



“Coffee Quizzes”: A Technique to Increase Student Engagement and Participation

by Mark J. Alves

Background

Imagine trying to teach—or to learn—at 7:30 in the morning. 7:30 is an ideal time neither for presenting crucial course content nor heavy-duty thinking activities. Nevertheless, I have taught 7:30 am classes in the ESL program at my college for more than a decade. What I learned early on was that quizzes at the beginning of class were essential to getting students in class on time and doing something active. In class, I refer to them “coffee quizzes”, suggesting a kind of wake-up activity, which they are.

However, over time, I have incorporated other instructional techniques and recognized a number of educational benefits of this class-initial quiz. In the rest of this article, I present what starts out as a simple “coffee quiz”, but in the end, I share my overall teaching approach, one in which the goal is to engage students and create an equitable, professional environment.

Method

The basic approach is to give a short quiz at the beginning of class and then use the quizzes in order to call on students during class to give responses.

1. Give the Quiz: Instructors give a short quiz (5 to 10 minutes, worth just a few points) at the beginning of class. This should be a quiz based on a required reading or other activity completed prior to a class. In my approach, late students lose the points since we review the answers immediately afterward.
2. Use the Quiz: For the rest of the class, following randomized order of the names of the quizzes, instructors call students' to give responses. One should start at the top of the pile and put the quizzes of students who have responded underneath and continue rotating. I may skip students who are frequent responders and instead focus on students who would benefit from being expected to share information verbally.

A Note on Small Group Work: After I collect the quizzes, I project the quiz on a screen. I then generally give students 3 to 5 minutes to work in pairs or small groups to prepare answers before I call on them to respond to the entire class. This increases the sense of cooperation and decreases the pressure of answering on the spot without time to consider possible answers.

Benefits

The reasons for applying this technique include both the ways students respond to it as well as some benefits to instructors in terms of efficient classroom management.

Student Reactions

- Preparing for the quiz: Students are more likely to do the readings or assignments to prepare for the quizzes. Accountability for learning may be an extrinsic motivator, but it can lead to intrinsic motivation when learners see their responsibility for their own learning.
- Active from the start: This encourages students to arrive on time and be actively engaged from the beginning of class. The lost points may be insignificant in the overall grade, but it nonetheless has motivational impact. Alternatively, or after habits have been formed, quizzes can be worth zero points.
- Increased accountability: It increases the sense of student accountability, the idea that everyone is expected to be engaged and ready to contribute.

Benefits to Classroom Management

- Equitable treatment: This method distributes participation among students equitably and prevents frequent responders from dominating. It creates a sense of equitable treatment of students.
- No need to call roll: The stack of quizzes is proof of class attendance. When I enter grades, I quickly see who was either late or absent, though one must be careful not to incorrectly mark a late student absent.
- Reviewing names: This helps instructors review and remember student names.
- No excess calling: Students who are absent do not complete the quiz, so instructors will not call names of absent students.

A Note on Late Arrivals: For students arriving after the quiz, I write their names (and "zero points, late") on a blank quiz and put those quizzes in the pile so that they are not left out.

“Coffee Quiz” Formats for the ESL Classroom

To reduce paper waste, I prepare quizzes short enough that a few can be printed on one piece of paper and cut into strips.

- Fill-in-the-Blank: Take or adapt three to five sentences from assigned fill-in-the-blank sentences or an excerpt from a reading. Focus on the verb, noun, or collocational issues.
- Editing: Select three to five sentences from either an editing exercise or an excerpt of a reading in which you create target language structure editing issues. Beyond noun and verb issues, this can include sentence connecting or sentence structure issues.
- Short Response: For readings students must complete for an in-class activity, for example, give a quiz with one or two questions that require one- to three-sentence responses. A variation can be listing a few key words that must be used in the response.

“Coffee Quiz” Samples**Quiz on Contrastive Sentence Connecting**

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Instructions: Correct the errors in contrastive sentence connecting. 2 pts each, 6 pts total.

From the beginning of American history, whites have been a majority in the U.S. however by 2050 whites will make up less than 50% of all Americans. The major cause of this change has been immigration. But, the nature of immigration to the U.S. has also become different. Whereas in the past most immigrants came from Europe. Over the last several decades, the majority of immigrants to the U.S. have come from Latin America and Asia.

Quiz on “Changes in the U.S. Population”

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. What is the main idea in the reading “Changes in the Population”?
2. What do you think is the most surprising or interesting detail in the reading?

Recap

The simple technique described accomplishes multiple pedagogical and classroom management goals. Giving quizzes at the beginning of class can encourage students to arrive on time prepared to engage in active learning. Moreover, instructors can use the quizzes for other classroom management techniques, such as equitably distributing student participation in class, reviewing student names, and checking attendance. An overall approach that can fit most any classroom setting is described along with a list of pedagogical benefits.

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