



# Pan SIG Journal 2018

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# Ancestor Lessons: Learning and Sharing Personal Histories in the Classroom

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This paper introduces and explains two EFL lessons focused on the topic of ancestors. It explains the rationale for the topic, what specifically to teach, how to teach the content while focusing on language skills, and finally how to deal with any difficulties that may arise in these lessons. Student feedback shows that the activity is a powerful classroom experience that generates intrinsic curiosity about their family and ancestors, and a new perspective on the genesis of students' own current life conditions. The lessons described will help any teacher who asks the question: How can I teach so that my students are engaging deeply with the English language and I am building a more genuine and personal relationship with my students?

本稿では、祖先の話題に焦点を当てた 2 つの EFL レッスンについて紹介し、説明します。トピックの根拠、具体的な内容、語学力を重視した内容の教授方法、最後にこれらのレッスンで起こりえる問題の解決方法について説明します。生徒のフィードバックは、その活動が、家族や先祖に対し本質的な好奇心を生み出す強力な教室での経験であり、生徒自身の現在の生活条件の創造についての新しい視点であることを示しています。私の生徒が英語に深く関わるように教え、私の生徒ともっと本物の、そして個人的な関係を築いていくように教えるにはどうすればいいですか。

The topic of family is a very common topic in English language textbooks. This is a familiar and useful topic that almost all learners can talk about at some level. This paper considers how teachers can use the topic of family in a way that engages students' interest and offers deeper opportunities for language learning and community building in the classroom. We introduce and explain two language-learning lessons focused on the topic of ancestors which allow students to explore and share their family history over multiple generations.

The rationale for using the topic of ancestors is explained and then this paper suggests how to teach the content while focusing on language skills. Talking about family can raise certain specific difficulties, and we suggest ways to deal with difficulties that may arise in these lessons. Finally, we introduce student feedback

which shows that students see the activity as a powerful learning experience that generates curiosity about their family and ancestors, and offers a new perspective on the genesis of their own current life conditions.

## The Topic of Family in Textbooks

The topic of family is ubiquitous in EFL/ESL textbooks for the obvious reason that almost everyone has a family and much of our lives are centered around family life, so there clearly is both content to share and an opportunity for simple language practice.

Despite the potential richness that the topic of family can bring to the language learning classroom, many textbooks deal with the topic in a rather superficial way. For example, in the popular textbook, *Interchange Intro*, Richards (2012, p. 37) shows a simple two

generation family tree representing parents and children and uses this to introduce vocabulary such as husband, wife, father, mother, brother, and sister. This is followed by a simple practice for students to describe their own families using sentences like "My mother's name is Angela" and "My brothers' names are David and Angelo." This is expanded on slightly in the following grammar focus section with sentences such as "My family and I live in the suburbs. My wife and I work near here, so we walk to work. Our daughter Emily works downtown, so she drives to work."

Similar examples from other textbooks tend to focus on the children's age and club activities, the parents' employment, and maybe what activities the family did last summer vacation. Students may learn some new English vocabulary or grammar, but conversations often occur at a superficial level. This seems to be a missed opportunity for students to learn something meaningful or insightful about themselves, their family, and their ancestors, which could in turn support students in making a deeper connection between their own lives and the English language being used in the classroom. The aim of this paper is to offer a deeper and multi-dimensional set of activities for the topic of family which can create a more profound and genuine interest in the theme, a deeper curiosity into one's own family past, and a deeper connection to the language used.

Below, the ancestor activity is divided over two lessons in consecutive weeks. Depending on your teaching context and how the activity relates to the rest of your course, it may be appropriate to spend more time on it. This activity has worked well with Japanese university students of mixed-ability with TOEIC scores ranging from 450 up to 900. Complete lesson plans are shown in the appendix at the end of this paper and the reader may like to refer to this throughout.

## Ancestors Lesson 1 – Generating Curiosity and Setting up the Interviews

The first lesson on the topic of ancestors is designed to generate student curiosity and then to do the required preparation for them to interview their grandparents about their family history. This is explained in more detail below.

## Introduce the Topic and Generate Interest

In order to engage the students in the activity from the beginning, the most important thing for the teacher to do is raise curiosity and interest in the topic. You can introduce the topic by share some interesting stories about your ancestors or family members. Then explain that the topic of the lesson and next lesson to the student will be "family and ancestors."

It is useful to do a simple brainstorm at the beginning of the lesson to get students involved and to activate vocabulary, knowledge, and ideas about the topic. On the blackboard, demonstrate a simple mind map activity centered around the word "Ancestors," and then have students write at least eight words connected to the word "Ancestors," such as history, tradition, family, life, and so on. Students can then discuss in pairs why they listed particular words or explain their favorite word from their list.

It is also important to have students begin to connect emotionally with the topic. The topic of not only immediate family but we wanted students to consider the long chain of ancestors that eventually resulted in their own lives. We have found that a poem is a good way to make these emotional connections. A poem can evocatively capture the essence of a topic and usually we use the poem, *I've known Rivers* by Langston Hughes. This poem (shown in appendix Lesson 1, B) connects Hughes' life to the lives of people thousands of years before by giving images of the people's lives in different places. Also within this poem there are lines that suggest the value of learning about history and our ancestors. The vocabulary of the poem may be unfamiliar to your students, and you may need to introduce difficult words such as ancient, dusky, soul, dawn, raise, muddy, veins, and lull. Allow students to review the vocabulary list with dictionaries.

As a follow-up, reinforcing activity use the Endless Questions technique to teach and reinforce the new vocabulary (Backwell, 2005). Endless Questions simply means the teacher asks students questions about the meaning of new vocabulary. Whenever there is a vocab list to review in class there is often at least one student in the group who knows the meaning of each word. If this is the case the teacher uses a series of questions to connect the vocabulary to the world of the students. For

example, if one of the new words is *raise*, you can ask the students to raise their right hand. If the next word is *ancient*, ask a student: "Are you ancient?" and then ask: "Is Mt. Fuji ancient?". For the word, *dawn*, ask the students: "What time was dawn this morning?" Move through the vocabulary in this way. One benefit of the Endless Questions technique is that it brings new vocabulary to life, imbuing personal meaning into each new word, and students can hear how the words are used inside authentic sentences.

When students are familiar with the vocabulary, remind them again that the topic of the lesson is Ancestors and do a dramatic reading of the poem, *I've Known Rivers*. Appendix Section Lesson 1, B offers other suggestions to help students to understand and engage with the poem.

You can help them to understand the topic by asking why rivers were so important to our ancestors and eliciting answers such as: Rivers are a source of fresh drinking water, food, personal hygiene and provided travel and trade routes. Students can use Google maps to learn the location of the four rivers (Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi) and the country which each river flows through. You can then explain the basic history of Langston's ancestors, how Langston's ancestors were free to roam by the first three rivers mentioned in the poem, but how his ancestor's voyage to America and the Mississippi river was forced by slave traders.

In order to get students thinking more deeply about their own ancestors, emphasize the meaning of the last sentence: "*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*" When we learn about our ancestors our lives become richer. Explain that the Ancestors activity is a possibility to gain knowledge and become wiser in learning and sharing stories about our ancestors, and that everyone will share ancestor stories in the next lesson.

### Preparation for Interviews

To begin preparing sharing their own ancestor stories, have students do the activities in Section C of Lesson 1 of the Appendix. This requires them to start thinking and gathering information about their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents including their names, place of birth, job, and major life events. Most students doing this

activity notice quickly that there are large gaps in their knowledge about their own family, and this helps to foster curiosity.

Explain that the homework is to learn about ancestors (See Appendix Section Lesson 1, C2). The students interview a grandparent and ask about their lives including information about jobs, hobbies, and major life events. They should also find out about their parents (the students' great grandparents). Show your own family tree and tell students that they should also draw a family tree with four generations that reaches back to great grandparents.

To prepare students better for the interview and to help them to focus their questions, have them fill in the KWL chart (Appendix Section Lesson 1, C4). KWL is a useful learning format (Ogle, 1986) which stands for What you **K**now, **W**ant to know and What you **L**earned. First, in the **K** column, students write everything they already know about their ancestors, for example grandparents' names, hometown, age, hobbies. Then in the **W** column, students generate a list of questions about what they want to know such as great-grandparents names, major life experiences, how their parents met, and what education their grandparents had. Students do not fill in the **L** column until after the Way of Council activity in lesson 2. Then they write and reflect in the final column on the new information they have learned.

## Ancestors Lesson 2 – Sharing Ancestor Stories

In lesson 2, students share stories about their ancestors and family members in an activity called the Way of Council. More details are shown in the lesson plan in the Appendix.

### Review and Preparation

Have students review their family tree and think about the questions shown in Appendix Section Lesson 2, D. These questions are designed to help them to review the information they have learned and to practice sharing it. Students then discuss the questions with a partner. Have students change partner a couple of times to allow for repeated practice in talking about the topic. Repeated partner practice will greatly help students prepare and

build confidence for speaking in the Way of Council. The teacher can circulate during partner discussions and help with any pronunciation or grammatical issues. Also remind students that because they are talking about the past, the verbs they use should probably be in the past tense and give examples from your stories highlighting use of the past tense.

## The Way of Council

Instructions for setting up the Way of Council are shown in Appendix Section Lesson 2, E in the Appendix. According to Fujioka (1998), the Way of Council and the “talking stone” have been used for centuries by many Native American tribes as a means of fair and impartial hearing, and as a democratic practice for community matters such as an important topic or making a group decision. Traditionally the aim of this practice was that the voice of each member of the council (or community) was heard and respected. We use it for the same reason in the EFL classroom i.e. so that the voice of each student in the class is given the chance to be heard and respected.

There are a couple of core rules underpinning the Way of Council. First, the person who holds the talking stone talks about the topic and those who are not holding the stone listen. The stone represents the importance of the speaker. The stone is passed around the circle, and each person speaks when she or he holds the stone. The passing of the stone ensures that all members can speak and have their ideas heard. The group listens as much as possible without focusing on what they personally want to say when their turn comes. Tell students that speaking from the heart and listening from the heart are two important principles of the Way of Council.

If feasible, the classroom should be set up differently to the typical classroom in which the teacher stands at the front of the room and the students are lined up in rows of desks all facing the front. Instead, make a circle of chairs. This immediately gives the environment a more democratic feeling because no one person is in a leadership position. In the Way of Council, students are encouraged to listen and learn from each other. This takes the focus away from the teacher as the only purveyor of knowledge in the room, and it can be

refreshing for the teacher to sit with the group, listen, and learn about the students’ ancestor stories. On a practical note if you have a large group (15 students or more) you may like to explain the activity and then split the group into 2 circles so that the activity does not last more than 30 minutes. This will involve desk moving to clear the floor and make way for a circle or 2 circles of chairs. In total Way of Council should not last more than half an hour to keep concentration focused on each speaker.

The intimate nature of the Way of Council and the personal meaningful topic creates conditions in which students are more likely to engage in genuine English communication. Of course, they can interview their parents or grandparents in their native language, but once that is done it is our consistent experience students are intrinsically motivated to share their discoveries with others through English in the EFL classroom.

It may in fact surprise you what topics arise in Way of Council. In the most recent class students shared stories of ancestors who died fighting in China during World War 2, a grandfather who made a lot of money during the bubble and bought a mountain in Kyushu only to sell it when the bubble burst, a modern day mother who sees ghosts, alcoholics, gamblers, single parent fathers who struggle to be the sole provider and an aunt who couldn’t have a baby so her sister gave her their second daughter. Some families described have 12 children and other stories focus on couples who have none. The variety of family structures and stories can be staggering. In such a class students can keep their focus and attention even if the Way of Council lasts 20 or 30 minutes simply because the speaker is telling an engrossing story.

## Follow-up

You can enhance student language learning after the Way of Council by using oral mistakes which students made as mini lessons. However, it is important to remember that this topic can be emotionally charged and if you are correcting students, be careful not to appear disrespectful of them or their ancestors as that could negatively influence the student-teacher relationship. If you do this, never correct a student during the Way of Council (unless asked). Only after the council has

finished should any correction take place.

It is useful to finish the lesson with a written reflection. Students can complete the KWL chart from Lesson 1 (specifically the section entitled What I Learned). Alternatively students can fill in a handout based on the four feedback questions in Appendix section Lesson 2, F. These two activities are two examples of reflective work at the end of two personal and engaging lessons which the teacher can choose to gather and mark or not.

### Addressing Difficulties

A concern when teaching the ancestor activities is that all families have positive, happy stories, and at the same time all families have difficult or negative stories. With this in mind it may be wise to tell your students to only share what they feel comfortable sharing and that during the Way of Council process what is said in the circle should stay in the circle, i.e., don't share with others who were not there unless specifically given permission by the speaker. In times gone past, the Way of Council was considered a sacred practice and it should be the same in our time as well.

Another difficulty as one student mentioned in the feedback section below, is that a student may only get minimal or even no information about an ancestor. There may be several reasons for this including that particular person may be the "black sheep" of the family and has been intentionally forgotten about. Of course, there may be other reasons such as that person never having been mentioned to family members living today. This should be accepted, and although each student should be encouraged to make efforts to gather as much information as possible, teachers cannot realistically expect every student to have a complete family tree. Most students will not live with their grandparents so we suggest a telephone call or perhaps e mail. Almost all students report these are acceptable ways to make contact with their grandparents.

It is best remembered there are some students who may not want to disclose private information. Iwata (2010) claims that Japanese have lower levels of self-disclosure than North Americans especially when speaking in the classroom. With this in mind we usually teach this class later in the semester when students and

teachers have built rapport and spent a more significant amount of time together. Building rapport is not a skill that is focused on in this paper although it is crucial for teachers and leaders. If you would like more extensive reading on the topic of classroom rapport building two suggested readings are: *Rapport building in language instruction* Nguyen, and *Unmasking the Structure of Rapport*, Backwell et al) For the sake of simplicity we will assume you are a teacher who has been building rapport building throughout the semester and you will understand that the key point to building rapport in these specific lessons is to share meaningful stories of your ancestors too. If you are not a teacher who feels comfortable sharing at this level then perhaps these lessons are not suitable for you however for teachers who want more self-disclosure and sharing of personal, real life stories these lessons will help such a rapport building process. Put simply, to a certain level you have to disclose too. It is our experience of teaching these lessons for more than a decade that if you build rapport, speak honestly and follow the lesson outlines these two classes will give you a powerful, bonding experience with your students. These classes will strengthen the bond of trust between the teacher and group members moving forwards.

### Student Feedback

Some typical student feedback is given below to show students' perspectives on the ancestors activity.

1. What new information did you learn about your family and ancestors?

- My grandfather bought a cruise boat!
- My great grandfather (father's grandfather) was adopted.
- I knew my grandparents were doctors but I didn't know they worked during World War II and were taught how to save injured soldiers. I was amazed.
- My great grandmother has ten children.
- My grandfather owns a mountain!!
- I learned my family knows nothing about my great-grandparents.
- My grandmother raised her children alone.

2. What was difficult about this project?

- I couldn't collect some information about my ancestors.
- All my great grandparents are dead so I couldn't get information about
- It was presentating about the information to classmates.

### 3. Why was this a useful/interesting project?

- I learned a lot about my great-grandparents that I didn't know before.
- I could find a stronger relationship between me and my ancestors.
- Now I want to tell my life story to my children and my grandchildren someday.
- It was interesting because without this class I would never try to learn about my ancestors.
- With this lesson we can say thank you to our family and ancestors.
- My ancestors passed away because of world war two so I realized war is a serious problem.
- Because we can know our roots and identity through this project. I feel my ancestors are close to me.
- I enjoyed myself because I could know more about my family and ancestors. At first I didn't know my great grand parents and I didn't think I want to know them but now I want to talk with my grand father more.

### 4. What more would you like to learn about your family/ancestors?

- What was my grandmother's dream when she was my age?
- Why was my great grandfather adopted?
- How were my ancestors daily lives during World War Two?
- What were my ancestors experiences at school?
- I want to learn more about all my ancestors and make bigger, longer family tree.
- Why did my mother and father marry?
- I learned they all had different jobs. I've not decided my job yet that's why I want to listen to their job life and think about my future work.
- While my great grandfather was a soldier what things happened?

## Conclusion

As the student feedback above indicates, the main driving motivation in the ancestor activities is intrinsic curiosity about one's own family and ancestors. This is not superficial interest but rather a genuine curiosity about the unknown and a sense of delving into one's own past to learn more about family and ultimately the creation of one's own current life conditions. As one student said in the feedback:

*"It was interesting because without this class I would never try to learn about my ancestors."* Another student shared *"We can know our roots and identity through this project. I feel my ancestors are close to me."*

As the students say in their own words, the ancestor lessons can be a powerful classroom experience. Perhaps the most pertinent student comment was:

*"Now I want to tell my life story to my children and my grandchildren someday."*

We, the authors, found this comment particularly satisfying because what could be more meaningful than to teach a lesson which is carried on by students beyond the classroom and even beyond the teacher's time on this planet?

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## Appendix – Lesson Plans

### Lesson 1

Materials: Vocabulary list, poem, teacher's family tree, bigger photos (optional)

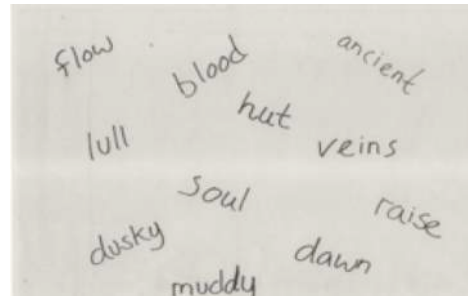
#### A. Brainstorm

Write the word "Ancestors" on the board and have students give ideas or words connected to it, e.g. "tradition", "history", "family."

#### B. Generate Interest in the Topic with a Poem

1. Introduce the vocabulary from the poem below. An example is shown on the right.
2. Read the poem aloud to students with feeling and drama.
3. Have students take turns reading lines from the poem.

4. Explain the meaning of the poem. Example:  
"Langston's ancestors were free to travel on the Congo Euphrates and the Nile. Later, they were captured and



taken to America as slaves.

5. Focus on the line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" and explain how learning about our ancestors can offer us wisdom.

#### I've Known Rivers

by Langston Hughes

*I've known rivers*

*I've known rivers as ancient as the world and older*

*than the flow of human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

*I swam in the Euphrates when dawns were young.*

*I built my hut near the Congo and the sound of the water lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked at the Nile and raised the pyramids above it*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi and saw this muddy river turn golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers*

*Ancient, dusky rivers*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

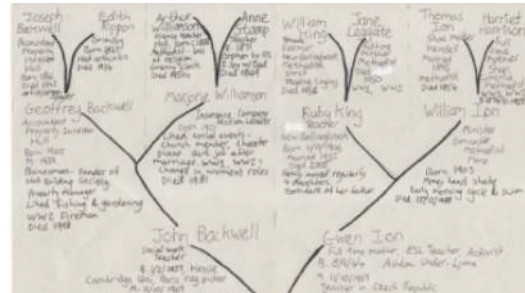




Share one or two of your own ancestor stories.

#### 4. Written Preparation

Give students time to fill in the sheet below. Students write what they already know about their ancestors e.g. Grandparents names, hometown, age, hobbies. Then in the second column students write what they would like to know e.g. Great grandparents' names, major life experiences, how their parents met, what education their



grandparents had.

Write details in the first two columns. Write in the last column after completing your research.

What I Know	What I want to know	What I learned

### C. Preparation

#### 1. What do you know about your ancestors?

Think about your parents, grandparents and great grandparents. What do you know about your ancestors?

Do you know their names? When they were born? Where was their hometown? What was their religion? What job did they have? What hobbies did they enjoy? What major life events did they experience? – World War 2, the bubble economy, etc.

#### 2. Explain Homework (Grandparent interview and Family Tree)

Homework this week is to learn about your ancestors.

First interview a grandparent and ask about their lives – job, hobbies, major life events, their parents or any interesting topic. Learn about your great grandparents.

Next, draw your family tree with four generations. Start your family tree with you and your parents then include grandparents and great grandparents.

Include the information below:

Name, birthday, hometown, job, religion, hobbies, life events, any other interesting information.

#### 3. Introduce your own family tree (Teacher)

#### 5. Give Homework

Students interview parents and grandparents (and great grandparents if still alive)

Then using A4 paper, students draw a family tree of 4 generations (themselves, parents, grandparents and great grandparents) with information of each family member – name, birthday, hometown, job, religion, hobbies, if appropriate marriage date and death date, major life events e.g. WW2 or bubble economy any other interesting information.

## Lesson 2

Materials: a stone for the Way of Council activity

### D. Preparation

#### 1. Review the family tree

Look at your family tree and think about your answers to the questions below.

#### 2. Talk in pairs

Have students ask and answer the questions below with a partner. Repeat 2 or 3 times to make students better in their explanations.

1. Where are your ancestors from?
2. What jobs did they have?
3. What major life events happened to your ancestors?
4. Who is your most interesting ancestor? Why?
5. What are you grateful for from your ancestors?

### E. Way of Council

1. Remove desks and set up classroom chairs in a big circle (Way of Council)
2. Students sit in a circle (no pens, paper, textbooks, etc.)
3. Teacher focuses on the poem's line "My soul has grown deep like the rivers"



4. Teacher brings up the theme of ancestors. The power of our history, the power of our ancestors to shape our lives today.
5. Teacher explains Way of Council and passes the talking stone.
6. Each student takes turn to talk about his or her ancestors while holding the stone. They can use the warm up questions as a focus of what to talk about. Go around the group until all students have spoken.
7. Teacher finishes the Way of Council by reading *I've known Rivers* again and thanking students for sharing their stories.

### F. Follow-up Written Activity

Have students write the answers to the questions below.

1. What new information did you learn about your family and ancestors?
2. What was difficult about this project?
3. Why was this a useful/interesting project?
4. What more would you like to learn about your family/ancestors?

## Bio Data

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