, either lexical or grammatical or both.

Equally important, especially in regards to task selection and design, are conditions put forth by Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993) to promote the greatest possible opportunity for student interaction. The activity types that they suggest include jigsaw, information gaps, and problem solving activities which are included in this lesson plan. Also, most activities in this task based lesson have been designed so that groups must negotiate to a consensus in determining the goal or outcome of the task. Tasks designed as such are thought to promote more negotiation among students than if a variety of outcomes were acceptable. Table Three classifies the tasks in this task based lesson according to Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun's critirions.

Also, activities have been arranged to give students linguistic support in terms of lexicon at the beginning of the lesson followed by grammatical support. This was done with the intention of providing the students with language to help communicate and complete further tasks. Tasks have also been graded from simple to more complex.

Finally, I have attempted to introduce task variation into the lesson plan in order to keep students interested. Further more, I've tried to sequence activities so that they relatively "flow" into each other addressing the problem of pacing, and hopefully improving classroom management.

### **Lesson Plan**

Subject: English Communication      Class: 2146      Time: 13:30 - 15:10

Topic: Appearance and Personality

Focus: Describing appearance and personality

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to list and identify vocabulary used for describing appearance and personality.
2. Students will be able to recognize some structures necessary to describe appearance and personality.
3. Students will be able to accurately describe and interpret classmates' appearance and personality.
4. Students will be able to collect data from other students in regards to family resemblances and decide if classmates in general resemble one parent more than the other.

**Table Two: Lesson Plan [as modeled by Farrell (2002)]**

Step	Time	Tasks (Teacher)	Tasks (Students)	Interaction	Purpose [Goal]
1a	10 Minutes	T Introduces the topic: describing appearance and personality. T arranges Ss into groups of 4 and instructs them to classify the words describing personal trait as positive or negative characteristic. (see hand out in appendix)  Feedback. T checks answers and answer any questions the Ss may have.	Listen  Ss arrange vocabulary as positive or negative traits Ss check with partners if they don't know the meanings of any words. Groups must agree upon the same list. (handout)  Ss call out their answers to the T.	T ↔ Ss  S ↔ S  Ss ↔ T	Arouse interest. Stimulate relevant schemata. Provide lexical support for subsequent activities.  [group agree upon the same list]
1b	10 Minutes	T asks Ss to brainstorm as many words as they can in regards to appearance and complete the bubble diagram  Feedback	In the same groups of four, Ss work together to complete the bubble diagram. Groups must list 5 items for each category in 10 minutes.  (on handout)	S ↔ S  Ss ↔ T	Arouse relevant schemata and provide lexical support for subsequent activities. [Groups must list 5 items for each category]
2a	5 Minutes	T tells the Ss they are going to listen to two people talk about their families. T plays tape  Feedback (may play the conversation once more)	Listen and complete activity 2a. Ss check answers with their partners. (handout)	T ↔ Ss  S ↔ S  Ss ↔ T	Gist listening [Groups must decide on the same answers]
2b	5 Minutes	T asks Ss to listen again and complete activity 2b. T plays tape  Feedback (may play the conversation once more)	Listen and complete activity 2b. Ss check answers with their partners. (handout)	S ↔ S  Ss ↔ T	Listening for details [Groups must decide on the same answers]

2c	10 Minutes	T tells Ss to work in pairs and read through the dialog and guess what the missing words in the cloze activity could be. T plays tape. Feedback  (Optional activity: T asks Ss to role play conversation)	Ss work in pairs and try to guess what the missing words are. Next Ss listen and complete the cloze activity and check answers with partner. (handout)	S ↔ S  Ss ↔ T	Provide grammatical support for subsequent activities. [Groups must agree on the same answers.]
3a	10 Minutes	T arranges Ss into pairs and asks each pair to choose another classmate. It's important that Ss don't mention who that classmate is to other Ss.	Ss make five sentences to describe another class member's personality and appearance. (should not be too obvious) (handout)	T ↔ Ss S ↔ S	Application of vocabulary and structures [Pairs must decide on a description]
3b	15 Minutes	T separates pairs into two groups. T sets up the activity  Feedback	Ss take turns describing a classmate while other group members try to guess which classmate matches the description. Group members must agree on one classmate before submitting the answer to the describer.	T ↔ Ss S ↔ S	Ss give and interpret description that will enable the identification of classmate. [Groups must agree on one picture before submitting the answer to the describer.]
4a	15 Minutes	T tells Ss to stand up and find a partner and ask questions regarding appearance and personality. Instruct students to get as much information as possible.	Ss ask partners questions to fill in the table. The object of this activity is to find out which parent the partner resembles the most personality wise and appearance wise. Repeat this again for 2 more partners. (handout)	T ↔ Ss S ↔ S	Allows students to personalize the language studied. [Find out which parent partners resemble the most in personality and appearance]

4b	10 Minutes	T arranges Ss into groups of 4. T tells Ss to report findings to other members and then determine which parent in general do students resemble the most. T asks Ss to think of a possible reason why. Feedback	Ss report to group member their findings and determine which parent do the S interviewed resemble the most in terms of appearance and personality. Decide on an explanation for your results.	S ↔ S	[Groups decide which parent students resemble the most in regards to appearance and personality. Decide on one possible explanation]
		T assigns for homework the following writing task (see next column)	Ss write a one page report describing: Who they resemble in their families, and a description of family members including the similarities and difference between each family member	Ss ↔ T T ↔ Ss	To review all components of the lesson in a different form of output (writing) [Complete a one page report and hand in by Friday]
Home work					

**Table Three: Summary of Tasks according to the pedagogy analysis based on Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun**

Task Number	Task Focus	Task Type	Goal Orientation	Outcome Options
1a	vocabulary to describe personality	problem solving	convergent	1
1b	vocabulary to describe appearance	problem solving	convergent	1
2a	listening + form	problem solving	convergent	1
2b	listening + form	problem solving	convergent	1
2c	listening + form	problem solving	convergent	1
3a	application	problem solving	convergent	1
3b	application	information gap and problem solving	convergent	1
4a	application	information gap	non convergent	+1
4b	application	jig saw	convergent	1

## **Step 5: Outcome**

Generally the students responded positively to the task-based lesson used in this action research, though they were a little slow at first to reach a group consensus when such kind of outcome was required. Students generally showed a decrease in the use of Japanese in the classroom with a corresponding increase in use of English. Also, as expected, participation improved drastically though some students continued to display behavior associated with boredom, especially playing with mobile phones. Students struggled at first when negotiating an outcome and often broke into Japanese. I had to remind them several times to speak English and they soon improved on this point. The lesson plan was fairly packed and there was little room for error in procedure. As a result several tasks (especially activities 3 and 4) were rather rushed and students could have benefited with more time. On positive side, students seem to enjoy the faster pace and become more involved in the activities. Not all but many students responded with a sense of urgency which resulted in a level of enthusiasm which I had seldom seen before in this class.

Due to other scheduled events in the course curriculum, this task based lesson plan was designed and implemented for only one 90 minute class. Therefore the outcome of the planned intervention, in this case a task based lesson, is rather inconclusive. Also, the data gathering procedure adopted in the preliminary investigation was not followed during the planned intervention stage and no supporting data was collected. The conclusions I have drawn in regards to the students' level of participation are based on my own judgment using my prior experience in the preliminary investigation as a guide. I must acknowledge; however, that the duration and lack of supporting data in the

planned intervention stage is a flaw in this research project.

As a result of this AR project and by observing increased language use and participation by my students I agree with Lee (2000); Pica Kanagy, and Falodun, (1993) and others that task based language teaching has the potential to engage students' interest and consciously raise their awareness of language use by forcing them to use the second language to complete a communicative task and thus facilitating the acquisition of the second language. Task based language teaching may not always be practical in the second language classroom; however, it is an approach to language teaching that has great potential and should be more widely used in a second language classroom context.

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**Appendix A: Observation Forms**

Observation Form: Class \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Table 1: Group participation and English speaking rating**

Rated on a scale of 5 to 1 where 5 designates very active participation using exclusively English and where as 1 designates little or no participation and little or no use of English. (examples of this would be speaking Japanese on an unrelated topic, sleeping, or sending email via mobile phone, etc. [see other side of form for more information])

Group Number	Activity 1 Size of Group	Activity 2 Size of Group	Activity 3 Size of Group	Activity 4 Size of Group	Activity 5 Size of Group
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
Duration					

Notes					
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**Table 2: Behaviour**

This table lists some classroom behaviours which indicate that the students are uninterested in some aspect of the lesson. The frequency of occurrence is tallied per group.

Group	Use of Japanese unrelated to the activity	Playing with Mobile phone (including email)	Looking out the window	Sleeping or attempting to sleep in class	Textbook closed or opened at the wrong page
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
Notes					

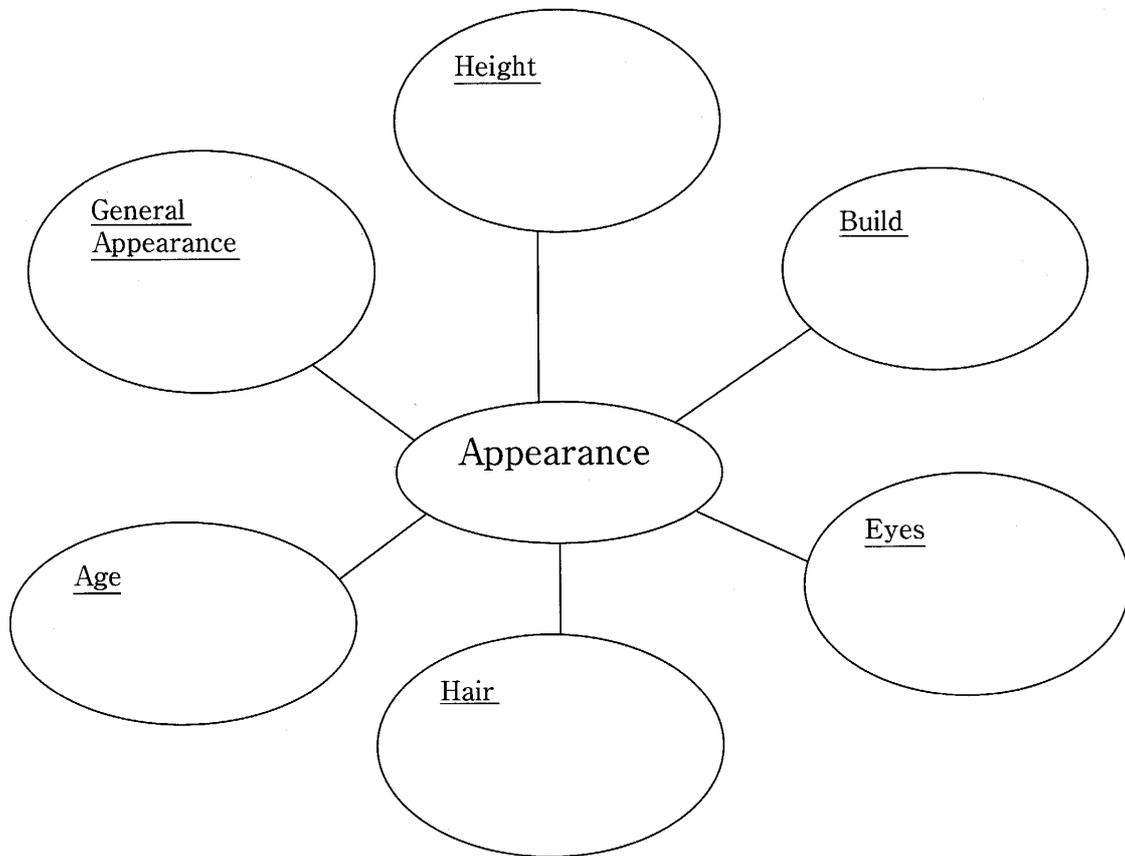
**Appendix B: Task Based Lesson Materials: Appearance and Personality**  
**Student Handouts**

1. a) Below are some words to describe personality. Put each word under the column for “good qualities” or “bad qualities”

Patient	honest	careless	friendly	selfish	lively	
lazy		clever	dishonest		organized	
nervous	jealous	intelligent	rude	clever	bossy	
optimistic	arrogant	confident	pessimistic	kind		
messy	shy	impatient	sensitive	thoughtful		
calm	tidy	boring	serious	outgoing		
stingy						

Good Qualities	Bad Qualities

1. b) Work in your groups and brain storm as many word or phrase as you can and write in the bubbles.



2. a) Who resembles whom? Listen to Family Pictures and check the columns below

	Mother's Looks	Father's Looks	Mother's Personality	Father's Personality
Mike				
Ann				
Ann's sister				
Mike's brother				

b) Listen again. Write M by the physical traits Mike inherited and A by the traits Ann inherited.

Father's blond hair \_\_\_\_\_ Mother's eyes \_\_\_\_\_  
Dark hair \_\_\_\_\_ Mother's facial expressions \_\_\_\_\_  
Dark complexion \_\_\_\_\_  
Fair skin \_\_\_\_\_

c) Listen to the conversation one more time and fill in the missing words.

Ann: So who is this? Is that you?

Mike: No, that's where it all started. That's my dad.

Ann: I can't believe how much you \_\_\_\_\_ your father.

Mike: Yeah. There's a strong resemblance, I guess. I certainly have my father's \_\_\_\_\_, the fair skin and blond hair. My mother's quite dark. See, here's a picture of my mom.

Ann: Oh, she looks really sweet. You \_\_\_\_\_ her. Maybe a bit around the eyes.

Mike: Well, maybe, but my \_\_\_\_\_ my mother's. She's easygoing like me.

Ann: Easygoing, huh?

Mike: I like to think so. What about you? \_\_\_\_\_, your mother or your father?

Ann: Well, I guess I look more like my mother. We \_\_\_\_\_ dark hair and dark complexions. I think I have my mother's eyes and facial expressions, but personality \_\_\_\_\_ I'm more like my father. We both have a sense of humor.

Mike: Sense of humor, huh? What about your brothers and sisters?

Ann: Well... my sister is more like my father. She looks like him and \_\_\_\_\_ him. She's \_\_\_\_\_ conservative than I am. She's really intellectual like my father.

Mike: My younger brother looks like my father but is more like my mother in personality. He's outgoing. He plays ice hockey, you know, a sportsman.

3. a) With a partner, make five sentences to describe another classmate's personality and appearance. Be careful not to say that persons name to any other groups.

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b) Partners separate into "A" and "B" and form two groups (A and B groups). Take turns giving your description of a classmate to your new partners. Your group members must decide on one candidate before you give them the answer. (If they have a wrong answer, make them guess again)

4. Who do you resemble in your family?

a) Stand up and find a partner. Try to find out the information in the table.

Try to get as much information as possible.

Partner's name	Mother's Looks	Father's Looks	Mother's Personality	Father's Personality

b) In groups of four report your findings to your partners.

c) Using the data that you and your partners gathered, determine which parent student resemble the most. If your group determines that the data indicates students resemble one parent more than the other, try to think of a reason for this.

## Appendix C: Teacher Information for Activities

Transcript: Family Pictures (for teacher's use)

Ann: So who is this? Is that you?

Mike: No, that's where it all started. That's my dad.

Ann: I can't believe how much you look like your father.

Mike: Yeah. There's a strong resemblance, I guess. I certainly have my father's complexion, the fair skin and blond hair. My mother's quite dark. See, here's a picture of my mom.

Ann: Oh, she looks really sweet. You don't look at all like her. Maybe a bit around the eyes.

Mike: Well, maybe, but my personality is more like my mother's. She's easygoing like me.

Ann: Easygoing, huh?

Mike: I like to think so. What about you? Who are you more like, your mother or your father?

Ann: Well, I guess I look more like my mother. We both have dark hair and dark complexions. I think I have my mother's eyes and facial expressions, but personality wise I'm more like my father. We both have a sense of humor.

Mike: Sense of humor, huh? What about your brothers and sisters?

Ann: Well... my sister is more like my father. She looks like him and acts like him. She's much more conservative than I am. She's really intellectual like my father.

Mike: My younger brother looks like my father but is more like my mother in personality. He's outgoing. He plays ice hockey, you know, a sportsman.