~ PRACTICAL, DETAILED AND ILLUMINATING GUIDE ~

BACK TO SCHOOL MAGIC

37 BACK TO SCHOOL SECRETS TO THE PERFECT CLASSROOM FOR A NEW SCHOOL YEAR

BEGINNINGS ARE USUALLY NOT EASY:
GET YOUR NEW ESL CLASSROOM ON TRACK IN NO TIME

EVERYTHING FROM ICE BREAKERS TO KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENTS

A NEW CLASS, A NEW CHANCE TO SHARE THE MAGIC OF LEARNING ENGLISH
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6 Deadly Mistakes Most Teachers Make On Their First Day Of Class

FOR NEW TEACHERS, OR FOR EXPERIENCED TEACHERS ENTERING NEW CLASSROOMS, FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT.

Students will be testing us, trying to discern where the boundaries lie, what they can get away with and what the expectations are. While it may be overstating the case to say that the first few classes can make or break your school year, failure to make a solid impression on your students (and your co-teachers, if applicable) can certainly make your life much more difficult for the next several months. Elsewhere on this site you can find information on what you should do on the first day of classes, so I will not address that here. Instead, here are 6 things you should NOT do in those early days.

AVOID THE FOLLOWING DEADLY MISTAKES ON YOUR FIRST DAY

1 DON’T: MONOPOLIZE THE TALK TIME

Students tend to be shy and nervous during the first few classes, making them reluctant to speak up. To counter this, teachers often make their first classes about them (the teachers) talking. We explain the class rules, expectations, perhaps do a bit of review, etc. However, as ESL teachers, speaking (in English) will be a key part of our classes and we should try to encourage students to engage and participate from the very beginning of the year.

2 DON’T: BE A TALKING POST AT THE FRONT OF THE CLASS

It can be very tempting to remain at the front of the class, that place where the authority of being the teacher seems strongest and where we often have things to point at on the screen/board. But this sets a precedent that you will not interact with your students and creates an imbalance in the class. Those in the front receive most of your attention and those at the back are much more difficult to engage (and control). Traditionally, trouble-makers will attempt to sit in the back of the class where they are comparatively free from the teacher’s scrutiny. By moving around the classroom, you spread your attention throughout the students and include even those who have tried to avoid that inclusion. Note that, depending on your teaching style, this may require that you buy a remote to advance your presentation from anywhere in the classroom.

3 DON’T: CALL ONLY ON STUDENTS WHO VOLUNTEER

This is very much linked to the above point. It is easier to call only on students who raise their hands than it is to force all students to engage in the class. However, you will eventually want all your students to participate, so setting that precedent early will help you down the road. Unfortunately, this is not quite as simple as just forcing everyone to participate. To begin with, you may not have time to get all students to speak. Further, if it is the beginning of the year, this will be a new class and the students may not be entirely comfortable with one another. Some students are particularly shy and forcing them to answer overly difficult questions can only cause them to withdraw. Ideally, call on groups or have every student complete the same basic speaking tasks.

4 DON’T: IGNORE YOUR OWN CLASS RULES

Class rules are there for a reason. Most literature emphasises the importance of presenting the classroom rules in the first class. The follow up to this is that teachers need to start enforcing them right from the start. Of course, this requires coming to class with a concrete set of rules and consequences already in mind. Not enforcing them will result in an uphill struggle of trying to break established bad behaviours among your students in subsequent classes.

5 DON’T: JUST PLAY GAMES

Teachers may feel pressure to make students like them, like their class, and like learning English. This can lead to simply playing a series of English games, often considered review games, for the entirety of the first class or two. While there is value in getting the students speaking in a fun, relaxed environment, not all of your classes are going to be games based. So, play games if that is what you prefer, but also include some partner dialogue practice or easy worksheets so the students are aware that they will be expected to do some work during your classes.

6 DON’T: CATEGORIZE YOUR STUDENTS

Teachers tend to class students into two categories: good students, and troublesome students. This can cover a whole range of qualifiers that usually vary based on the teacher but may include behaviour, intelligence, interest, etc. Having these mental categories can be very helpful when it comes time to create seating charts, groups, or for classroom management, but it is important that teachers don’t form their impression based on the first class or two. Early in the year, students are still finding their own role within their new classroom and their relationship with their teachers. It is not uncommon for a student’s behaviour to change significantly after the first few weeks of class. I am sure that many of us have seen watched a few exemplary students turn into classroom management nightmares over the course of the semester. Keep those assessments flexible until things have settled down a bit.

As a side note, there is a plethora of literature out there stating that teachers should never pick favourites. Ever. I agree with this, with a slight twist: teachers should never play favourites in class. We all have favourite students: those who make us laugh, are interested in our subjects, go the extra mile, but, and this can be very difficult, we can’t favour them above their peers.

FIRST CLASSES ARE IMPORTANT TESTING PERIODS FOR ANY TEACHER.

It is the foundation of the relationship that will exist between the teacher and that class. There are a million things that can go wrong in these early weeks, but being well-prepared will help stave off most of them. Teachers, especially new teachers, tend to be nervous and anxious for the students to like them. This may often lead to the common mistakes discussed above. Remember that students will often like a teacher who is consistent, fair, and inclusive. Beyond that, relax and have a great year.
Who Am I?: 7 Creative Ways to Introduce Yourself to Your Class

ONE OF THE FIRST CHALLENGES FACING NEWLY MINTED ENGLISH TEACHERS, ESPECIALLY WHEN TEACHING IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY, IS FINDING A WAY TO INTRODUCE THEMSELVES TO THEIR NEW CLASS. Although it may vary depending on the culture you are teaching in, the students are generally interested in you and curious about your life and why you are now living in their country. Sadly, many teachers mistake this as an opportunity to hold a monologue at the front of class as they run through a presentation discussing their country, schooling, hobbies, etc. While there is nothing really wrong with this approach, it can get a bit boring for the students, regardless of how curious they are about you.

It is always better to get the students not only interested, but involved in the discussion if at all possible. While question and answer period may be a great way to do this, some cultures (Korea for example) tend to discourage students from asking many questions. In those instances, it is important that the teacher create opportunities for the students to get involved. Here are a few ideas about how to go about doing that.

ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO GET INVOLVED FROM DAY ONE

1 FOOD
While our primary purpose is to teach English, most foreign English Teachers also serve as a cultural ambassador, or at least a multicultural influence, in the classroom. Language is certainly an important part of culture but, let’s face it: food is going to be way more interesting to your students. As part of your self-introduction, include some information (especially pictures) of your favourite foods. Depending on the culture within which you are working, you may want to explain how the foods are made, what the ingredients are, and when they are usually eaten. Bringing a bag of candy from your home country (preferably candy that students cannot purchase in their own country) to serve as a prize in that first class will also get the students interested in you and where you come from.

2 GAME-SHOW-STYLE QUIZ GAME
This method can take a bit more work, but it has the benefit of giving students a reason to listen and engage with the class from the very first lessons. Create a short game-show-style activity for the last half of your class. There are many templates for this available online, but something along the lines of jeopardy is usually best as it allows for teamwork and is (usually) a familiar game. Before starting your presentation, divide your students into teams and explain that there will be a game based on this information at the end of class. Having pre-knowledge will encourage them to listen attentively. Present your introduction and be sure to include some interesting facts about your home country, province or state, culture, and family. This information will form the basis of the game. Once the presentation is complete, the teams will have the necessary information to participate in the game. Play until the end of class. As mentioned in the above point, some candy from your home country might be a great prize for this activity.

3 JIGSAW PUZZLE
This activity takes quite a bit more preparation but is much more interactive and student-based. There are several ways to approach it. To encourage speaking practice, create a short write-up about yourself and where you come from (pictures always add to student interest) and then cut it up into one or two sentence sections. Be sure that the language you use is appropriate to the students’ levels. When class starts, divide the students into groups and give each group part of the write-up and a lined piece of paper. Each group must then send out one or two people at a time to ask other groups to share their sections. Especially for higher level students and classes, it is best to emphasise that the slips must be read out loud when they are being shared, not simply handed to the person asking for them. Explain that the first group to get the complete story wins. Suggest that groups may want to bargain (ie. I will give you point three if you have point five).

4 20 QUESTIONS
This activity is one that is familiar to most teachers, but only really works for introductions to older classes that have a relatively high English level. To begin, introduce yourself by first and last name. What happens next depends on the age and level of the students. For high level students who have a solid grasp on geography the first topic for twenty questions can be your country of origin. From there topics can include province and/or city (it may help to provide a map of your country at this point), size of family, type of degree etc. While this activity can be interesting, it will not fill an entire class. Limit it to ten or fifteen minutes then move on.

5 TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE
This is a very simple game that can take up ten or so minutes at the end of an introductory class. It starts to draw the students into speaking and helps them get to know a bit more about their teacher. Teachers need to come up with several small, obscure facts about themselves and/ or their lives. The teacher will present these statements in groups of three. Two statements will be true and one will false. False statements can be either completely fabricated or a slight alteration of a truth. Start with false statements that are more blatant and progress to more subtle differences. Students will guess which statement is false. To turn this into a game, have teams write their answers down and then award points to the teams that have guessed correctly.
READ, RUN, AND WRITE

This is a good activity as it practices all aspects of English and gets the students up and moving. Create a list of facts about yourself, your country, and your family. Print off several copies and attach them to the board at the front of the room. Divide the students into groups of four to six. Each group will need a sheet of paper. One person in each group will be the scribe. The others will take turns running up to the board, reading and memorizing as much as they can, then running back to their group and reciting what they can remember to the scribe who will listen and write it down. The first group to finish wins. Remember when you are creating the list to keep the language within reach of your students’ levels.

STUDENT INTRODUCTIONS

It’s easy to forget that your students likely want you to know who they are as well. Many teachers will have close to a thousand students in a given semester, so it seems pointless to attempt to learn the student names. After all, there is no way teachers can remember them all. However true this may be, the act of introducing themselves is important to students in that it gets them speaking and shows them that they matter to the teacher.

STUDENT INTEREST IS AT ITS HIGHEST WHEN TEACHERS FIRST ARRIVE IN THEIR NEW CLASSROOMS.

Finding creative ways to engage your students from the very beginning may be the key to capturing and maintaining students’ attention for the duration of the semester. They are curious anyways, so instead of just talking at your students, try drawing them into conversation with you.
5 Ice-Breakers To Help Your Students Get to Know Each Other

Whether it is the first day of school or your students have been studying together for most of the semester, get to know activities are very valuable for the ESL classroom. Here are some get to know activities that work well with newly formed classes as well as those who have already gotten to know each other to some degree.

1 BEACH BALL TOSS

Help your students get to know each other with this fun icebreaker activity. Prepare for the game by getting a large plastic beach ball and writing several ice breaker questions on it with a permanent marker. To play, arrange your students in a circle and toss the ball to someone. They catch it, read the question that is nearest their right thumb, and then answer it. They then toss the ball to another student who reads and then answers the question nearest their right thumb. Continue playing until everyone in class has at least one chance to answer a question. You can also play this game with a class that already knows each other fairly well. Rather than answering the question right away, the player can explain the connection between it and themselves. Students can take turns showing their objects to the class. The class makes predictions about how that object relates to their classmate. After enough people have shared their guesses, have the person explain how the object really relates to them. Did anyone guess correctly?

2 GET TO KNOW YOU COLLAGE

This get to know activity doubles as a vocabulary builder for your ESL students. Start by setting up a shadow tracing station in your classroom. Simply direct a bright bulb at a blank wall. Students work with a partner to trace each other’s profiles. One person stands in front of the light, and the other person traces their shadow on a piece of white paper. Students then cut out their profiles and paste them on a colored piece of paper. Once students have their profiles, have them look through a collection of old magazines to find pictures of things that interest them. They should glue their interest pictures inside their profile cut out, looking up any vocabulary words they do not know but will need to talk about their pictures. After the collages are finished, give each student a few minutes in front of the class to talk about the pictures in their collage. After the presentations, you can display the collages around your classroom.

3 AN ALL ABOUT ME ACROSTIC

A simple way for students to get to know each other and learn adjectives that describe people at the same time is to have them create acrostics from their names. Start by brainstorming with your class a large list of adjectives that might be used to describe people. Put these words up on the board (and if you have a daring class you might even want to have students act out some of the adjectives). Once your lists are complete, have each person write his full name vertically down the left side of a piece of paper. He must then choose an adjective that begins with each of the letters of his name that also describes him and write it next to the letters. For example, someone named Li might write “loving, intelligent”. Once the acrostics are complete, have students share their adjectives with the rest of the class. You might even invite your class to suggest other adjectives each person might have used to describe himself.

4 GET TO KNOW YOU GUESSING GAME

In this game, students will guess at information about their classmates based on objects that person shares with the class. As homework, each person should gather two or three objects that represent something about them. It might be something they love, something they hate, something that evokes a certain memory – anything is ok as long as that person can explain the connection between it and themselves. Students take turns showing their objects to the class. The class makes predictions about how that object relates to their classmate. After enough people have shared their guesses, the person explain how the object relates to them.

5 APPLES TO APPLES

This get to know you party game is designed for native speakers, but that doesn’t mean your ESL class won’t have a ball with it, too. A simple set of Apples to Apples cards costs as little as ten dollars, and you and your students will get hours of entertainment from them. Each person receives seven cards that have a characteristic of a person, place, or thing on them (the red apple cards). One person lays down a green apple card, which has the name of a person, place, thing, or event. Each player then chooses one of his characteristic cards that best represents the green apple card and gives it to the “judge” for that round (the one who laid down the green apple card). That person reads all the red apple cards and chooses the one he thinks is most fitting. His choice is based solely on his own preferences, and this is how your students will get to know each other. Whoever laid down the card he chose gets to keep that green apple card. Play continues around the circle until one player has earned five green apple cards or however many you choose to set as the winning number. If you like, you can leave the game at a learning center for students to play during free learning periods. Make sure to include a dictionary at the center so students can look up unfamiliar words.

These fun activities not only give students a chance to get to know each other, they also give ESL students an opportunity to learn new vocabulary and practice their speaking skills. Whether your class is a bunch of old friends or they are just meeting each other for the first time, these activities can be valuable tools for building a more tightly knit class and supportive atmosphere in the classroom and outside it.
Getting to Know You: Every Level Ice Breakers for the First Day

ICEBREAKERS ARE IMPORTANT IN ANY CLASSROOM, AND EVEN MORE SO IN YOUR ESL CLASSROOM.

Your students will be working together for the rest of the semester, and the sooner they get to know each other, the more supportive and encouraging they can be. Some icebreakers, though, are better for beginning students while others are best for advanced students. Here are some activities you can use with your students no matter what level you are teaching.

TRY THESE IDEAS WITH BEGINNING STUDENTS

1 20 QUESTIONS JAR

Keeping icebreakers simple for beginning students will get your class off to a stress free start, and this ice breaker is one of the simplest. Write a list of simple get to know you questions (Do you like sports? What is your favorite song? What did you eat for breakfast? What time to you go to sleep? Etc.) Cut the questions into small strips and put them in a small jar. Students take turns choosing a piece of paper from the jar and answering the question. This activity also doubles as a fun way to review specific grammar points you will cover later in class. Just formulate your questions using the target grammatical structure and see if your students can answer with the correct grammar.

2 IT’S ON THE MAP

If you teach a class of internationals, this activity will help them get to know where their classmates are from. On a large map, have everyone put a small sticker where they are from. Once everyone has marked home, allow students to guess which sticker belongs to each person in your class.

3 FUN FACT MATCH UP

This simple icebreaker matches each student (and you) to an unexpected fact. Have each person write a fun or unexpected fact about themselves on a sticky note (I have a pet squirrel, for example). Collect all the sticky notes and put them on your front board. Students come up one at a time and point to a fact. They then guess who the fact describes. If they guess right, they keep the sticky note. If they guess incorrectly, they leave the note on the board. Students take turns until all the notes are gone. The person with the most notes in their possession at the end of the activity wins.

WARM UP YOUR INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS

1 TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

This simple icebreaker requires nothing other than personal creativity. Students prepare three statements about themselves – two that are true and one that is a lie. On her turn, a student shares her statements with her classmates, and they must guess which statement is the lie. This icebreaker even works with students who already know each other, as long as your students can come up with some really interesting facts about themselves.

2 STUDENT BINGO

This ice breaker will require a little preperation on your part, but after the initial investment you can use it year after year. On a blank Bingo board, fill in the boxes with phrases that might describe the people in your class: likes soccer, was born this month, has more than two siblings, speaks more than two languages, comes from the same home country as you, etc. (You can see some examples here: http://binged.it/1kHor2N ) Give each person a copy of the sheet. Then on your go, have students mingle and talk to each other, looking for someone who fits the description in one of the boxes. When they find someone who does, that person should sign their name in the box. When someone gets five boxes in a row, he calls Bingo and wins the round. If you like, play another round, but you will need a bingo board with different descriptions in the boxes to make the second round as challenging as the first.

HELP YOURSELF

Bring a big bag of M&Ms to class on the first day and pass them around, but tell your students to wait before they indulge. Once everyone has taken at least one candy, it’s time to get to know each other. Go around the room and give each person a chance to share about himself or herself. He will have to share one piece of information for every piece of candy he took. Some students may not have much to say if they only took a few pieces of candy. Others with a sweet tooth may end up sharing twenty or more pieces of information about themselves. After a student shares, he can enjoy his chocolate while listening to his classmates.

USE THESE IDEAS WITH ADVANCED STUDENTS

1 ICE BREAKER JENGA

One of the greatest investments I ever made for my classroom was in a simple set of Jenga style stacking blocks. It’s a fun game and easy to play, but I wanted to add a language element and use it with my ESL students, so I wrote an icebreaker question on each block. I have groups of students play the game, and whatever block they pull, they have to answer the question on it. It’s a great way to learn about each other without putting a lot of pressure on students, and the game aspect gives us all something to enjoy while we are answering questions.

2 WOULD YOU RATHER?

Would you rather always be late or early? Would you rather get to school by bus or by bike? What about going to school by plane? etc. Cut the questions (Do you like sports? What is your favorite song? What did you eat for breakfast? What time do you go to sleep? Etc.) Collect the questions into small strips and put them in a small jar. Students take turns choosing a piece of paper from the jar and answering the question. This activity even works with students who already know each other, as long as your students can come up with some really interesting facts about themselves.
or always be early? Would you rather have only peanut butter or only jelly? Asking questions such as these [http://bit.ly/1rBGyWj](http://bit.ly/1rBGyWj) is an easy way for students to get to know each other. Have your students stand up, give them a question, and have them go to opposite sides of the room based on their answer. Then choose a few volunteers to share why they made the choice they did. Though this is a simple icebreaker, students will have to be comfortable with the conditional structure to understand and answer appropriately, which is why it’s perfect for advanced students.

3 **INTERVIEW AND INTRODUCE**

Advanced students should be comfortable talking with a classmate and getting to know them through conversation. Take things a step beyond this by having each person introduce his new friend to the rest of the class. Not only will your students get to know each other, you will also get a good chance to evaluate the speaking skills of your new students.

**THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS CAN BE FUN AND EXCITING, BUT IT IS ALSO A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO GET TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER NO MATTER WHAT LEVEL YOU TEACH.**

These are just some of the activities you can do with your students on the first day to get the getting to know you started.
WHETHER YOU HAVE A CLASS FULL OF ANTSY FIVE-YEAR-OLDS, SHY TEENS, OR BUSY ADULTS LEARNERS, THEY ALL HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: THEY WILL BE TOGETHER FOR THE DURATION OF THE ESL COURSE, AND THEY WILL WORK TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE THEIR ENGLISH-LEARNING GOALS. What better way to start classes than to help them get to know each other? Here are some games and activities. These are more than simple icebreakers -- they will help your students really bond as a group.

**BACK TO SCHOOL: HOW TO HELP YOUR STUDENTS BOND**

**1 A BLANK CANVAS TO FILL**

Once you’ve greeted all of your students and gotten all of the introductions out of the way, present them with a completely blank bulletin board. Tell them that their first task as a group will be to decide what they want to do with it:
- Fill it with drawings of what they did over the summer?
- Put up family photos?
- Choose a theme and decorate accordingly (fall, summer movies, pop stars?)
- What they hope to learn?

When they have chosen their theme, they must decide how they will decorate the bulletin board and which materials they will use (you may have a box of odds and ends they can recycle).

**2 RIGHT ON OR DEAD WRONG?**

Hand out slips of paper and ask each student to write two things about themselves that are true and one thing that is untrue. Shuffle the papers and give one to each student. Students must guess which statement is untrue about their classmate.

**3 SHOW YOUR STUFF**

Tell your class that they will have the chance to show off their best talent. Have students divide themselves into groups according to different abilities. Form groups of students who have musical talent, artistic skills, or are really creative writers. Each group has to work as a team to prepare something to show to the class. Dancers may choreograph one of their favorite songs. Artists may create a poster. Writers may write a short story. Give them enough time to prepare and choose a day for your talent competition. Each team has to vote for another team they consider the best. The winning team wins a special prize.

**4 THINGS IN COMMON**

Create a questionnaire with 5 to 10 questions like:
- What’s your favorite American/English food?
- What’s your favorite American/English TV show?
- What’s your favorite international pop star?
- What’s your favorite color?
- What month were you born in?
- Etc.

Students must first complete this questionnaire and then walk around the classroom to find other students they share some of these things with. They must write the names down. When everyone’s done, each student counts how many people they share things with. The student with the biggest number wins!

**5 WHAT A CUTE BABY!**

Ask students to bring in baby pictures of themselves and put them up on the bulletin board. Students take turns matching a student to a baby pic. The student who guesses the most correctly wins. For obvious reasons, this game works best with teens or adult learners.

**6 BAG IT!**

Give each of your students a paper bag and instruct them on what to do with it:
- First, they must decorate it in a way that represents them. Students may draw a guitar on it because playing the guitar is their favorite thing to do. Or perhaps they can draw something connected to a sport they play. Or their country of origin.
- Second, they must place three things that represent them inside the bag. Obviously, they must be small enough to fit inside.
- Finally, they must bring the bag and its contents to school, and share it with the class.

**7 CHOOSE A CLASS NAME AND CREATE A FLAG**

You may have a class with students from different backgrounds and nationalities. While you may encourage them to share information about their countries of origin, it would be nice for them to also form their own little “nation”. Ask students to come up with a name for their class: English Ninjas, Grammar Warriors, or the like. Then, they may create their own class flag or banner, something that will represent them as a group. If you decide to create a class website, you can tell parents what your “English Ninjas” have been up to and proudly display their work.

TRY ANY OF THESE ACTIVITIES, AND YOU’LL SEE. WHAT WAS AT FIRST A GROUP OF COMPLETE STRANGERS WILL BECOME A GROUP OF STUDENTS WHO SHARE A GREAT MANY THINGS AND ARE READY TO EMBARK ON THIS ADVENTURE THAT IS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE.
A LOT HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON THE TOPIC OF "BULLYING," WHICH SEEMS TO BE A KIND OF TERRORISM AT THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL, THE BULLY CONTROLLING THE BULLIED THROUGH INSTILLING FEAR. Most of the writing on the topic is focused on bullying among school-age children, where we seem to associate the problem the most, and indeed the very term “bully” tends to summon images of a large boy in shorts, intimidat- ing his smaller peers on the schoolyard to steal their lunch money. However, bullying does occur among adults, of either gender, and it can occur in the classroom.

DEFINITION AND TYPES OF BULLYING

Bullying is simply the act of controlling others by instilling personal fear. The methods used by the bully can be both physical and mental, often both. In the classroom of adults, bullying rarely is taken to the level of physical violence but can be just as intimidating. Specific methods used may be among the following: verbal abuse, humiliating, moving into other’s physical space, implied or direct threats, demeaning criticism and the spreading of rumors. The purpose of bullying is to control through fear those the bully targets for whatever reason — often because the target is perceived as “weaker” in some way. The bully, who almost always feels in some inferior to others, gets a temporary boost to her ego through intimating — at least someone is of lower status.

METHODS TO ADDRESS BULLYING IN THE CLASSROOM

Preventing bullying is easier than trying to stop it once it has begun. Either can be achieved, however, in the following ways:

1. SET UP CLASS POLICIES FROM THE FIRST DAY

Many teachers spend the first day of class establishing ground rules and norms of behavior in class. This is important even in classes with adults, due to the diversity of our classrooms. Students come from widely different backgrounds and have varying understanding of appropriate behavior and often little or no background of such behavior in an academic setting. These standards, once established, can be referred to and reinforced throughout the term. For example, have students spend part of a session discussing classroom expectations and policies in groups and then as a whole class share what they brainstormed. There will probably be a core of standards that all of the groups mention in some way: these can be typed up and handed out at the next class session and/or posted on the class website. Typical policies include such standards as arriving and leaving on time, coming prepared, and so forth. Almost always listed is listening to and respecting others. Some instructors go so far as to have students sign the classroom behavior policies, in effect creating a “contract.” If the contract is breached, varying consequences may follow, from loss of points to, in extreme cases, referrals to the dean of academic discipline. Often a set of such policies will alert the bully to boundaries—boundaries that won’t accommodate his behavior. Some bullies drop the class when they realize their conduct won’t be tolerated, and the instructor is serious about enforcing the expectations.

2. BE A ROLE MODEL

Model respect for your students — allowing others to talk uninterrupted, respecting others’ opinions and providing criticism in a constructive manner. Much of the classroom climate can be traced to the teacher: if the teacher is authoritarian and doesn’t respect others, then the students will see a classroom where these behaviors are appropriate. In addition, some students, those who are new to an academic environment, may not know what “constructive criticism,” for example, really looks like although they may be familiar with the term on the abstract level. Therefore the instructor should model criticizing student work respectfully, focusing on ways to improve the work, not attacking it, or worse, its author. Establish your classroom as a place where it is safe to express opinions and make mistakes without being exposed to attacks or ridicule.

3. CALL OUT BULLYING

If bullying occurs, even with careful design of a safe classroom environment, it’s important not to ignore or avoid confronting a bully as this sends a message that the behavior is all right or at least that it won’t be stopped. Name the behavior and point it out as inappropriate, referring to the classroom policies: “As we’ve discussed, it is important in the academic environment to let everyone express her opinion. Please let Sarah finish, William, and then you may respectfully disagree with her.” This emphasizes the classroom standards while sending a message the instructor will enforce them.

4. MIX GROUPS UP TO AVOID CLAIRES

A bully’s power is in large part derived to from the “posse” which supports him, either through admiration or fear. Prevent cliques from forming in the first place so there will be no such group to prop up the bully. This can be done by regularly mixing groups and seating arrangements so that the same students are not always working together.

5. USE OF PEER PRESSURE

In extreme cases, it may not be enough for the teacher to confront a bully himself: the use of peer pressure can then prove useful. This often evolves organically from the classroom climate as the semester progresses. If the class standards are being regularly enforced, other students often will speak up about bullying behavior or react with dismay or even outrage when the bully interrupts or belittles others. This is in effect turning the table on the usual bullying pattern, where the bully garners support for his inappropriate behavior among his peers. In this case, the peer pressure can be used to stop rather than encourage bullying.

6. PRIVATE TALKS WITH THE BULLY AS NECESSARY

Sometimes, if necessary, a private talk with the bully is needed to curb his behavior if it continues or grows so excessive it interferes with learning. When isolated from her peers and an audience, the bullying loses a lot of her power. Sometimes the bully will react with anger -- oftentimes with confusion, as he is so unused to his behavior being corrected.

ADDRESSING BULLYING IN THE CLASSROOM CAN BE STRESSFUL OR EVEN FRIGHTENING. BUT BY CAREFUL CREATION OF A SAFE CLASSROOM CLIMATE AS WELL AS CONFRONTING BULLYING, THE INSTRUCTOR CAN ELIMINATE OR MINIMIZE IT AND ITS EFFECTS.
Please Have a Seat: Setting Boundaries in the Classroom

**Boundaries Can Be Defined as Where I Leave Off and Others Begin.**

A boundary is where I can claim some personal item, space or mental process as mine. Boundaries have long been a problem in the high school or college classroom as young adults may have little understanding of adult boundaries as they have just begun to navigate the adult world.

Different understandings of boundaries exist across cultures as well: a well-known example is personal space and how it varies across culture. For example, most Americans require more personal space than many other countries, and if someone, especially someone you don’t know well, moves into that personal space, they are likely to become uncomfortable. Besides physical boundaries, there are more abstract boundaries, such as emotional boundaries, reserving as my right to determine my own feelings or refusing to take responsibility for someone else’s. Annoyance, even anger, and a sense of violation come with others crossing our personal boundaries. These feelings have implications for the individual student, teacher and the classroom as a whole. Protecting boundaries, and modeling this for students, is important as students may have very different boundaries from the teacher as an individual as well as from what is expected in the classroom and broader culture. Students may not even be consciously aware of the concept of “boundaries” even if they feel uneasy when their own are violated. Finally, students may have little knowledge of how to protect their boundaries in an appropriate manner. Therefore, it is important for the teachers to model claiming and protecting boundaries while respecting other’s.

**Examples of Boundaries Violation**

Before teaching how to protect boundaries, “boundaries” and violations of them must be defined. Some broad categories of boundaries violations follow.

1. **Personal Space**

   Violations of personal space include sitting or standing too close, as already mentioned. This is often simply a cultural misunderstanding: different cultures have different notions of what is appropriate social distance. It also can be quite deliberate: standing too close to someone can signal a desire to dominate that individual’s movements. Violation of personal space can proceed more seriously, and usually deliberately, into violations against one’s person itself, such as uninvited and unwanted touching.

2. **Personal Property**

   Boundaries surround not only one’s person but also personal property. Violations against property include examples such as “borrowing” something and not returning it, borrowing it without asking, or damaging it accidentally or otherwise, and not admitting it or offering to fix it or replace it. Again, there is a continuum here from non-serious to more critical concerns. Students frequently borrow classroom items like pencils, pens and paper and then forget to return them. More serious would be taking confidential material, such as the grade book or stealing books or classroom equipment or damaging them.

3. **Mental Space**

   Violations against one’s mental space are among the most insidious because they are more difficult to name and protect. Prying into personal information and telling another individual what she or thinks or feels are common violations. Again, this may be unintentional as cultures widely differ on what “privacy” is and how much should be shared with others.

**Methods to Protect Boundaries**

These methods can be taught explicitly through discussion and lecture as well as implicitly through modeling.

1. **Name the Violation to Yourself**

   Just identifying why you are uneasy is a first step. An example would be determining why you are suddenly tense or annoyed: perhaps another person is standing too close or asking things he doesn’t need to or shouldn’t know.

2. **State the Violation and Its Effect ...**

   ... if necessary: for example, “Standing so close makes me uncomfortable,” or “That is information I’d rather not give.”

3. **State What You’d Like the Other Party to Do**

   This can be more direct, such as “Please have a seat, and I will help you in a moment” to the more direct “Please don’t touch that.” Again, indirectness is largely cultural — while many Americans will recognize “Have a seat” as often being a way of saying that their standing is a specific place is causing a problem, this isn’t always the case, and more directness may be required.

**Methods to Teach Protecting Boundaries**

1. **Explicitly**

   Discuss what is appropriate in American culture, such as what may or may not be asked. Or when reading or watching movies, point out the behavior of the characters: who is standing too close, for example, or why one character reacted with anger at being
asked something. Letting students know when they’ve asked an inappropriate question is another method to teach about boundaries. This has to be done sensitively to avoid embarrassing the student, as she or he may have been unaware of the inappropriateness.

**IMPLICITLY**

This is done largely through modeling: standing an appropriate distance from students, asking permission when borrowing something, such as a student’s pencil, or asking if it is all right to ask a specific question.

**ROLE-PLAYING**

Sometimes having students take certain roles and acting out a situation, either through script or through improvisation, can teach a lot about boundaries. It can develop understanding about roles within culture. For example, students’ current understanding of how one relates appropriately to friends, teachers and classmates can be revealed through role playing and the boundaries with U.S. culture rehearsed. The language for talking about boundaries can also be taught when role-playing, such as how to tell politely tell someone she is asking a question you would rather not answer.

**TEACHING ABOUT BOUNDARIES IS DIFFICULT DUE TO VARYING INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL NOTIONS ABOUT BOUNDARIES AND HAS TO BE HANDLED WITH SENSITIVITY.** However, it is necessary for students to develop understanding about expected boundaries in their new culture.
This isn’t the Right Time: Setting Limits in the Classroom

TEACHERS ARE ROUTINELY PUSHED PAST THEIR LIMITS — THAT LINE THAT SEPARATES WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN AND WILL DO FROM WHAT THEY CAN’T AND WON’T.

In fact, pushing teachers to the line has long been popular entertainment for students. Most often, of course, it isn’t intentional. All students have needs: many have a lot of needs, and many of those needs are huge and beyond the individual teacher’s control. Because teachers have so many conflicting needs to address in a finite time, setting limits on what teachers can and cannot be reasonably expected to do is paramount.

We also come from a culture that has sometimes shocking expectations of teachers: note the portrayal of teachers in the movies. If we are not able to live up to those “hero” standards, such as single-handedly turning around a failing community in a few months, as Michelle Pfeiffer did in “Dangerous Minds” or draining herself financially and damaging her marriage for the good of the school as Hillary Swank did in “Freedom Writers,” we are then villains.

In addition to it not being good for the individual teacher, having no limits is ultimately not good for the students they serve, the teaching profession as a whole, and the school community. The lack of limits shifts responsibility onto the teacher from students in addressing their own needs, leaving them dependent on the teacher. It also is bad for the school culture as a whole — why set up a budget for books and supplies, for example, if you know the classroom teachers are going to foot the bill out of their own pockets, as they often do? Teachers, by engaging in this kind of self-sacrifice and failure to set limits, are actually enabling a dysfunctional culture, where those in charge fail to set priorities. And certainly the lack of limits is not good for the teachers, draining them financially, emotionally and physically. In fact, about half of all teachers leave the profession within five years. For good teachers to keep teaching, they must learn to set limits.

PRINCIPLES OF SETTING LIMITS

1 DETERMINE WHO

Who should you help first? Who can wait or help themselves? It’s pretty common even at the college level to have five to ten students crowding the teacher’s desk before and after class needing help “right now.” Determining who needs help immediately and if who (probably all) can wait until office hours is critical.

2 DETERMINE WHAT

Decide what you can realistically be expected to do for students and what is beyond your time, expertise and resources. Students sometimes demand not only time and academic help but also extra psychological, financial and social support. Communities also seem to take it on faith teachers will spend a hefty portion of their salaries and time on what others in the community should be giving. Set limits on how much and what you can give. To not do is of course bad for the individual teacher but also enables others in not taking responsibility that is really theirs.

3 DETERMINE WHERE AND WHEN

Determine the appropriate forum for helping someone. I teach at a college of mostly lower-income, first-generation college students, where it is apparently considered appropriate to come up to the instructor while she is lecturing with the whisper “I need to talk to you now.” Nothing will satisfy the student until I step out of class to hear her “emergency.” I’ve had to really set limits with this class on when they can present their emergencies: I’m available before class, after class, during office hours and by appointment. They also have my email address and office phone number where they can bug me just about any time. Just not during class. Also there is the nagging question: if it were really such an emergency, why is the student in class at all and not, for example, at the emergency room? There are other people in the universe better equipped on occasion than the teacher to address emergencies. Enabling students by helping with each emergency helps no one, ultimately.

ENFORCING THE LIMIT

Deciding what your limits are is only a first step, of course, although it is important. After that comes the more difficult part of stating the limits and enforcing them. This is harder than it sounds, but it can be done.

In the example already cited of the class where students’ individual emergencies took precedence over the class lecture, setting limits became important because this was a fairly regular occurrence.

1 STATE AND REPEAT AS NECESSARY

After it happened once, I stated the limit. “When I am teaching, please don’t interrupt. See me before class, phone, email...” etc. This worked for several days, and then there was the student who ran in late and came up to me while I was lecturing:

“Ms. Stacia, I really need to talk to...”

“Elizabeth, remember what we said about coming up during class? Please wait.”

“But this is really, really important — we need to talk now...” etc.

So more had to be done. This is where the mantra comes in.

2 HAVE A MANTRA

My mantra is something like “Talk to me later, before class, after class, email, or call.” If I repeat that
each time a student comes up — by rote, in a monotone — they finally get the message. Or they don’t come up anymore just because they don’t want to hear the mantra. Either way works.

3 STATING ALTERNATIVES IS ALSO IMPORTANT.

Students shouldn’t feel cut off by you, with no alternative. (Note I didn’t say there were, actually, no alternatives, just that students might feel there are not.) Suggesting an alternate might be helpful. In the case of the chronic problem of interrupting during lecture — well, of course, the mantra regarding seeing me outside of class time was an alternative although apparently not a good one for some students. Find an acceptable alternative to your “line in the sand” might help: e.g., “I can’t address that problem at this minute, but if you have a seat, we can talk as soon as I’m finished here” could be a solution both parties can live with.

SETTING LIMITS AND FAILURE TO DO SO HAS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STUDENT, TEACHER, AND COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE.

Students don’t learn how to problem-solve, the teacher is left drained, other leaders within the school community don’t fulfill their own commitments to students, and the whole community suffers from the loss of good teachers every year. Therefore, setting limits is critical to the practice of teaching.
Drama Queens/Kings & Masters of Crisis: Minimizing their Effects

WE’VE ALL ENCOUNTERED AT LEAST ONE: THE “DRAMA QUEEN” (OR “KING”), CAPABLE OF TAKING THE MOST MINOR OF ANNOYANCE — E.G., THE FULL WASTEPAPER BASKET — AND TURNING IT INTO A CRISIS OF ALMOST GLOBAL PROPORTIONS, REQUIRING IMMEDIATE ACTION. Or the drama queen or king may actively create crisis. In life outside the classroom, these crises are often real ones, involving job loss, bankruptcy, or criminal offenses. In the classroom, the emergencies tend to be smaller, at most unsubstantiated reports of cheating or other offenses committed by classmates, however, they remain a major drain of time and energy.

There are a number of puzzling reasons for the drama addict to engage in such destructive behavior, of blowing up minor concerns or creating major ones. Upon further examination, the biggest motivation is probably control. By creating the drama, the master of it gets everyone’s immediate focus in dealing with the crisis and creates a situation she or he has unique qualifications to manage, having long experience in such crises and agency in this one in particular. Whatever the reason, however, as in life in general, steps must be taken within the classroom to minimize or even extinguish the drama master’s effects if not the behavior itself.

HERE IS HOW TO MINIMIZE EFFECTS OF DRAMA QUEENS/KINGS

1 QUESTIONING

Ask critical questions: “How important is this right now? What do you want me to do about it? What actually can be done about it?” This gets the student focused on solutions rather than the drama itself or may even lead to a concession that the issue isn’t really an issue.

2 SET LIMITS

“I can’t address the wastepaper problem right now, and am not actually motivated to, as I’m setting up for class, but will do so at break.” This gets the student to put the issue in perspective and consider effects of the behavior on others.

3 PASS RESPONSIBILITY

“I’m sorry you are so distressed over the loss of five points. If you arrive on time, then you will not lose points.” This will strip away the drama master’s illusion of control, that he or she can make the loss of points the focus of immediate attention, and places the control back where it belongs, on what he or she can control — his or her behavior.

4 PRIVATE DISCUSSIONS

A large part of a drama queen’s power is an audience — hence the “drama” portion “drama queen.” However, drama isn’t really drama without an audience, and the audience is indeed part of the drama master’s control, especially if more players can be pulled in. “Well, maybe the wastepaper basket isn’t important to you, Ms. Baker, but it is to the rest of us. Hey, class, how many of you agree with me? Isn’t the waste paper basket...” etc. Remove the audience and pull the drama queen into a private discussion in your office or after class. It is more difficult to be dramatic in a small space before an audience of one. In addition, the instructor can help the drama master save face: “I’m sorry that X has caused you anxiety. Can you explain what the problem is, exactly, that is creating such concern and what can be done about it?” This kind of isolating and direct questioning forces the drama king or queen into demonstrating there is an actual crisis by giving specifics about it without embarrassing him or her in front of peers, which will compound the problem. The lack of a larger forum also allows the issue to die a natural death because the motivation in keeping it alive also dies.

5 STAND FIRM

People like the drama queen who are used to being in control naturally are threatened by the loss of that control. Therefore, they may lash out and become even more dramatic than usual. Be prepared for adult tantrums: acknowledge the feelings behind the outburst, but stand firm on your boundaries: e.g., “I’m sorry you are so upset, but as I’ve mentioned before, I cannot take up class time with this. Please take a seat and speak to me after class.”

6 TAKE BACK CONTROL FROM THE DRAMA QUEEN

Drama queens often have a limited set of boundaries. It is the instructor’s job, ultimately, to worry about the classroom environment, other students’ classroom manners, and overall, how class time will be structured. Point out gently to the drama master when she has transgressed one of these boundaries: “Thank you for your concern, Abigail, and I’ll certainly look into this matter of Jenny’s use of Facebook during the lecture. Meanwhile, please focus your energies on your own grade and doing well in the class.” This is actually correct: other students’ behavior is the instructor’s problem unless it directly impacts the drama queen, and the individual student’s main responsibility is her own success. Again, be prepared for outbursts, insistence that she is addressing the concern because you aren’t doing your job, and so forth. Stand firm by repeating the expectation the drama queen remove herself from this matter and focus her energies elsewhere. This reinforces your respective roles and boundaries.

7 CONSIDER INVOLVING HIGHER AUTHORITIES

As a last resort, if the drama master becomes so disruptive that he im-
pedes classroom instruction, consider meeting with him and the dean. The drama master may actually preempt you in this move if you are not responsive to the effort to disrupt the class with his antics. Remain calm during the meeting, stay factual: e.g., that the drama king repeatedly interrupts lectures, argues with you and other students, and in general takes up class time. If you have documented the behavior, such as notes of specific incidents on specific dates, this can also help. In addition, a drama master might well have created her own paper trail in a series of argumentative or hostile emails to you. She may have even copied the dean or other administrators because of her conviction in the rightness of her actions and the degree of offense that has been directed at her. All of this serves the purpose of demonstrating inappropriate behavior on her, not your, part, especially if you have remained coolly professional in the face of her drama. The situation, however, rarely evolves this far. More commonly, the drama queen by her very nature finds it difficult to sustain a drama you are largely not entertained by and unresponsive to and takes her act elsewhere, usually by dropping the class.

**Drama Masters, because of their need for attention, can be among the most challenging students to deal with.**

However, by remaining professional, sticking with facts, and redirecting the attention of the drama master to more productive uses than creating crises, the instructor can limit the negative energy of the drama master and even channel it in more productive uses.
Tolerance of Ambiguity and Lack Thereof in Students

I HATE TO SOUND LIKE AN OLD, IRASCIBLE PROFESSOR, BUT I’M FINDING AN INCREASING GENERATION GAP BETWEEN COLLEGE STUDENTS TODAY AND THOSE OF MY GENERATION. Most notable today is the tendency of students to treat a college education as a commodity which they’ve purchased, and the quality of which — and the individual student’s grade — is solely in the responsibility of the instructor. Related to this “consumer” attitude is an intolerance of ambiguity, the demand to be told exactly what to do, in order to protect the precious grade, the student’s “investment.” This has resulted in a number of trends: for example, the expectation to provide increasingly detailed “rubrics” for each project which explain in excruciating detail its expectations and their relationship to the students’ overall grades.

In a personal experience, a few years ago I had a student in a graduate-level education course who claimed to “not understand” what to do in the design of a “webquest.” A webquest asks the student to visit a number of related websites, recording information from each, in order to investigate a problem. In other words, it is a research project incorporating online data. The problem was not that the student didn’t understand and admitted it: most students then had not yet had experience with such a project. Indeed, because I had anticipated some confusion, I gave out a list of detailed instructions on how to complete the project. Because the student still expressed confusion, I then provided a model that I created of a webquest investigating my own question on the effects of writing portfolios. When the student still expressed confusion, I then obliged by asking for the student’s topic and completing the first step for her. Not surprisingly, there was still feedback that the assignment was “confusing” and an implied demand that the project be eliminated—which the student stated explicitly was to protect her grade.

It is my position, however, that some ambiguity is part of an education, indeed may be the essential component. Development of critical thinking skills naturally involves learning new material that is initially confusing, demanding one’s active engagement in the learning process in order to plan one’s original work that is not modeled completely on someone else’s. Students should approach the class expecting some ambiguity and lack of immediate understanding, and the teacher should guide students toward this acceptance.

STEPS TO GETTING STUDENTS TO ACCEPT AMBIGUITY

1. START THE TERM WITH CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS BUT MOVE AWAY FROM THIS GRADUALLY.

Starting with clear instructions of the material but eventually turning control over the learning process to the student is a traditional teaching method called “scaffolding.” That is, the instructor provides temporary support as students progress in competence. In the webquest, the clear instructions, examples, and instructor completion of part of the assignment are all temporary “scaffolding” that teachers should be expected to provide, especially over unfamiliar material. The operative word, however, is “temporary.” Students are expected to actively engage in this learning process from the start so that they can gain enough understanding of the material to eventually progress independently. The problem is when the student “shuts down” and turns over all control to the instructor. The teacher should actively discourage this response. Explaining “too much” can create a passive learner who has not grappled with the material enough to truly understand it. Therefore, when students begin to show some understanding, the teacher should stop helping so much.

2. EMPHASIZE THE NEED FOR COMPLETING ONE’S OWN ORIGINAL WORK.

Along with the increasing demand of detailed instructions is the expectation for “examples”: students expect examples of almost all assignments, from essays to research projects to journal responses. Again, while a valued teaching method, excessive use of “examples” is problematic. For one, it’s not always necessary, especially with familiar assignments. While the instructor shouldn’t assume that all students have seen a webquest, it’s not at all unreasonable to expect they all know what a paragraph looks like. Scrambling up so many models is also an additional burden on the instructor, as not all student work is exemplary, and a model created by the teacher is often artificial. By nature teachers are not at the students’ level of development, and examples created by teachers on assignments can look forced. In a related concern is the potential for plagiarism. If the model is too close to the project students are expected to complete, the probability of students just copying the model increases. Teachers should therefore not yield to demands for examples in all cases. In addition, there is a need to explain what plagiarism is and the seriousness of the offense.

3. TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO COME UP WITH THEIR OWN TOPICS AND DO THEIR OWN RESEARCH.

A main problem behind the demand to be told what to say and how to say it is students’ mistaken belief they have nothing original and of value to say. This notion is usually incorrect: almost everyone has some original interest and something of value to say about it. Therefore, wide latitude in the choice of topics for projects should be
allowed. I’ve had students who have researched such “nonacademic” topics as the process of recruiting professional football players and controversial topics such as whether a college education really delivers on its investment. Allowing this choice not only decreases the possibility of plagiarism, but student engagement is also increased. Students are more engaged with a project they care about and therefore work harder, learn more, and produce better work.

4 DISCUSS THE VERY NATURE OF COLLEGE EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR.

At some point in the process, often early on, the students begin to ask why: why is the instructor not telling us exactly what to do, how to do it, what her expectations are: why isn’t she doing her job? It is now time to discuss the nature of a college education. By telling students exactly what to do, the teacher is actually doing a large part of the student’s job, which is to grapple with the material, maybe get frustrated, feel confused, and deal with ambiguity in general. This is all part of the learning process. In dealing with these problems, students begin to develop critical thinking skills required in figuring out, for example, what they want to research and how to go about finding the answers to their questions. To take over the process completely is to rob students of this experience which is the very education they’ve paid me for (which they often remind of).

AS FOR WHAT I EXPECT? THE ANSWER TO THAT IS OFTEN I HONESTLY DON’T KNOW. THE FINAL PRODUCTS THAT STUDENTS PRODUCE IS ULTIMATELY IN THEIR CONTROL.
And often I’m pleasantly surprised.
How To Create An Effective Learning Community

A LOT HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT DIVERSE CLASSROOMS AND THEIR ADVANTAGES.
From many years of experience as an instructor in diverse classrooms, I can attest to this: there is nothing quite as energizing as the flow of ideas, sometimes heated, that comes out of a classroom among people of varying levels of maturity, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic status. However, that is not to say that these classrooms are without disadvantages.

An inherent concern in the diverse classroom is initial student alienation from each other. What, after all, does the eighteen-year-old female freshman have in common with the male veteran in his thirties readjusting to being a civilian? Or to the student with gang/criminal history trying to straighten out his life? To the young immigrant student longing to break free from the confines of his parents’ boundaries? How does the instructor create a community of students of such varied background and goals? It is a challenge, but it can be done.

TEACH A DIVERSE CLASS EFFECTIVELY

1 INITIAL ICEBREAKING ACTIVITIES
Group activities should be incorporated from the first day, in learning about the class together. On the first day, have students work in groups to come up with three to five critical questions they have about the class: they can then read the syllabus to find the answers or ask the instructor. Further ice breaking activities related to the course content or college life can be incorporated in the early days of the class in surveys to find out peers’ college majors, for example, or past experiences related to the course content. For example, as the first writing assignment, I had students write their “literacy biography,” in which they discussed their own experiences with reading and writing. All students were reflective on the topic, and in this way they also got to learn each other’s backgrounds -- if they had second language/cultural experience, for example, or if they shared the same interests in reading material.

2 INSTRUCTOR MODELING
Instructors must model the behavior they wish to see in students: in this case, authentic concern for each student and her experiences. If the instructor treats each student as if her contributions to the class discussion are valuable -- and invariably they are--then the other students will act accordingly and take an interest beyond the students of similar background that they might normally gravitate to. For example, a number of students had unexpected opinions on the topics of our criminal justice system and treatment of drug offenders--unexpected and perhaps unacceptable, in a traditional college setting. But by modeling listening to their opinions on the topic, even if they weren’t entirely socially acceptable--e.g., opinions on the criminal justice system, drawn from personal experience of involvement with that system--respect for different viewpoints was modeled.

3 GROUP WORK / DISCUSSION
Discussion of course readings is one of the activities that can really get students exchanging ideas with each other. The discussions are based on core class readings, on topics such as language use and learning, from writers like Amy Tan and Richard Rodriguez, both of whom have written compellingly of their experiences in growing up in bilingual homes and of language learning. Language is of course a universal--everyone has experience with it, and it is through dialogue here that students can begin to exchange opinions and experiences. For example, many students have had the experience of suffering through foreign language classrooms with less than effective instruction (it is a source of constant amazement to me that California youth who may have taken Spanish from kindergarten onward leave high school without being able to communicate in the language at all.) Because students have this shared experience, and probably have reflected on it, they can discuss why the instruction was so ineffective and what might have improved it.

4 CORE TOPICS OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONCERN
Once students are comfortable discussing more universal topics, they can begin discussing specific social issues that are still of general concern. For example, one of the course readings was written by a man serving a life sentence for an unpunished murder committed when he was a young man. He wrote compellingly about how the prison system, focused on punishment rather than rehabilitation, was ineffective in addressing crime--mostly committed by people such as himself: young males with poor impulse control who would not in their lives commit another crime. Because most students have some experience with crime -- either as victim, or as a perpetrator, sometimes themselves a perpetrator--all were concerned with the topic and had varied perspectives on it to share. Entering a dialogue with each other on a topic of importance deepened understanding of the topic and each other.

5 EXTENDING THE DIALOGUE: ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS
The dialogue can be further extended to online discussion threads, if your class has a companion website or “learning management system,” as many do today, such as Blackboard and Turnitin, websites set up specifically for classroom use and which can be modified by individual class need. I posted some of our topics on the discussion threads portion of the site, asking students to post once to
the topic and to at least two peers’ responses. This got students more involved in the topic and deeper responses their peers were developed as students were more able to reflect than in a face-to-face discussion and did not have to worry about turn-taking as they did in class. In addition, introverted students who had trouble speaking up in class were drawn into the dialogue more. Most students went beyond the required participation because they became committed to the dialogue.

**INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS AND RESEARCH BASED ON STUDENT INTEREST**

Once students have become acclimated to the academic dialogue, they are ready to develop the dialogue more through independent research and writing on a topic of individual interest. It is here that students are really drawn into what it is to be a college student. Some students chose to write about topics we had been discussing, such as gun control, but others chose to research a topic of interest to themselves -- cleared by me, the instructor, for appropriateness (they invariably were.) One young man, a returning student, researched the value of the four-year, liberal arts degree, focusing on the drawbacks (expense, time, lack of focus on student need and interest, all leading to a high attrition rate). This research generated a great deal of interest from his peers and led to students considering focusing their college goals early and learning ways to limit expense. In addition to generating interest in other students, students who posted their writing received feedback on ways to improve their work from their peers -- critique they were receptive to as they now knew and were comfortable with each other.

**CAUTIONS: HEATEDNESS. MIXING UP THE GROUPS**

Are there some concerns in students sharing diverse opinions? Of course. A major one is the concern of conversations getting overheated, which quieter students in particular may find uncomfortable. Usually a reminder from the instructor to respect each other in exchanging opinions is all that is needed. In addition, a problem I encountered last semester was groups “solidifying” early, with students working over and over again with the same peers -- usually those they happened to be seated near. In teaching the class again, I would make sure that students changed the groups every day.

**THERE ARE CHALLENGES AS WELL AS BENEFITS TO WORKING IN A DIVERSE CLASSROOM.**

However, with teacher planning and effort, students can move beyond initial discomfort to sharing their experiences enough to feel comfortable in the dialogue with each other and critique of each other’s work that make an effective learning community.
HAVE YOU EVER TAUGHT A LESSON AND WALKED AWAY JUST FEELING LIKE SOME STUDENTS WEREN’T GETTING IT?
In fact, have you ever had a student who just didn’t seem to connect to the way you were teaching no matter what you said? If so, it may be because that student had a learning style that didn’t connect with your personal teaching style. Learning styles are intangible, but they are so important for making sure students get what you are teaching. That’s why it’s worth taking some time to determine what learning style each of your students seems to prefer. You don’t have to take extra class time to do it. Just observe your students (you do anyway) and see which of the following categories seems to best describe them. Then make sure you give them just what they need to flourish as language learners.

CATER FOR STUDENTS’ LEARNING STYLES FOR IMPROVED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

1 VISUAL LEARNERS
Visual learners prefer working with images or spacial relations as they learn. ESL students who are visual learners might prefer a picture dictionary to a written one. Or you might find them highlighting with different colors or creating a highly organized system of note organization. For these learners, letting them see what you are teaching is key. Bring in objects when you teach new vocabulary. Write everything on the board. Use different colors or fonts when giving informational handouts. Anything you can do to stimulate their vision will help these learners understand and retain the information you are giving them.

2 AURAL LEARNERS
Aural learners use sound to help them process and retain information. These ESL students may stand out as good listeners, or they might have no problem understanding material you present in a lecture though they struggle to answer questions on paper. They may often wear headphones and listen to music both in English and their native languages. To make the most of this learning style, be sure to present information in a spoken manner. But don’t stop there. Tie songs and jingles into your lessons whenever possible. Talk about rhythm and rhyme. You may even want to play soft background music while students are working independently or in groups. Aural learners tend to do well in traditional classrooms since most information is presented orally, but make sure you add special touches to your teaching style to really connect with the students who learn this way.

3 VERBAL LEARNERS
Do you have any ESL students who just seem to pick up the language without even trying? They are likely verbal learners who thrive on using words. Their skills with language will most likely come out in both oral and written modes. These are your natural language learners, and they may even be multilingual already. For these learners, incorporate both speaking and writing into assignments. Include group activities in class like discussions or skit writing and performing. The more these students can use words, the more they will learn both inside and outside class. Write your notes on the board or give handouts, too, and you will be impressed with how easily these students learn.

4 PHYSICAL LEARNERS
Physical learners are also known as kinesthetic learners. These students learn best when their hands and bodies are involved. You might recognize these ESL students by their inability to sit still, by their love of hand motions or working with manipulatives. The more you can get these students moving as they learn, the more they will remember and be able to use English in real life. One of the best ways to teach physical learners is the Total Physical Response technique. You can also include songs with hand motions and classroom manipulatives to help these students physically connect with the information they are learning. Make your classroom as full of hands on manipulatives as you can, and have learning centers available where these students can really get their hands into what they are learning.

5 LOGICAL LEARNERS
Logical learners are mathematical, analytical, and look for the reasons language acts the way it does. These are the students who ask deeper questions about grammar that might be difficult to answer. They want to know why. They might be engineers, scientists, or business analysts or will take on these professions in the future. To reach these learners, emphasize the whys behind the whats when it comes to language patterns. If you can, give reasons for grammar rules and explain how the brain is processing language (so English language rules make sense). These students will value discussions about language acquisition, phonological rules, psycholinguistics, and syntax. You might want to use sentence trees/diagrams in class to help these students see the underlying structure behind spoken English.

6 SOCIAL LEARNERS
Social learners, also known as interpersonal learners, learn best when they work with other people. You might see these ESL students flourishing in groups and on partner projects but struggling when they are tackling questions on their own. These are the students who are always talking in class and who are social butterflies. Many strong extroverts are also social learners. For these students, group assignments are key. Using activities where students must work together to understand something or reach a goal will get these students interested and involved in any lesson. Role plays are a great method of social language use. So are jigsaws. Getting these students out of the classroom and into the “real world” to use the English that they know will
also hit them in just the right educational place.

**SOLITARY LEARNERS**

Solitary learners, also known as intrapersonal learners, may seem uninterested in the very activities that social learners love. That is because these learners prefer working independently and studying on their own. You may identify these learners by their disinterest in group activities or their reluctance to pair up with classmates. They may often have their head in a book trying to puzzle out information you may have already presented to your class. To encourage the most learning in these students, give them time to work on their own. Setting up learning centers and offering free reading periods are great for giving these learners time to figure things out for themselves. Don’t take it personally if they are disinterested in your teaching or classroom activities with other students. Giving them the space they need to puzzle things out on their own will make all the difference in their English studies.

**ONE OF AN ESL TEACHER’S GREATEST CHALLENGES IS UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING TO ALL THE DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES EXHIBITED IN THEIR STUDENTS.**

And even though it is a lot of work, it is worth taking the time and making the effort to really reach students where they are. If you do, you will see your students achieve success in their language studies, and they will retain and use the language they learn for many years to come.
Get Them Involved: Teach Students To Cooperate & Collaborate

COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION ARE KEY, NOT ONLY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING BUT IN ANY CLASSROOM AND HOUSEHOLD FOR THAT MATTER.

It is one the first things kids learn to do in kindergarten and preschool, and it’s no surprise. When children work together in small groups, they can share strengths and also develop their weaker skills. Also, they develop their interpersonal skills and learn to deal with conflict. When they cooperate and are guided by clear objectives, students participate in different activities that improve their understanding. In today’s world where being a “team player” is often a key part of business success, teaching children to cooperate and collaborate from an early age is very useful and important. Take a look at some of the benefits of cooperation and collaboration in the ESL classroom.

- Since students participate together in groups, they interact and develop interpersonal skills. As students interact, they acquire skills for resolving conflicts or differences when they appear. They learn to relate to fellow learners as they work together on tasks in groups. This is particularly beneficial for students who have difficulty with social skills. Also, because learning to communicate is essential in language learning, structured interactions can improve communicative abilities.

- Learning to respect others is extremely important, and by learning to respect each other in order to work together, children can acknowledge individual differences. While working together, students will have a variety of responses. This is very positive since it can help the group become aware of a wide range of perspectives which will make their work more complete and comprehensive.

- Children need to be challenged. Through teamwork, challenges are easier to deal with since they can rely on each other to find solutions. Different perspectives provide different and varied alternatives to problem solving.

- Working with others teaches students to value all contributions. Students learn to work with all types of people and diversity is celebrated. Different things like, culture, likes, and personal experiences allow students to add their perspectives to an issue. Students have the opportunity to reflect and this helps students to better understand other cultures and points of view.

- They will have more opportunities for personal feedback on their ideas and contributions because there are more exchanges among students, and they will provide feedback for each other.

Often cooperation and collaboration in learning is not easy to achieve. There are situations in which conflicts that arise obstructize learning, particularly in situations where students must work together on a problem. As a result, cooperative and collaborative learning require teaching kids to work well with others by resolving these inevitable conflicts. That’s why, in order to create an environment in which cooperative and collaborative learning can take place, three things are necessary. First, students need to feel safe, but also challenged. Second, groups need to be small enough that everyone can contribute. Third, the task students work together on must be clearly defined. There are a number of techniques and exercises that you can use. Among the most popular are:

1. THINK-PAIR-SHARE

It is one of the best known and most common exercises used. Students have the opportunity to reflect on the question and then practice sharing and receiving possible solutions. Since it is simple, teachers find it easy to use and adapt to a wide range of course material.

2. INTERVIEW

This is a great activity to use as an ice-breaker because by interviewing each other children learn about their fellow classmates and can share opinions, positions, or ideas. Students are paired and take turns asking each other questions that can either be provided by the teacher or created by them with supervision. After the interview they can introduce their partner and tell the other students what they know about them.

3. JIGSAW

This is great for problems that are more complex. Here, students become experts in one of many parts of a problem. They first participate in a group exclusively focused on a single part of the problem. Later, groups are rearranged with a representative from each expert group who can now manage the whole problem because they have sufficient expertise.

4. PEER EDITING

Students are paired up and assigned a task. Peers give each other feedback during the completion of that activity. For instance, each student in the pair describes their topic ideas and outlines the structure of their work while their partner asks questions, and develops an outline based on what is described.

5. NOTE-TAKING PAIRS

For any student, learning how to take notes is important. The reason is that poor note-taking leads to poor performance. A good way to exercise this is by having students summarize what they understood of a concept based on notes they have taken and by getting feedback from their partner. This gives students the opportunity to find gaps in their written records. The note-taking should be guided by questions so students realize what is important.
SEQUENCES

Graphic organizers are powerful tools that make information meaningful and less complex. In exercises that involve sequences, students can provide a visual representation of a series of events or actions. Students working together can be asked to organize information. They can even be asked how each sequence relates to another.

COOPERATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING BRINGS POSITIVE RESULTS SUCH AS DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF CONTENT, INCREASED OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT OF LESSON GOALS, IMPROVED SELF-ESTEEM, AND HIGHER MOTIVATION.

Helping students learn to cooperate and collaborate with one another can enable them to become actively and constructively involved in the lesson, to take control of their own learning, and to improve teamwork skills.
A Creative Language Unit to Help Students Understand Each Other

TEACHING INTERNATIONALS ISN’T LIKE TEACHING PEOPLE FROM YOUR OWN COUNTRY.
Not only do they speak a different language from you (and often from each other), they hold different cultural values. Culture, though it may seem easy to understand, is, in fact, a very complex and intimate part of who a person is. What makes culture more difficult to understand is that it permeates so much of who a person is without that person even realizing it. This activity is designed to help your students appreciate different cultures among the world’s people and to develop cultural sensitivity toward each other as well as the rest of the globe’s populations. Your students will be creating their own culture and the elements that are part of it and then sharing that culture with one another.

CONSIDER USING THIS ACTIVITY TO DEVELOP CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

1 ELEMENTS OF CULTURE
Before your students get creative with their own cultures, your class should take a look at the finer points of their own cultures. If you teach a class composed of the same nationality, you can use that nationality as your example. If you teach a class of internationals, use your own culture as the example, and then have them note the same points from their own cultures. Explain that culture comprises much of who we are without us even realizing it. Culture shows itself in our beliefs, our values, our habits, our expectations, our language, and our traditions among other things. Take a closer look at either your culture or your students’ culture by thinking about and noting specific elements on the board. Make a note of each of the following. I have used the USA as an example.

Country/Nationality: USA/American
Language: English

How to say the following words?

Hello
Goodbye
Please

Thank you
Sorry
Cheers

What do you do when you meet someone for the first time?
What do you do when you meet someone you know?
What do you say when someone sneezes?
What actions should you never do in your culture? (Cultural Taboos)

What are some reasons you celebrate?
Birthdays, religious holidays, historical events, a personal accomplishment / success

As you answer these questions with your class, encourage students to offer other examples they might know from their own or other cultures.

2 THE SCENARIO
Once your students have an understanding of how culture manifests itself, it is time for them to create their own cultures. This is the scenario. Space exploration has reached a new height, and your country has discovered life on many other planets far from your solar system. These planets are small, and their populations are small as well. Though they are in close geographic proximity, they had no knowledge of each other’s existence until your country visited the planets. Your country is organizing an interplanetary conference where these peoples will meet each other for the first time. Each student’s task is to create a culture for one of those small planets.

Have students start by thinking up a name for their planet/culture and describing its geography as well as its people. Depending on your class, you might want them to illustrate the planet and people and display them around the room.

Once your students have created the planet, they should think more about the beings who live there by answering each of the following questions:

What do the people do all day and/or all night?
Do they work?
What do they do for fun?
What do they eat and drink?
What kinds of sports do they play?
What kinds of music do they listen to?
What are some of their laws?
What is most important to each person?
What do the people not care about?

Once your students have answered these questions, have them go back to the questions you answered about your own culture and answer those questions about their fictional planet. Encourage students to be creative throughout the culture creation experience.

3 THE CULTURES
Once your students have developed their own cultures (and kept the information to themselves), it is time for all the people groups to meet. Half of the class will do the role play at a time while the other half watches. Have the students who are playing in the role play come to the front of the room. Each person will be acting as a person from the culture he created. In this part of the activity, the peoples are meeting each other in an informal atmosphere, like a party or mixer. They should perform their greetings, use their language and display other elements of the cultures they created. If someone from another culture performs one of the taboos, the person should act offended. Once the students have had enough time to meet and greet each other, have the groups change places and repeat the meeting.

4 THE MEETING

Have students start by thinking up a name for their planet/culture and describing its geography as well as its people. Depending on your class, you might want them to illustrate the planet and people and display them around the room.

Once your students have created the planet, they should think more about the beings who live there by answering each of the following questions:

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Once your students have answered these questions, have them go back to the questions you answered about your own culture and answer those questions about their fictional planet. Encourage students to be creative throughout the culture creation experience.

5 THE DEBRIEF
After all your students have played the greeting, ask them about the experience. How did they feel when they were meeting people from other cultures?
Were they uncomfortable at any point? Did anyone do anything that offended them? How did that feel? Did anyone do anything that made them feel welcome or happy? What was it? Encourage your students to share as many details about the experience as they are comfortable doing.

Then help your students understand why they had the experiences they did. Have pairs of students share the specifics about their cultures with each other. If possible, match students with someone who offended them in the meeting. As they discuss, each person should take notes about the other person’s created culture, listing the same information they have about their own culture. After students have shared, change the pairings and have students gather information about another culture.

**DISCUSSION**

Once students have gathered information about two other created cultures, come back together as a class. Ask students to share any insights they got learning the specifics about another culture. Then place students in groups of four or five for some discussion time. Give each group a copy of the following questions.

When have you felt uncomfortable or offended in real life because of a cross cultural experience?

How does the activity we did compare to real life?

What can we learn from the in class cultural conflicts?

How can we be more sensitive to people from other cultures in real life?

**RESPONSE**

After students have discussed their experiences in both the class activity and real life, ask them to share their own experiences in writing. You might have them write a paragraph, an essay, a letter, a newspaper article, or something else. Individuals can use the discussion questions for inspiration, or they can write about their own ideas. Whatever they choose to write about, ask students to include a paragraph on what they learned from the entire experience.

Helping your students understand each other and other peoples of the world does more than make your ESL class run smoothly. It helps them become globally sensitive people who can make a difference in the future of our world.

They say it’s a small world after all, and that is truer every day.
What Did I Get Myself Into? 11 Tips to Prepare for Foreign Classroom

YOU ARE AN ENGLISH SPEAKING NATIVE WITH AT LEAST A COLLEGE DEGREE FROM THE “FIRST” WORLD EMBARKING ON YOUR JOURNEY TO FILL EAGER MINDS WITH YOUR WISDOM. MAYBE YOUR FOREIGN COUNTRY EFL ASSIGNMENT WILL WORK OUT THAT WAY, BUT PROBABLY NOT!

Furthermore, your EFL program may provide you with some sort of “training”, but most likely that training will do little to prepare you mentally for the challenges of teaching in a different culture. Here are 11 common foreign classroom discoveries first world-ers make and some tips to anticipate them.

HOW TO MENTALLY PREPARE FOR THE FOREIGN CLASSROOM: 11 TIPS

1 THEY HAVE NO MANNERS!
What is polite to you is not what is polite everywhere in the world: manners are culturally constructed. Not only is it important to understand that what seems rude to you is probably not intended to be rude, but also you should recognize that your actions might be rude to foreign natives in their country. You are the foreigner -- you need to adapt. Your training program probably taught you a few dos and don'ts, but you need to experience the culture of the classroom to understand. Here are a few tips if you find yourself cursing your bad-mannered learners.

• Go to a school and sit in on another teacher’s class. Observe and take notes on behaviors. What is normal?
• Be patient and minimize reactions. Do not react to student behavior for a few classes until you understand better what is happening. You might not get a lot of teaching done the first few weeks, but that is ok!

2 THEY ARE NOT INTERESTED!
You assumed when you signed up that students enrolled in EFL courses would be eager learners, but any experienced field professional knows the opposite to be more likely. Examine the reasons for student disinterest and disassociate yourself from it so that it does not affect your morale.

• Their parents enrolled them, and they are normal teenagers that do not care about school.
• It is a mandatory government initiative and not auto-initiated by students.
• They are poor and have bigger worries (Maslow’s needs).
• They thought it would be easier or more fun when they enrolled and are now bored after one or two classes.

You luck will have at least a few students that are generally interested. Feed off of their energy to stimulate the class as much as possible. You can also separate students into work groups to mix up the interested and disinterested. The ones that do not want to learn will probably stop coming to class after a little while, so think of the situation as temporary!

3 THEY DO NOT RESPECT YOU!
You having a fancy degree from a far off place means nothing to these people. You will have to command respect in other ways. The best is to earn respect from leaders in the community or respected teachers. Establish yourself within the community as a teacher accepted and respected by peers. This might require developing personal relationships with those teachers by any means necessary. Visit them at home! Have a dinner!

4 THEY DO NOT DO HOMEWORK!
First world-ers study outside of the class, but your foreign students probably do not. Do not plan to give a lot of homework. Instead, integrate it into your lesson plans. You can give short tasks like “bring in a picture” or “find three words”, but avoid lengthy worksheets and writing assignments. Students will probably learn slower and you will need to review more than you hoped, but just accept that as a reality in your lesson planning.

5 THERE IS LITTLE TECHNOLOGY!
You planned PowerPoint presentations for all of your 20 classes only to find that you not only have no projector, but your classroom space is a field with no walls. Do not plan too many classes that use technology! Or have a backup plan. If you do not even have a blackboard, you can use large sheets of paper and rig them to a tree with two horizontal sticks and a bit of twine.

6 THEY CANNOT READ AND WRITE WELL!
Maybe students cannot read and write at all, or they do not respond well to reading or writing. Either way, it does not mean that they are less intelligent or incapable of learning a foreign language. Plan to focus your classes on verbal and listening skills. Conversation is probably more important for them to learn anyway!

7 THEY DO NOT RESPOND TO COMPETITION!
You created a fantastic activity where students have to race against each other to win a prize. The moment comes, and they either do not care about winning or do not care about the prize. They even share the prize with the losing team. Be prepared that typical first world rewards systems might not translate. Competition is a cultural trait, especially strong in Americans who have a fierce independent and capitalist ethic. Collectivists want to share. Figure out to what they respond best by trying different types of activities or asking other teachers in the area before planning!

8 THEY ARE NOT CREATIVE!
They stare at you like you have...
horns when you assign a creative writing activity or ask them to draw a vocabulary word. Art, creativity, and imagination are not universal learning tools and cultural traits. Do not assume “all kids like to paint” or “all kids like to imagine”. Especially in authoritarian regimes, creativity could be stifled in your teaching culture. Adapt creative activities to mostly copying an example and gradually add more creativity expectation as your semester moves along.

9 YOU ARE NOT PROGRESSING QUICKLY ENOUGH THROUGH YOUR LESSON PLANS!

Your students do not come because it rains, or your electricity went out half way through class. Developing country barriers are a challenge to meeting learning objective milestones, so plan ahead to teach less or to need significantly more time to complete a course.

10 YOUR COMMUNITY IS NOT SUPPORTIVE!

You thought the local government was going to lend a salon to teach, but they do not want to help you when you arrive. Your students’ parents do not greet you when you see them at the market. Expect this -- you are foreign. You are not one of them. Be patient and unobtrusive, and in time you will fit in and be supported more by the community.

11 YOU FEEL LONELY AND DEPRESSED!

That lack of immediate acceptance, coupled with being away from your family and country, will create a feeling of loneliness and possibly even depression in even the most independent, adventurous, and adaptable EFL teacher. Be patient with yourself and try a few of these tactics when those moments overwhelm you.

- Have movies and TV shows from your culture on hand to watch, or some great books. Sometimes it helps to just escape into your cultural world for a bit!
- Leave your house and go talk to whoever is friendly. If you do not know the language, go to a coffee shop, a bar, or another similar place and use body language to communicate. Even if it is just a smile exchanged, that human connection helps.
- Go for a run or walk. It releases endorphins and makes you feel better.
- Call your mom!

TEACHING EFL IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY IS AN ADVENTURE, AND YOU CAN MAKE IT A GOOD ONE BY PREPARING YOURSELF FOR THE INEVITABLE DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES YOU WILL FACE!
A great deal of value has been placed on “openness” in communication in U.S. culture over the past years, perhaps in response to political scandals of several leaders hiding critical information. “Openness” may also be in a backlash to traditional U.S. manners which tend to emphasize reserve. The cultural change in revealing one’s innermost secrets, which in the past would have been kept secret, can also be seen in popular culture, where celebrities as well as the lesser known readily reveal such information as abuse, addiction disorder, and mental health concerns. There is also the proliferation of “reality” TV, in which people invite cameras into their homes to film their family dysfunction for the public’s entertainment. Some of this change has actually been positive — individuals shouldn’t have to hide their heritage or sexual orientation, for example. However, there should also be boundaries in this openness — an opinion a number of people apparently share, as seen in the popular use of the acronym “TMI” or “too much information” (about one’s personal life). In addition, opinions on what is appropriate public information about oneself vary across cultures and generations. Therefore, in the classroom, especially the multicultural classroom, care should be taken on how much students should be expected to reveal about themselves even in a culture with an increasing expectation of self-revelation.

EXPECTATIONS ON STUDENT SELF-REVELATION: HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

PROBLEMS WITH EXPECTED STUDENT SELF-DISCLOSURE

1 DISCOMFORT

Take into account cultural and personal boundaries. Many students are uncomfortable revealing so much about themselves. That boundary should be respected. When I was a new graduate student twenty years ago, just on the cusp of this movement of self-revelation, I had an instructor who twice pulled me into her office to complain about “distance” in my writing. I was already writing professionally at that time and was surprised by a serious complaint about my work. However, willing to correct any deficiencies, I asked her to please point out instances of what she was talking about. She didn’t but just reiterated the complaint. Because “distance” and objectivity is usually a value in academic writing and higher education in general, her concerns continued to elude me. I’ve since concluded that she was annoyed that I refused to participate into the kind of therapy session her class regularly devolved into — students and instructor sitting in a circle, and sooner rather than later abandoning discussion of the curriculum and moving into their personal lives. I was simply uncomfortable with this. Because instructors have an obligation to teach the students who come to their class and not pick and choose their culture or personality type, boundaries should be respected.

2 LOSS OF PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE

Another concern with self-revelation in the classroom is the loss of professional distance. If students are too self-revelatory, there is a breach of the boundary that exists between students and teachers that is there for a reason: students and teachers are in actuality not peers even with pretenses that they are. When there is an imbalance in power — instructors hold power over students in their grades and possibly entire academic future — the relationship is not equal. Therefore, some distance must be maintained. Students and teachers are really are not friends free to share everything without fear of repercussions.

3 INTRODUCTION OF BIAS IN GRADING

Another related concern of the loss of professional distance when self-revelation goes too far is the introduction of bias into the grading process. Professor “Turner” did not like me because if I didn’t participate in her group therapy nor did I treat the class journal as a personal diary. My grade reflected her frustration with this reserve. In a contrasting situation, a number of years later, when I was myself a college professor, I allowed a student to confide in me personal details related to an emotionally abusive relationship that were affecting her class grade. Later, when that grade was not up to her usual standards, she was angry because she had opened herself to me. It can be difficult to turn students away, or seem to, because teachers are usually compassionate individuals. However, to preserve the objectivity of the grading system, students with personal problems should be referred to professionals trained in addressing them.

4 CREATION OF A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

A final and prime reason to avoid too much openness in the classroom is the potential creation of a hostile environment. The incident with Professor Turner and her group therapy sessions would not have occurred today because if not I then another student would have taken the situation to the dean regarding the creation of a hostile environment — that is, a learning situation that is so oppressive or anxiety-producing to individuals that learning becomes impossible. The students’ comfort level and safety in the learning process takes precedence over the individual instructor’s preferred teaching style.
SELF-DISCLOSURE: ASSIGNMENTS AND STRATEGIES TO BE WARY ABOUT

1 JOURNALS

A journal in an academic sense is not a personal diary. Because students often confuse the two — most have had experience with a diary but not a class journal — care must be taken to distinguish the two. The personal diary many students have kept reveals their reflections on their personal lives: indeed, the diary is often seen as so private that it is hidden away even from family members. An academic journal, on the other hand, is meant as reflections on course material and drawing connections between it and other material students have read and in turn to their professional and academic — not personal — lives. An academic journal, in addition, is intended for an audience, unlike the secrets of a diary. Make the distinction between the two clear and what is expected in an academic journal.

2 PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Many instructors start the semester assignment with a writing topic that will demand in response a personal narrative, an account of something important that happened to the student — in itself fine and a traditional way to start a writing class. Most of us have some experience telling stories about our own or other’s lives. The potential problem lies in the specific topics assigned: topics related to experiences of trauma and disagreements with family and friends, for example, invite the kind of intimacy that should be avoided to preserve professional distance and student comfort levels. More appropriate topics might relate to students’ introduction into the academic community, such as experiences related to coming to college and how it contrasts with high school. Assignments like these not only preserve comfort levels and objectivity but also lead to student reflections on the academic community they are entering.

3 SPECIFIC TEACHING STRATEGIES THAT INVITE UNPROFESSIONAL INTIMACY

A much-touted, perhaps too much so, strategy in recent years has been moving from the traditional classroom design of rows of desks where students sit facing the instructor, who stands in the front of the room and lectures. Replacing this is the circle of desks facing each other, the instructor joining as just another member of this group. There are several problems here, however. The first is it seems facile to claim the simple change in a seating arrangement has so many advantages: breaking down barriers, fostering classroom interaction, creating equality and so forth. In addition, even if these claims prove true, it is not a given that the changes are positive. As noted, the barriers are there for a reason, and since the student-teacher relationship is not equal to begin with, pretenses that it is are troubling.

THERE ARE ADVANTAGES IN THE MOVEMENT TOWARD MORE SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE CLASSROOM.

If implemented well and without undue pressure, it can foster learning in allowing students to feel safe in being who they are and free to share ideas related to the class curriculum without fear of criticism. There are pitfalls, however, in crossing boundaries and creating a nonprofessional and even hostile environment. Therefore, a curriculum that invites student self-disclosure should be approached with care.
First Things First: How To Get Students to Actually Read the Syllabus

Every Instructor in the United States—and Beyond, for the Matter—Has Probably Had Student Approach Her Near the End of the Semester to Say He Didn’t Know Regular Attendance Was Part of the Grade. Other students didn’t know they were required to take a laboratory component, or that internet access was expected, or that there was a midterm exam. None of this information is hidden, by the way: most of it on the first page of the course syllabus, in fact. But therein lies the problem: these students usually are not reading the syllabus, and they should, as it’s actually the instructor’s contract with the students on how they will be taught. It’s not easy, but getting students to read the syllabus and making them aware of the class expectations is actually an integral part of the class and actually can serve not only as an introduction to the more routine and administrative details of the class but also to the content area of the course itself.

Make Sure You Teach the Course Syllabus

1. Go Over the Syllabus the First Day

It seems elementary, but on the first day of the class, the instructor should go over the syllabus thoroughly with the students and introduce them to the course expectations. Some instructors skip this step, believing that students are responsible adults and should be expected to read and understand their course documents on their own. I agree with this position, actually, -- however, the actual practice of it proves problematic as significant numbers of students aren’t responsible enough to take this step without being guided. In addition, while introducing the syllabus, the instructor can introduce her own teaching expectations and style: for example, whether or not she prefers students to contact her directly about an absence or if it’s better to contact a classmate to find out what went on in class or to check the course website, how much students are expected to participate in class, whether or not peer interaction, for example, is a critical component of the course. Each instructor varies on preferences and expectations of student behavior, so it’s best to make these expectations explicit from the beginning. This can also be a mini-introduction to college expectations as a whole for new students: e.g., most instructors will not necessarily remind the student of upcoming assignments or give her an update if she was absent: it is generally seen as the student’s responsibility to take initiative on her course progress.

2. Have Students Develop Their Own Questions About the Syllabus

One concern, even for instructors who have carefully gone over the syllabus the first day, is that introducing the syllabus is not an interactive activity: that is, the student’s role is largely passive while the teacher talks and explains. Therefore, students often don’t pay attention, and hence they are surprised to learn that a specific assignment is part of the course. One way combat this concern is to make the reading of the syllabus a more interactive activity: have students sit in groups, for example, and develop five questions they have about the class. They can then search the syllabus and find answers to the questions. This also can serve as a first-day icebreaking activity, introducing each student to at least several of their peers, and setting the tone for the rest of the semester.

3. Give a Syllabus Quiz

Another way of holding students accountable for reading and understanding the syllabus is, a week or so into the course, to give a “quiz” on the syllabus with about ten important points the instructor really wants the students to understand. I count the “quiz” as participation points, really a smaller part of the grade than the actual quiz points, and I allow students to check their answers against a peer’s before turning their quizzes in. The point is for students to actually read and understand the syllabus, and they are more likely to do so if they know they are going to be tested on that knowledge.

4. Make It Really “Legal.”

Some instructors go so far as to have students sign a contract attached to the syllabus or the syllabus quiz that they have read and understood the policies within the syllabus. I don’t know how much this “contract” would stand up if it actually came to a dispute over the student grade with the office of the dean, for example, but this carries at least some added accountability within the class itself: e.g., if the student claims not to have “known” about the attendance policy, the instructor can remind her of the statement she signed regarding having read the syllabus, where the policy is clearly stated.

5. Post the Syllabus on the Course Website

A final step an instructor can take is to post the syllabus, along with other important course documents, on the class website, where he can direct students when they claim to have “lost” the syllabus.

Benefits of Teaching the Class Syllabus

The benefits of actively teaching the course syllabus are many and extend beyond understanding the policies of a specific class. These benefits include increased awareness of college expectations in general: namely, that students are responsible for taking the initiative for their own learning and grades. The syllabus can also begin to introduce course content: typically, on a syllabus, major topics and assignments are introduced, giving students a quick overview of the semester. In addition, students can begin to learn the “lingo” of the subject matter from the first day: for example, if the syllabus states that course papers are to be submitted in “MLA style,” the instructor will likely have to explain this phrase, and the students will acquire a term used throughout academic life.

Finally, teaching the syllabus at the beginning of the course sets the tone for the rest of the course: there will be assignments every day, there are no “throw away” or “easy” days, each day comes with an assignment (even the first day of class). In general, the syllabus should communicate the message students are required to take responsibility for their own learning as well as work with their peers throughout the course.
Keep It Real. How to Manage Your Students’ Expectations

AS TEACHERS WE KNOW WHAT WE EXPECT FROM OUR STUDENTS, BUT MANY TEACHERS ARE NOT FULLY AWARE OF WHAT STUDENTS EXPECT FROM THEM.

This happens for different reasons. Mostly because many teachers think they know what their students want or need. Many believe that since they have experience, it is essentially a waste of time. It is shocking how many of them actually take the time to address all their students’ expectations. Taking some time to fully understand what your students’ needs are, is definitely not a waste of time. Not managing your student’s expectations well can lead to a whole bunch of problems, and feedback from your students can help you adapt and find a better alternative. So, how can you manage your students’ expectations? Take a look at these awesome strategies.

HERE’S HOW YOU SHOULD DIRECT YOUR STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS PROFESSIONALLY

1 FIND OUT WHAT THEIR EXPECTATIONS ARE

This seems so obvious but you would be surprised by how many teachers actually take the time to find out in detail what their students expect from them and the course. You need to know what their language learning objectives are. What do they want or need to learn? Your students will want to learn something new and useful in each lesson. The knowledge or skills they develop will have to be relevant to their lives. Otherwise they will simply lose interest or feel they are wasting their time.

2 MAKE SURE THEY UNDERSTAND WHERE THEY ARE

Very often what students expect is not very realistic. This could be because they are missing information. Many teachers don’t provide detailed information about where and how students are from the language learning point of view before they begin their course. Students should have a detailed interview or meeting with their teacher when the course begins. You need to make sure they fully understand what level they are in, what they can do now, what their biggest challenges are, and what they will achieve and be able to do when the course ends.

3 BE REALISTIC ABOUT MEETING THOSE EXPECTATIONS

Some expectations are easier to fulfill than others. Watch out, don’t promise things you won’t be able to do later. It is not uncommon for teachers to promise a little too much. Make sure to plan ahead with them once you know what they expect from the course. Involve them in the process and think about objectives and timing together. Also, some specific needs might require special material, and that might change how long the course lasts and even the cost. So make sure to communicate a program and let your students know what objectives that course includes.

4 COMMUNICATE PROBLEMS OR ISSUES

Good communication with your students is not only necessary at the beginning of the course but throughout the course as well. Things start out a certain way and could change further along. Challenges and pitfalls are not uncommon, make sure any problems regarding their program are communicated clearly. Also, provide details on how you plan to deal with those problems and what the options are.

5 SHARE WHAT YOUR EXPECTATIONS ARE

Sometimes, what teachers and students expect are two different things. Our expectations regarding students’ performance can differ greatly from what they expect. Once again, communication is the key. After you have told them where they are and once you understand what they expect, make sure to explain what you expect from them as well. Remember, learning a language requires a lot of hard work and dedication. They need to be committed to your goals too. Students consider their own expectations as the only or true objectives. What they don’t understand is that sometimes to reach their objectives they will first need to reach yours. There are many things they are simply not trained to consider, after all, you are the teacher. They have to understand that they have to be able to trust your decisions and that will have to devote time to their learning.

6 MOTIVATION IS CONTAGIOUS

Of all the things students expect from us, motivations is at the top. Nothing will kill their spirit and desire to learn faster than an unmotivated teacher who can’t or won’t motivate them. Your students want you to bring out the best in them. They want you to help them reach their goals, to make them want to work, and to constantly remind them of their day to day achievements. Believe me, motivation is contagious and it will spread. Once it does, you will see the difference.

7 IT’S ALL ABOUT RESPECT

Sometimes teacher lose sight of simple things. One of those things is how students feel and what they are going through in general terms. Learning a language is not an easy process. Students can function perfectly well in their native language and suddenly all that is gone the minute their ESL lesson begins. They now have to struggle to communicate things and try to avoid making mistakes. They often feel anxious and uneasy and it could be worse if an important life goal is tied to their language learning. They want the teacher to understand their difficulties and their hesitations. They don’t want to feel humiliated, they want to feel contained and, as their teacher you have to make sure they are.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS CAN BE A SIMPLE TASK.

There is no need to complicate things. The key is good organization, communication and respect. If your students communicate what they want and are clear on what you expect of them, they are on a road to success.
THE PROBLEM

Remember in your high school foreign language classes? Did you speak for about two minutes in the target language and the rest of the time in “L1”, your first language?

Monolingual classes pose special problems. Teachers are obliged to tackle a very strong, natural tendency for speakers of the same language to go ahead and – you guess it – speak the same language together. After all, this has likely been their language environment for their whole lives. Who are we to drag them out of it?

Persuading students to speak only English can be no small challenge, but happily, there are a variety of ways to tackle it, centered on a mixture of carrot and stick, a little inventiveness and constant reiteration!

RECOMMENDED METHODS

1 START FROM SCRATCH

Begin to address the problem on day one, when you first meet the students. This way, we immediately set the precedent of speaking only English together. If we wait until the second week of classes, for instance, the students will already have spent a week establishing an environment in the wrong language, and it will take much longer to bring them round.

2 GRAPH IT OUT

Draw three graphs on the board and explain very simply that the lines represent three students’ rates of progress: a) the first speaks mostly L1 in the classroom and doesn’t practice outside, having made few non-L1 friends, b) the second speaks 50/50 L1 and has a couple of native speaker friends, c) the third speaks only English and has a vibrant English-only social life. This is useful for demonstrating an unavoidable truth: students who practice more will achieve more.

Those who use lots of L1 only end up getting better at their first language!

3 CONSTANT REINFORCEMENT

Like any kind of training, especially if it goes against the natural grain, establishing a purely English environment takes reiteration and reinforcement from the outset. It may seem strict, but reacting to every instance of L1 might be just the impetus the students need. There are some classes, and some age groups, where this will take longer, but with sufficient reminders, the students will gradually make the change.

4 YOU HAVE ALLIES

The strongest, or most confident students are very helpful here. If they buy in to the idea early on, you’ll have very useful allies in persuading their classmates to follow suit. You might go so far as to remind them that they are role models for the class: in many cases, the idea that they’d be helping you is itself attractive and persuasive.

5 “WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT?!”

After a week or so, I find it useful – not to mention, pretty funny – to deliberately overreact when I hear L1 in the classroom. Exhibiting what appears to be genuine shock, or even jaw-dropped horror, at the sound of this unwelcome, imposter language carries a strong message: this behavior, however familiar it may be, just doesn’t belong in the classroom. Poking fun is useful, too: “Hey, your Chinese is really improving nicely!”, or, “Wait a minute, I’m lost. Which country are we in? Wait... We’re not in Venezuela? So, why am I hearing Spanish? I don’t get it”.

One colleague of mine reacts to L1 as if she has been shot, with a pretty good impression of being in real pain. It’s a bit silly, but golly it gets the point across!

6 TEACH BASIC CLASSROOM LANGUAGE EARLY

A lot of L1 chatter is actually functional: asking to borrow something, checking the meaning of a word, confirming classroom instructions or homework assignments. Practice suitable English phrases with the students early on in your time together, so that they have no excuse for lapsing back into L1, even for something as simple as, “Can I borrow your dictionary?”

7 DICTIONARIES!

In the last ten years, at least in my classroom, dictionary use (and I’m talking about book dictionaries) has declined to virtually nil. I’ve tried and tried, but the students don’t seem to see the point. Their cellphone may have a dictionary on it (of which more in another article) or they might never have developed the habit of using one. Having one to hand helps to avoid diverting to L1 if the student doesn’t know a particular word. “Hang on... let me look it up,” could be an early phrase they learn.

8 PUNISHMENTS

Keep this super light-hearted, but impose some sanction on those who still don’t play ball. One of my favorites is to paint the tip of their nose green with a whiteboard marker, I also insist on their singing a song or dancing for the class. In extreme cases, I threaten to reduce their grade or to mark them absent for the class. In situations where attendance counts towards the final grade, this can be a very effective method, if a little drastic.

9 INCENTIVES

Award points to a pair, team or table of students who speak no L1. Once a team reaches 50 points, reward them with candy or something similar. Students who speak L1 lose their team points. Collective policing can be extremely effective – no-one wants to let the group down.
10 EXTEND IT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Recommend that the students agree that they will speak only English for part of their non-class time. This could be a specific time each day (7-8pm) or a fixed duration (1 hour, measured on a timer with an alarm). You could also ask the students to submit a recording of this period, proving that there was no L1 -- whether you listen to it or not, it's a good motivator.

11 NO TRANSLATION

A tendency for lower-level students is to translate new words for their friends. This is very damaging to the learning process, in my experience, and sets a precedent that translation is the fastest, and therefore best way to learn a new word. I use the ‘green nose’ principle, or just look severely disappointed. Either gets the message across!

12 NOTE-TAKING ONLY IN ENGLISH

Although it's tempting to make notes partially in L1, I think it best to make English-only notes routine. It practices language much more if definitions are in English, rather than a direct translation, and are accompanied with at least one practice sentence.

13 FLUENCY GAMES

Try some games to increase confidence and the students’ own sense that they might not need L1 to express themselves. Taboo is excellent for training students to go around the vocabulary roadblocks they’ll encounter. ‘Just a Minute’, based on an old BBC radio quiz game, requires one student to speak for a minute on a particular topic, without hesitation, deviation or repetition. Success is greeted by massive applause, in the affirmation of the students’ ability to speak at length without any of their first language creeping in.

I’VE SEEN ON COUNTLESS OCCASIONS HOW HELPFUL IT IS TO KNOCK OUT L1 FROM THE FIRST DAY, AND REINFORCE THE RULE THROUGH A LITTLE DISCIPLINE AND LOTS OF PRACTICE. Eliminating L1 might be an ambitious aim, but it could usefully be among the learning aims of every classroom in which communicative methodology is used.
7 Speaking Activities to Introduce Classroom Language

IT’S THE BEGINNING OF A NEW YEAR, AND WITH THAT COMES BRAND NEW STUDENTS WHO MAY HAVE NEVER BEEN IN A CLASSROOM IN ENGLISH BEFORE. Whether you have new students, beginning-level students, or young students, it’s crucial to review some key vocabulary before you begin the new school year in order to build their confidence in speaking about these necessary items throughout the year. Try these activities for building up their classroom language.

HOW TO HELP YOUR STUDENTS USE CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

1 KEY VOCABULARY ITEMS FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

Each classroom is different, so spend some time thinking of the important words you want your students to know. Since these are items they’ll be encountering daily, make sure they get introduced either directly or indirectly early on. They may or may not already know some of these words, so don’t be afraid to challenge them and give them many words in the first week. Here are some suggestions to get you started.

Supplies: desk, book, paper, pen, pencil, notebook, binder, syllabus, iPad, marker

Rules: Imperative grammar, don’t, should, must, can, can’t

People: Student, teacher, classmates, principal, director

Classroom: clock, board, computer, calendar, poster

Requests: question formation, bathroom, water, feeling sick

Respectful words: please, thank you

2 DIALOGUES & ROLE PLAYS

A great way to introduce or review these words is to practice them in dialogues accompanied by pictures. These will take some time to create, or you can scan the Internet to find some already written. Practice a variety of dialogues such as a conversation between two students, a conversation between a teacher and a student, and a conversation with the whole class. Give each pair the same dialogue to practice, and then discuss the dialogues as a whole group and answer any questions. Alternatively, you could give each pair a different dialogue to practice in pairs first and then with the whole class. Make sure you rotate the dialogues so that all students can get practice with each scenario.

If you have more advanced students, give them role play contexts rather than dialogues. Prepare a written context or give them a picture with two people in a classroom and have them construct the dialogue for this picture. If you give each pair the same picture and have the students present their dialogues for the class. Going over the similarities and differences between the dialogues can lead to some great conversations about the variations of speech they may hear.

3 I-SPY—

Another great activity for lower-level students to review the tangible items in the room is the classic game I-Spy. If you want to provide more practical language, change the name of the game to “I can see something…” Depending on the level of the students, you may need to review some adjectives and descriptive vocabulary as well before you begin. If the level of your students is too low to give adequate descriptions, change the game to Pictionary. Have one student come up to the board and you show them a vocabulary word. Have the student draw the word on the board and the other students try to guess the vocabulary word.

4 DESCRIBE MY PART OF THE CLASSROOM

Have students in groups separate into different parts of the room. Together, they have to find and identify everything in their corner of the room, and then introduce the class to all of the objects in their room. They can use their dictionaries if they want. Have students rotate around the room to get practice describing different areas.

5 PREVIEW THEIR KNOWLEDGE FIRST

If you’re unsure of your students’ levels, it’s best to let them show you first what they already know so you don’t have to waste time repeating information. Put students into groups and have them think about all of the school related words they know. The group who has the longest list wins! Alternatively, prepare a set of pictures of classroom-related words on it and have the groups label as many as possible.

6 PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Use the words as often as possible and in as many ways as possible. Say, write, and point to the words in all appropriate contexts. When an appropriate time comes up, not only should you repeat the word clearly, but have all of the students repeat after you to practice using the word in the correct contexts.

7 FLUENCY GAMES

Another extremely important factor to consider is making students feel very comfortable with using this practical vocabulary. Use fluency games to build their familiarity and speed in recalling the vocabulary. One way to achieve this goal is to do a hot potato game. Have students stand in a circle and toss a small object around the circle. When a student receives the object, they should say a vocabulary word within three seconds. If they stall or take longer than three seconds, they have to leave the circle. To make it more challenging, students also must leave the circle if they repeat a word already said by a different student. Feel free to adapt this activity to the level of your students, such as using words that start with the same letter or words that are related to each other.

THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR IS THE MOST CRITICAL PART OF THE YEAR. Teachers need to make sure that they set the boundaries of the classroom, create a supportive classroom environment, and equip students with the tools they need for the year. Classroom vocabulary is the foundation to a successful rest of the year, so it’s a step you don’t want to skip! Be sure to try these activities to build students’ speaking skills and their mastery of the basic English vocabulary words they will use on a daily basis.
6 Ways To Bring Down Your Teacher Talking Time

IF YOU’VE NEVER MADE A RECORDING OF A CLASS YOU’VE GIVEN, I URGE YOU TO GIVE IT A TRY.
I first tried this during my CELTA qualification, way back in 1999, and was amazed at what I found. There were some good things – the atmosphere was active and noisy, the students spoke entirely English, and there was a good amount of production going on – but I noticed one thing which stopped me cold.
I never, ever shut up. Not even for a minute.
I’m a talkative guy anyway, but this was a real problem in the classroom.

WHY DO TEACHERS SOMETIMES TALK SO MUCH IN THE CLASSROOM?
• We’re happy. Teaching is enormous fun, and many of us express their love for the art by chattering animatedly. That’s understandable, but it has its downsides.
• We’re trying to energize sleepy people. A worthy aim, but consider this: on a sleepy morning, which wakes you up the fastest – being chattered to, or doing the chattering yourself?
• We chatter to fill the silence. To my students, I describe silence as ‘illegal’. It is a symptom of limited production and, equally worrying, limited interaction between the students. However, as scientists say, ‘nature abhors a vacuum’, – silences tend to be filled by students, if given the chance and trained to do so, and they will bring in their classmates.
• We have a lot to communicate. Whether it’s the simple matter of today’s grammar content or vocabulary, a story you heard on the news that morning, or a deeply philosophical life lesson, we need to transfer information, often in large amounts. Consider, though, the interaction patterns - Teacher to Student (T-S), Student to Teacher (T-S), Student to Student (S-S) - created by a lengthy explanation. Think of the students as being set to ‘receive’, rather than ‘transmit’ for these periods: they are left passive for (arguably) too long.

Here are two real examples. The first is by a relatively new teacher who was actually interviewing for a job at my school. Unfortunately, she was not chosen, but can you see why?

EXAMPLE 1
Teacher: Good morning! Today I’m going to talk to you about making friends from other countries.
Students: OK! / Great!
Teacher: I have lots of friends from other countries, because I’m curious about other languages and cultures. I think they’re fascinating.
[Draws a quick cartoon of herself on the board, linking it to other, small cartoons of her friends]. This is Pedro, my friend from Spain. He’s an architect. [Draws a house next to the cartoon of Pedro.] And this is my best friend. Her name is Selene and she’s from Peru. Right now she’s a student, like you guys. [Draws a scholar’s cap on the cartoon of Selene].
Students: [Some giggling at the cartoons.]
Teacher: So, how did I make all these international friends? Well, I like to friend people on Facebook. I have nearly seven thousand Facebook friends now, but I want a lot more! [Writes ‘7,000 friends’ on the board under the cartoon of herself.]
Students: Wow! / Is a lot / Seven thousands!

Teacher: Do you use Facebook?
Students: Yes! / No really / Is passed now, I like [names a social media site from home].

Teacher: It’s great, isn’t it? All of my friends are just a click away. Selene and I talk almost every day on Facebook and I get to learn all about the things she’s been doing. It’s really helped us to stay friends, even though she lives a long way from Boston. [Pause.] Now, do you have any questions?

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My students didn’t have any questions. While upbeat and fun, and accompanied by some entertaining cartoons, her session was more a mini-lecture than a class. I made notes, as I had to help with the hiring process. I wrote:
• ‘Going to talk to you about...’ Worrying start. Feels like a lecture already.
• No questions!
• Could ask about students’ friends & countries they’ve visited or made friends in.
• Could ask them to describe the work of an architect.
• Students could guess her friends’ ages, whether they’re married, what work they do...
• Answered her own question, ‘Now, how did I make all these international friends?’
• Asked one question [about Facebook] but then ignored students’ reaction.
• Could ask about other social network sites, and why Facebook is losing members.

This was a nice opportunity to bring in the students and find out about them, but ultimately, there was only one dominating voice.

EXAMPLE 2
The second example comes from my work with an advanced ESL class who had asked me to cover the Ukraine
closeness: this was in February 2014, when the situation was very uncertain. I did some preparation and arrived determined to help the students understand the issue, but to take myself out of the center.

Teacher: Morning, everyone!

Students: Morning, Graham / Morning, teacher

Teacher: So, there’s this thing going on with Russia this week, right?

Student 1: It’s getting crazy over there.

Student 2: I think there will be a war.

Student 3: Why it happened all suddenly, now?

Teacher: Well, let’s think about the background. First, let’s name these places. [Points to a wall map and elicits the names of the countries and the Crimean region, their capitals and other major cities. Then elicits the names of the relevant political leaders. All of this goes on the whiteboard.]

Very quick pronunciation check to stop the Saudi student from rolling the ‘r’ in ‘Crimea’, and so that the Russian student adds the required two syllables to the L1 name for the area.] So, what does Russia want?

Student 2: To control Ukraine?

Student 3: Is so big! How can they control?

Teacher: Well, how do the two militaries compare?

Student 4: Russia is stronger, much bigger. They will win a war if it is war.

Teacher: Is that the impression everyone has?

Students: Yeah / For sure

Teacher: What about NATO? What is that, exactly?

Student 3: Is the North Association of...

Student 5: No, it’s North Atlantic something...

Student 1: Treaty?

Student 2: [Reading from his iPad.] North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Teacher: Thanks, Google!

Students: [Laughter]

Teacher: OK, what does NATO do? Why was it created, how does it connect its members?

Student 1: It is a military network. Like a team.

Student 2: Is for mutual defense.

Teacher: [Big thumbs up for producing this important vocabulary.] Nice one, Thomas. If something is ‘mutual’, what does that mean? [Short silence, then teacher gestures a two-way exchange.]

Students: [Almost all nodding.]

Student 5: From me to you, and from you to me.

Student 6: Everyone benefits?

Student 3: Yeah, both benefit. Is advantage for both.

Teacher: Good, well done. So, if Ukraine were a member of NATO...

Student 2: Whole NATO will need to help Ukraine.

Student 5: NATO will be fight with Russia? Too terrible.

Student 1: That would become World War Three, no?

Student 3: [Mimes a mushroom cloud and provides the sound effects]. Everything gone!

Teacher: Well, let’s hope not. Don’t you think these leaders are too smart to let that happen?

Student 4: Hope so. But politicians... they are sometimes no so smart.

Students: [Laughter.]

***

The teacher has become a facilitator or guide, rather than a lecturer, and relies on student comment and interaction more than on the delivery of new information.

I decided in advance what the students needed to understand the Ukraine issue, and I led them towards that information using only what was immediately available to everyone. We used a map, some help from the teacher on names and places, and the Internet, but most of the information came from the students themselves. I didn’t have to lecture, because I knew the resources for our success already existed – I just had to ask the right questions, and keep the channels open for follow-up information and opinions to flow.

The secret to this is almost childishly simply. If I may paraphrase an old US Army maxim: ASK. DON’T TELL.

Students can often already explain much of the issue to you, or at the very least, have some basic knowledge which they can share. This way, they are contributors to the learning process rather than passive observers.

TRY THESE 6 TIPS FOR REDUCING TEACHER TALKING TIME

1 COUNT YOUR QUESTIONS

Record your class and count the number of questions you ask. Next class, count them as you ask them, and aim to increase the number by 10% (or 50% or 100%) over the previous class.

2 GIVE STUDENTS TIME

In the above example, I could have explained ‘mutual’, but instead I waited for an answer and then helped out non-verbally, thereby eliciting the meaning. The most common collocation ‘mutual benefit’ came out of that, so again, I didn’t need to teach it. Don’t be afraid of that ten seconds of silence: language production takes considered thought and preparation. If ever you doubt this, think back to your early days learning Spanish or French at high school, and imagine how you would manage, in the same position!

3 EYE CONTACT

Your students are much more likely to talk if they’re being engaged with your eyes. Establish this as a routine way of expressing to students that you expect them to speak to you. If they break eye contact, discover why: is it just shyness, or did they not understand the question? In either case, don’t give up. Ask the question a different way, or go two steps back in your explanation.

4 PREPARATION

If you know that a complex explanation is on the horizon, practice it before class. Think of check questions you could ask at every stage of the explanation, so that you come as close to you can to following another foolproof maxim:

DON’T SPEAK FOR LONGER THAN 20 SECONDS WITHOUT ASKING A QUESTION THAT REQUIRES A THOUGHTFUL ANSWER.

5 STOP YOURSELF

I literally put my finger on my lips to remind myself to shut up. I’ve also
put a small egg-timer on the desk before, resolving to say nothing until it has expired, and glanced at the clock, choosing a time until which I’m not allowed to speak, unless really needed. This works wonders in open class discussions, permitting space and time for even the shyer students to pipe up. It’s amazing what you’ll hear when you decide to listen.

6 ANNOUNCE YOUR SILENCE

Once a discussion is going well, you could announce that you don’t intend to be involved for the remainder of it, and would prefer just to listen. Again, remarkable things can happen: student to student interaction is, hands-down, the best form of spoken language production, and an enormous amount can be generated by the teacher simply withdrawing.

I HOPE THESE EXAMPLES ARE USEFUL TO YOU, AND THAT YOU FIND YOURSELF LISTENING MORE, TALKING A LITTLE LESS, AND ASKING LOTS OF QUESTIONS TO ENCOURAGE AN OPEN AND ACTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.
The 5-Min Guide To Dealing with Control Freaks in the Classroom

WE ALL KNOW CONTROLLING PEOPLE AND PERHAPS DEAL WITH THEM ON A DAILY BASIS: THOSE PEOPLE WHO NEED TO BE IN CHARGE, IN CONTROL, AND REFUSE TO SHARE LEADERSHIP IS THE SIMPLEST DEFINITION OF “CONTROL FREAK.”

We don’t necessarily expect students or other school staff to demonstrate this personality type, however, as the cultural expectation is that the teacher is the leader within her own classroom. However, since control freaks occupy all walks of life, it should be anticipated that some students and school staff are control freaks or demonstrate some of their personality traits, and the traits of course can also be found among parents and others within the larger school community. Because their behavior is insidious and can damage a classroom environment, the behavior of a control freak must be recognized and addressed.

REMEMBER THESE 6 TRAITS OF A CONTROL FREAK

The first step of addressing the control freak personality, since the task can be quite overwhelming, is simply recognizing you are dealing with a control freak. Again, control freaks can exist in all walks of life, but they share common characteristics, which follow.

1 TAKES LEADERSHIP AUTOMATICALLY

The first sign that you are dealing with a control freak is there’s an apparent assumption on her part that she will be in charge. Some students, classroom volunteers, instructional assistants, and parents will enter a classroom or school committee and automatically assume, or try to assume, a leadership role. They will use tactics such as correcting students and teachers, bringing in material such as books and pictures from home—without mentioning it to the instructor or committee chair— and then take up time showing it off. These methods bring attention to the control freak, and from there, control of the agenda and direction of the class or committee to the control freak, which is her intent.

2 ASSUMPTION OF EXPERTISE

In addition to taking leadership in areas she really has no authority in, the control freak will often assume expertise in an area where she has no apparent qualification. Her very conviction that she is qualified to lead will blind her to her lack of competence, such as assuming that a group of Asian students working together are all “Chinese” and that an apostrophe goes in front of all “s’s.” The control freak will not hesitate to point out such “lapses” in classroom procedure and expectations.

3 DWELLS ON THE INCONSEQUENTIAL

Perhaps because of the lack of expertise, there is a lack of sense of the “big picture,” so the control freak “micromanages” and get wrapped giving orders over the inconsequential, such as the “correct” method to stack books or arrange papers—again, not hesitating to give orders on the matter.

4 DISREGARD OF OTHER’S INPUT AND FEELINGS

Because control freaks are so strong in their conviction that they are right and that certain calamity will ensue if their orders are not followed exactly, they don’t hear other’s input, such as that you’d really rather not dwell on whether or not the postures are hung “correctly” on the wall and in fact don’t care very much.

5 NEEDS TO BE “HIT OVER THE HEAD”

The control freak doesn’t respond to subtle signs that her behavior isn’t appropriate and that her orders will not be followed: unreturned phone calls, unread emails, and simply ignoring her orders and plans don’t register with her because she assumes it was an oversight on your part.

6 OVERSENSITIVITY IN HER OWN FEELINGS, EASY TO TAKE OFFENSE

While being often insensitive in her treatment of hers, the control freak, because of her social tone deafness, is unaware of her own dictatorial qualities and therefore is offended when other’s negative responses such as ignoring her, refusing to follow her orders, asking her to please wait her turn to speak, and so forth, finally register with her. She may accuse others who do this of being “rude,” taking challenges, even relatively polite challenges, to her authority as an offense.

Because of her strong personality and poor interpersonal skills, the control freak can be quite difficult to deal with, but some strategies prove effective.

... AND LEARN THESE 7 WAYS OF ADDRESSING A CONTROL FREAK

1 DON’T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

Control freak behavior is not about you and your lack of competence, weak will, or over-niceness (as the control freak might herself imply), but rather the control freak just being who she is and engaging in behavior customary to her. Recognizing this will help you pinpoint and then address the control freak’s inappropriate behavior, rather than internalizing it as something deficient in your own.

2 REMAIN PROFESSIONAL

Control freaks are unsettled and often stymied by a cool, professional response to their behavior. It can be very difficult to respond to the objective verbal or written observation that “We have standard curriculum we need to address today, so your cooperation is greatly appreciated.” However, if you snap at her to shut up and sit down,
this is the response the control freak is often looking for, resulting in an argument over who is ruder, right, or wrong, and so forth.

3 DON’T ALTER YOUR PLANS TO ACCOMMODATE HER

If you had envisioned a shared leadership in your curriculum committee, for example, don’t yield to her assumption that she is going to be “the leader” but proceed with assigning leadership roles within the group. Again, this can be hard for the control freak to address because it would require her actually coming out and demanding to be in charge, which may not be well received by the rest of the group.

4 GENTLY FILL IN THE ‘WHERE THERE ARE GAPS’ IN HER KNOWLEDGE OR SHE IS SIMPLY INCORRECT

Be courteous, but if she doesn’t know of a major author in an area of study, for example, feel free to share it yourself. Educate her on the standard use of punctuation or the different cultural groups that may be called Asian. Again, remain courteous and professional, but don’t let the incorrect or incomplete information stand. Consider this one more opportunity in your role as teacher to educate someone.

5 ACQUAINT HER WITH THE BIG PICTURE

Point out the areas of symbolism, for example, or of inference, that go beyond the literal interpretation or surface features of the text she wants you to focus on. Instead of getting hung up on how the books should or should not be stacked, discuss with her the value of group work/peer learning. Again, consider this an opportunity to educate someone in a field she has taken apparent interest in, for whatever reason.

6 SHARE WITH HER YOUR FEELINGS

A simple interpersonal technique is to use “I--” statements. So instead of saying “You’re being really pushy,” which she will probably heatedly deny, say “I feel disrespected/frustrated when you interrupt me,” which she can’t really argue and say that no, she doesn’t think you do feel that way. In addition, this provides needed feedback to the control freak of the effect of her behavior on others.

7 BE PREPARED FOR TANTRUMS

Because she is so used to taking power and not sharing leadership, the control freak may be angered when she understands that isn’t happening. And then because she is can be easily offended and doesn’t know another means of dealing with her anger, she will may as a last resort throw an adult tantrum and threaten to quit the project, leave the class, or resort to name calling and other ad hominem attacks. Don’t be swayed by these tactics. Remain firm, express regrets about her anger, but let her know that her anger is hers to own and that threats will not change matters.

DEALING WITH CONTROL FREAKS IS A MAJOR LIFE CHALLENGE. HOWEVER, THEIR BEHAVIOR MUST BE ADDRESSED IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN PEACE OF MIND AND A PRODUCIVE ENVIRONMENT.
Poor Retention And 4 Great Activities You Need To Fight Back

There are some situations that are way too common in the ESL classroom, and I’m quite sure that this one in particular will ring a bell.

Imagine this situation: you spend more than enough time on a specific language goal making sure your students understand and practice everything as they should. You are certain your choice and use of techniques is perfect for your students and they truly seem to be grasping everything the way they should. Of course, you are boasting with pride and even think it is a good time to give yourself a well-earned pat on the back. The class ends, and you say goodbye. The following class you consider it might be a good idea to get the ball rolling with a few questions about the points covered in the last lesson, and this is where the horror begins. They remember nothing! Question after question is met with surprised looks and wrong answers. The bitter realization is too much to bear and you start to wonder what went wrong.

If this has happened to you, the first thing you should bear in mind is that you probably did nothing wrong. Students all over the world have problems retaining what they learn. Many teachers blame themselves and in reality most of the time it has to do with something our students are not doing. However, though this may be true, we are not simply going to put the blame on the students because in the end, it is our responsibility to explain how to improve retention and to provide a plan. And, lucky for you, that’s exactly what I’m going to give you. So, are you ready for duty, soldier? If your answer is Yes sir!, take a look at the following tips and activities.

Ask Students to Do It at Home

Most of us provide exercises for our students to do at home. Good ol’ homework can give your students some great opportunities to keep what they have learned fresh on their minds. What you should do is simply give some thought to what they are doing. What happens very often is that we assign exercises that are provided in their workbook and although most of those might work out well, others might not. Some workbook exercises may not be targeting real student needs or may not even be challenging enough.

1. **Read and Identify**

   Provide texts where students need to skim and identify structures or vocabulary they have learned. Seeing how they are used in texts can really help them understand how to use them. You can also mix it up and use a viewing activity instead of reading. In this case provide links where they can watch short videos and do the same thing.

2. **Choose and Use**

   After identifying structures and vocabulary in the previous exercise, they can start using them. Ask them to choose a handful of words and a structure and have them write a short text. It can be an email, a report, a story or whatever they want.

3. **Do It in Class**

   Always start your class with some sort of exercise to review what was practiced the previous lesson. I’m sure a lot of you already do this but what happens often is that we end up simply asking questions. Let’s face it, not the best way to start a class. Make it fun and challenging, play games or have them interact.

4. **Read My Mind**

   Write a list of words and/or examples with the structure/s you have been practicing. Let’s imagine they have gone through the past tense, with a bit of mystery, tell them “something happened to me last night”. They will feel curious, so encourage them to guess what happened using the vocabulary and structure/s.

The secret to learning languages is exposure.

The more you hear it, read it, see it and use it in general, the faster you will learn and retain. Don’t simply move on after something has been covered. Remember to always go back after a certain number of goals have been covered. Keep things fresh in their minds because as Lord Byron said “It is singular how soon we lose the impression of what ceases to be constantly before us.”
A 5-Minute Guide To Building Your Students’ General Knowledge

THE ESL CLASSROOM IS AS GREAT A PLACE FOR NEW KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE WORLD AS IT IS FOR PRACTICING LANGUAGE.

I find that almost every topic we cover has a factual element, and that often, students are missing some important background information. Facts, figures, names and dates can all be covered in a fun way which doesn’t feel like an academic exercise.

Often, this information isn’t taught, but checked. A good reason to check the names of the countries, people, ethnicities and languages we encounter in the classroom is that the students’ own L1 word may be very different from the word in English. There are exceptions: in Bahasa Indonesia, for example, words for countries are transliterated so that they’re very close to the English word. However, in Chinese, such transliteration obscures the English word by assembling Chinese characters to produce a sound which only roughly approximates the original name.

The same can be true for the names of movies, famous people, historical events, oceans and mountains, planets and moons, and almost any other lexical group which connects to our knowledge of the facts of the world. Ensuring that our students both know these facts, and can pronounce the relevant words, leads to an expanded general knowledge and also a greater confidence in self-expression.

KNOW BEFORE YOU TEACH

Teachers build up a repository of useful facts as their careers progress, and I’d like to encourage you to keep this information handy in a file which you regularly review. It really engenders confidence in a teacher if they’re able to produce relevant facts – capitals, the names of inventors, the winner of an important sports championship, the leaders of major countries or companies – and students’ focus and discipline improves when they perceive their teacher to be well-prepared and knowledgeable.

Wikipedia is a great source for quick ‘cheat sheets’ of such information -- I recently found it very useful for my Business English class to have at hand a list of the world’s top 20 companies by market share and number of employees, for example, or the biggest producers of oil and electricity. Students respond well to these facts, and I’ve noticed repeatedly how they feel a sense of progress, measured not only by improvements in language ability, but more simply and immediately by knowing something at 10:30 which they did not know at 9:00.

CONSIDER BUILDING IN FACT-CHECKING

There are limitless opportunities to quickly quiz your students on the facts of the modern world. Here are some genuine examples from my own classroom, where fact-checking has become so routine that the students arrive armed with the facts of an issue, whether or not they believe I’ll call on them.

EXAMPLE 1: PREPARING FOR A READING ON THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

Teacher: So, who can tell me some countries where most people are Muslim?

Students: Saudi Arabia / Afghanistan / Iraq / Indonesia

Teacher: Good, those are all correct. What about Africa?

Student 1: Nigeria?

Student 2: Yes, I think about half of Nigerians are Muslim... and?

Student 3: In Arabia, right?

Teacher: I think you’re on the right track there.

Student 4: Important places, like

Student 5: Mosque. Like ‘mask’ but with ‘o’.

Teacher: [Laughter]

EXAMPLE 2: PREPARING TO DEBATE ‘HISTORY’S MOST IMPORTANT INVENTION’

Teacher: OK, you’ve told me the Internet is the most important invention of the 20th century, but you still haven’t told me who invented it.

Student 1: It wasn’t invented. It just is.

Teacher: What, it just appeared by magic, one day?

Students: [Laughter]

Student 1: It wasn’t just one person. Everyone created it.

Students: Yeah / Sounds right.

Teacher: That’s true. Tell me about the holy places of Islam.

Student 3: What is holy places?

Teacher: [Open gesture to the class.] Help me out, guys?

Student 4: Important places, like churches or the mos... how we say?

Student 5: Mosque. Like ‘mask’ but with ‘o’.

Teacher to Student 3: So, what about Islam’s holy places?

Student 3: In Arabia, right?

Student 1: Mecca!

Student 2: Every Muslim must go one time in the life.

Teacher: Good! And who are the important people in Islam. Is there a God?

Students: Yes!

Student 3: Is Allah.

Student 5: But Allah... God... Same same?

Teacher: I think you’re on the right track there.

***

Short brainstorms like this produce a lot of vocabulary, in this case, the names of Muslim countries. The other facts are checked as a group, so that the students effectively teach each other the material.

Wikipedia is a great source for quick ‘cheat sheets’ of such information -- I recently found it very useful for my Business English class to have at hand a list of the world’s top 20 companies by market share and number of employees, for example, or the biggest producers of oil and electricity. Students respond well to these facts, and I’ve noticed repeatedly how they feel a sense of progress, measured not only by improvements in language ability, but more simply and immediately by knowing something at 10:30 which they did not know at 9:00.
Teacher: Interesting! What do you think of that, gang?
Student 2: It's the idea of the internet which was invented. All the websites and everything, we made that. But the idea was an invention.
Teacher: I agree! But whose?
Student 3: Army?
Teacher: How do you mean, Gao?
Student 3: Was maybe an army invent. For communicating.
Teacher: You may be onto something there. Guys, do me a favor – Google this word. [Writes DARPA on the whiteboard.] Anyone heard of it before?
Student 4: Is like CIA.
Teacher: A little bit, I guess. What kind of work do they do?
Student 1: Defense research. Did they invent Internet?
Student 2: [Quotes part of the Wikipedia article, establishing DARPA's role.]
Student 4: But that was the military internet. Not for EBay or Facebook.
Students: [Laughter]
Teacher: That's right. So, I ask again... Who invented the Internet? Check out who invented HTML, and that might help. [Writes HTML on the whiteboard.]
Student 3: [After a pause for research]. Tim Berners-Lee?
Student 2: Who?
Teacher: You got it! Write down this man's name, guys. He deserves to be much more famous.

***

The students have produced vocabulary relating to modern computer inventions, and equally importantly, have the chance to metabolize a difficult but important name.

INCLUDE OTHER GENERAL KNOWLEDGE SITUATIONS

1 GEOGRAPHY
Countries, capitals, neighboring countries, as well as products a country is famous for.

2 HISTORY
In which century did this event happen? Was this event before or after that one?

3 RECORDS
Which is the tallest / fastest / oldest / most valuable, etc.?

4 TIME
How long ago did this happen? How long did this project take?

5 CULTURE
Names of artists, writers, Oscar winners etc., artistic controversies, famous works.

I BELIEVE THAT IT’S HEALTHY – AND NOT SCARY OR INTIMIDATING – TO BOUNCE FACTS AND FIGURES AROUND THE CLASSROOM AS A ROUTINE PART OF LEARNING NEW MATERIAL.
Once made routine, the pinning down of facts becomes an agent of learning -- everyone’s interested in gaining new information, and by doing so, students think through and produce a greater volume of language.
10 Easy Activities You Can Do with a Picture Dictionary

DO YOU HAVE A PICTURE DICTIONARY ON YOUR DESK THAT YOU’RE JUST NOT SURE HOW TO USE IN THE CLASSROOM?

Did your students purchase a picture dictionary for your class but haven’t used it much? Or do you have a class set in your classroom that you want to put to good use? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might want to try one or more of the following simple activities you can do with a picture dictionary.

TRY THESE 10 EASY ACTIVITIES YOU CAN DO WITH A PICTURE DICTIONARY

1 INTRODUCING VOCABULARY FAMILIES

If you have a picture dictionary in your ESL class like The New Oxford Picture Dictionary, you might want to use it as a resource for your next thematic vocabulary unit. Have students turn to a particular page and introduce the vocabulary in logical groups. By teaching your students several related vocabulary words at one time and through one picture, they will not only learn the words themselves but will also make connections between the English words as they learn them, which will ultimately increase their fluency.

2 GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

Though many beginning ESL students already have some knowledge of the language, some classes may contain student with no English knowledge whatsoever. For students who have extreme trouble in communicating their ideas, a picture dictionary can help them their meanings across and decrease their stress. As they point to items in the dictionary, they will also learn the words they are looking up.

3 STORY STARTING

Are you looking for a writing prompt for your students that also relates to your current vocabulary unit? If so, try using a scene from your picture dictionary as inspiration. Have your students turn to a particular page and ask them to write about something they see in the picture. They might write about what a person is doing, or they may want to write about the place in the picture. No matter what on the page inspires them, you can encourage your students to use the vocabulary on the page as they write.

4 I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE

If you are looking for an easy game for beginning students, pull out your picture dictionary. A simple game of I Spy can be too challenging for student with little to no knowledge of English. Limiting I Spy choices to what your students can see on a page of their picture dictionaries, however, can not only simplify the game but can also help teach your students new vocabulary. Tell your students which page you are on, and then teach them the rules for playing I Spy. (I spy with my little eye something _insert color_.) This might also be a good opportunity to review color words with your beginning students.

5 20 QUESTIONS

If your students are ready for more of a challenge and want to get some question asking practice in as well, try playing 20 Questions with your picture dictionary. Have everyone in class turn to the same page. Then you or a student chooses an object on that page. The rest of the class takes turns asking Yes/No questions (20 is the limit) trying to determine the object you have chosen. If they can correctly guess the object in 20 or fewer questions, they win. If not, the win goes to you.

6 VOCABULARY ELICITING

How much vocabulary do your students already know about a subject area? Using a page in the picture dictionary might help you find the answer to your question. Have students cover the words at the bottom of a page and just look at the picture. What items can they identify? Are they using the same words listed at the bottom of the page, or are they giving synonyms? Once you know what prior knowledge your students have, you will know where to focus your time and energy as you teach a vocabulary unit on that theme.

7 VOCABULARY QUIZ OR LEARNING CENTER

If you want to challenge your students or evaluate just how much they know about thematic vocabulary, grab your picture dictionary and get in line at the Xerox machine. Take a photocopy of a page in your dictionary making sure to cover or cut out the words at the bottom of the page. Give a photocopy to each of your students or set a stack at an independent learning center. Then challenge your students to label all the identified words on the page. This exercise will challenge their vocabulary recall and spelling. If your students are doing this activity at a learning center, make sure you leave them a complete copy of the original page to see if their answers are correct.

8 RECEPTIVE VOCABULARY CHECK

How much vocabulary does your class already understand? Use a picture dictionary to check. Retype the list of words on a given page, and arrange them in alphabetical order. Have your students cover the words at the bottom of the page in their dictionaries and see how many words from your list they can match with the correct number or letter in the picture dictionary.
WHAT PAGE ARE YOU ON?

You can use your picture dictionary for a great listening activity in class provided everyone in your class has the same book. Choose a random page in the book, and describe to your students what you see there. You might want to use the vocabulary supplied at the bottom of the page, or you may want to keep your descriptions more general. (E.g. I see two men. One man is wearing a hat. He has on blue clothes.) Your students will have to listen to your description and then determine which page in the dictionary you are describing. The first person to get the correct answer scores a point. This activity will test your students’ listening comprehension, their memory recall, and their ability to multitask while they listen.

VOCABULARY GAMBLE

If you teach advanced students who think they no longer have a use for the picture dictionary, this activity may just prove them wrong. Divide your class into two teams. Have two students, one from each team, come to the front of the room for this vocabulary show off challenge. Let the two students study the same page from the dictionary for two to five minutes and then close the book. Students then take turns bidding on how many vocabulary words they can remember from the page by saying, “I can name _____ words.” Each turn, the player must outbid his opponent by at least one word every time they bid. Once a student thinks he cannot top his opponent’s bid, he says, “Name them.” The student must then name at least as many objects as he bid. For example, if a student said he could name 10 words on a given page, he will have to put his money where his mouth is and name at least that many words without making a mistake. If he can, his team scores one point. If he cannot, the other team scores a point.

PICTURE DICTIONARIES ARE GREAT IN THE ESL CLASSROOM, AND YOU CAN USE THEM WITH YOUR STUDENTS NO MATTER WHAT THEIR LEVEL.

Don’t let this resource go to waste.
I’m sure most of you, if not all of you, are familiar with mind maps. Why? Well, because they are simply awesome. They can be used in a bunch of different ways and most teachers use them in their ESL lessons. And, why wouldn’t they? Mind maps are an amazing way to present new material, to dip into students creativity, and even help them remember things they have learned previously and need to refresh. Great, right?

Now, believe it or not, that’s not only what they are useful for. In addition to using them with students, ESL teachers can also benefit greatly from using mind maps from the professional point of view. How, you might ask? Take a look at these great tips for how to use mind mapping outside the lesson.

### HOW TO USE MIND MAPS FOR TEACHING ESL

#### 1 FOR PLANNING

Mind maps are one of the ESL teachers’ best allies for any and all planning tasks, since they provide a clear and visual overview of what needs to be planned. Whenever you are planning something, mind maps help you get all the relevant information down in one place and organize it easily. They can be used for planning any piece of writing. Here are some examples of what can be planned using mind maps:

- Lessons
- Assignment time lines
- Class curriculum for the school year
- Class Projects

#### 2 FOR ORGANIZING

For ESL teachers, organization is essential. After all, simply planning what you are going to do is not enough if it isn’t organized. Mind maps are the perfect tool to create a clear structure of what you have planned. So what can we organize using mind maps?

Take a look.

- Lesson content
- Meetings with parents or even other teachers
- Parent teacher interviews
- Class Projects

#### 3 FOR REMEMBERING

I’m quite sure all of you have plenty of things to remember, right? Teaching is just packed with details and information that needs to be recalled. Also, for those of us who are busy, forgetting is always a risk. Mind mapping can also help out in this area since it enables us to associate ideas to other ideas. Also, there’s no need to write full sentences. Jotting down words and linking them can go a long way toward helping us review and recall in an efficient and organized way. Here are but a few examples of things that might need remembering:

- Events
- Lesson plan for that day or week
- Special student/class needs

#### 4 FOR CREATIVITY

Being a teacher requires a great deal of creativity. A lot of what we do with our students doesn’t come from a book but out of our heads. And, let’s be real, there are times being creative is not such an easy task. This is where mind maps come in handy, because they liberate the mind from linear thinking and allow fresh ideas to flow easily. If you consider every item in a mind map as the center of another mind map the possibilities are endless. Let’s look at some examples where creativity can come in handy:

- Creating or improving the curriculum
- Creating games or other fun activities
- Creating tests of assessment activities

#### 5 FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

Sadly for all of us, problems are just about everywhere. As teachers, there are many issues we need to deal with in any and almost every class. Mind maps can be very useful in seeing all the issues and how they relate to one other. They are also amazing when we need to get an overview of different aspects of the difficult situation. They can help us:

- Find solutions to class behavior problems
- Find alternatives to teaching techniques
- Create better and more efficient lesson plans

#### 6 FOR TAKING NOTES

Using mind maps to take notes is becoming more and more popular among those who regularly attend meetings or lectures. It is an amazing way to map out the information you hear without the need to write full sentences quickly. However not only those who attend meetings find it useful. Take a look.

- Meetings
- Presentations
- Lectures
- Courses

Any way you look at it, mind maps are simply amazing tools. No matter what you use them for, your lessons will only benefit. They will be more organized, efficient and even fun!
What Can I Even Do with That?  
Great Uses for Smartboard

MANY TEACHERS OLDER THAN 30 -- AND EVEN SOME YOUNGER -- HAVE TROUBLE WITH USING "NEW" TECHNOLOGY. This is in part because, electronic revolution or no, our classrooms don’t look much different, in most cases, than the one Socrates lectured in: four walls, a place for the students to sit, a place for the instructor to stand, and a place for her to write. However, sometimes money comes our way: the budget gods smile on us, or someone writes for a grant, and it gets accepted. Then we might be blessed with new technology, such as laptops and PCs. Many schools recently in such a situation of unexpected financial largess have equipped the classrooms with “smartboards”: an electronic device that in some ways looks like a traditional whiteboard (I confess to have written with a marker on one, a real no-no), but it does so much more than a whiteboard. Still, many instructors teach around the smartboard, giving it a wide birth, perhaps afraid to damage it. However, there is no reason to fear the smartboard, and it has so many more uses than a traditional whiteboard that you’ll soon wonder how you ever taught without one.

DEFINITION OF A SMARTBOARD  
“Smart” has come to mean “electronic in contemporary vernacular, or “high tech,” or “latest tech” (e.g., smartphone). So a “smart board” is simply an electronic whiteboard, and which may also be thought of as an interactive overhead projector. It can combine websites, video, and images and project them on a screen as well as being used as a more traditional tool for the instructor to write on. So what can an instructor do with this electronic overhead or whiteboard? There are actually many uses.

GREAT USES FOR A SMARTBOARD  
A smart board consists of a projector and a touch screen, -- the projector is typically connected to a computer, which can then display an image on the board. Once the projector is turned on, hooked to, and set to communicate with the laptop, and the laptop turned on, you are ready to go.

DISCOVER PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR USING A SMARTBOARD IN CLASS

1 IMAGES FOR DEFINITION  
Have you ever tried to define “unicorn” to an ESL student? Believe it or not, sometimes these things come up in class spontaneously or are included in a reading, such as the classic James Thurber short story, “The Unicorn in the Garden.” Or how about trying to define the circus to someone who is from a culture where people don’t go to the circus and have no real concept of it? Before the smartboard, I would have struggled to define and communicate these concepts verbally, or with pictures drawn on the board: “Uh, the unicorn is a mythic, a not real, creature, like a horse with one horn...” and then tried to draw a picture. Or I would have tried to communicate the concept of “circus” by drawing a picture of a clown (and still getting blank looks because someone who has no prior understanding of the circus probably won’t connect a clown to it). Now, however, I can just bring the internet up on the smart board, search “unicorn,” hit “images,” and dozens of artistic renditions far superior to mine will come up. Similarly, with smartboard I can pull out images of an actual circus, or a circus’s website. This can also lead to some course discussion that promotes language and critical thinking growth: what is so compelling about the unicorn myth that it would be found across cultures, both Eastern and Western? What are the ethics of the circus: can it be said to be inhumane in its treatment of animals?

2 SET HISTORIC CONTEXT  
It’s one thing, for example, to discuss the power of a musician or other performer from another era, but it’s another to actually play the music of Ray Charles. To be able to see the images and film clips from some of the war protests or civil rights marches can give more of a feel for the era of 1960’s and 1970’s and its advances in social justice than any lecture. Just as cultural concepts can be more vividly portrayed with the smart board, so can history be made more real.

3 MAKING THE ABSTRACT TANGIBLE  
On a related topic, the instructor can make the abstract tangible with a smartboard. Instead of talking in general terms about “the Cold War,” the teacher can pull an image of an atomic bomb explosion or of the Berlin Wall or of maps that depict the divide between “Western” and “Eastern” nations during the Cold War.

4 WRITING TOPICS  
Numerous images and film clips can be pulled up on the smartboard for writing prompts. For example, pictures of some of the world’s great masterpieces can be shown, and students can write a description and critique of them. Or a clip can be shown from a recent TV series, movie, or the news for a written response analyzing it and what it says about contemporary culture.

5 MORE TRADITIONAL USES  
Sometimes a picture is not worth a thousand words. Sometime we still need words to communicate a specific idea or diagram a sentence or otherwise discuss grammar. In this case, the smart board can function much like a traditional overhead by not turning on the commuter and using an electronic pen or “stylus,” or even your finger, to write. Your notes can even be saved in the Smart Notebook by touching the board and selecting “Save Ink.”

ALTHOUGH THE SMARTBOARD MAY SEEM, AT BEST, DIFFICULT TO USE, AT WORSE, A SPACE WASTER, IT IS A USER FRIENDLY AND EXTREMELY VALUABLE DEVICE THAT HAS MANY FUNCTIONS IN ASSISTING IN STUDENT COMPREHENSION AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.
PUZZLES ARE ALWAYS A GOOD TIME. OK, not always, but most of the time, and logic puzzles are a great way to challenge your students. You can find various logic puzzles on the internet or can make your own. Making your own logic puzzles can be a very time consuming and difficult process, especially if you are not overly familiar with how these usually work. Modelling them after the Einstein Puzzle is probably the best method. It is also usually best to supply your students with a grid style work sheet so they can work though the answers piece by piece as well as a table where they can write their final answer. This helps students keep track of their reasoning and remember what questions they are actually trying to answer.

When you are having your students complete these puzzles, remember that this is partially about how your mind works. Even native speakers can find these difficult so it is probably best to let them discuss the clues in their own language. They will have to keep coming back to reading and understanding the English clues to actually make headway on solving the puzzle. Be aware that these are not primarily speaking activities. Also, these are not activities that you complete in the last twenty minutes of class. In my experience, even my highest level classes needed the full forty minutes for one or two groups to finish a low/mid-level logic puzzle. This is a best done as a group project so the high level students can help the others fully understand the clues.

If you want to incorporate some speaking into this you can give each group only some of the clues they need. Then some group members must go to the other groups, ask for a clue, listen carefully, write it down, and take it back to their own group. Depending on the level and behaviour of your students you can insist they ask specific questions (ie. do you have any clues about Stephanie) and that only one member from each group can be standing at any one time.

![Image of a group of students working on a logic puzzle]

INCORPORATE LOGIC PUZZLES INTO LESSONS SUCCESSFULLY

CLOSE READING

Logic puzzles are fantastic for getting students to really concentrate on what they are reading. Obviously, teachers must ensure that the students have been taught the necessary vocabulary and sentence structures to understand the clues, but having to apply it in a logic puzzle situation forces them to really pay attention to the implications of each word and sentence. When explaining the project, encourage the students to read through all the clues first, then go back and mark off all the obvious information on their answer sheet. Suggest that on the third read through they pause after each clue and discuss with their group exactly what the full meaning and implications of the sentence might be. Does it have underlying implied meaning beyond what is stated in the actual sentence? Once they have milked each individual clue for what it can tell them, they need to start comparing the different clues and see what they reveal when used together. It is probably worth suggesting, either at the beginning of class or part way through that they try grouping clues that all discuss the same category of information (ie. height) together and see what information that reveals.

Ultimately, completing a logic puzzle is about reading and fully understanding each clue in its own right, how it relates to the other clues that are given, and what the final, cumulative meaning of all this writing might be. Logic puzzles use all the important elements of close reading comprehension.

THE CONDITIONAL

At its heart, solving a logic puzzle relies completely on conditional reasoning. If x then y. If Jamie is taller than Kelly, Jamie cannot be the shortest person and Kelly cannot be the tallest person. Teachers who are using logic puzzles to practice the conditional may want to consider completing a simple logic puzzle as a class in one lesson and then having the groups do their own logic puzzles in another lesson.

For example, in the first lesson divide the students into their groups and give each group an even number of the clues. The teacher can then call on each group in turn to read out one of their clues. After each clue is read, solicit conditional clauses from the class at large. To help keep all the clues in front of the class, teachers may want to print very large copies that can be put up on the board once they have been read out by the group. This requires a very simple puzzle as the process of reading the clues and then composing conditional sentences will be very time consuming.

In the second class, give each group their own, more complex logic puzzle to solve. Follow the same process as in the close reading explanation and then allow the students to work through and solve the puzzle. It may be necessary to assign it as homework if the students are not finished by the end of class. Alternatively, the teacher can, while circulating, help keep all the groups at roughly the same level by assisting those who get stuck. The following class, have the students work in their groups and compose at least one conditional sentence for every conclusion they have reached. So, let’s say the students have concluded that Janet is the shortest person. They would then create a conditional sentence referencing at least one clue they used to draw their conclusions. Depending on the complexity of the puzzle this may take a large portion of the class. To practice speaking, have the groups take turns reading their conditional sentences.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Many logic puzzles rely on distinguishing characteristics of the people involved in the situations to resolve them. Clues such as ‘the girl with blonde hair is taller than the boy with black hair’ are very common. Tied into physical appearance is the use of comparatives.
and superlatives. Again, these are a key part of most logic puzzle clues involving people, races, houses, pets, etc. Distinguishing between them requires knowing which are bigger, taller, faster, smallest, etc. Depending on what material you taught your students, you may want to make your own logic puzzle for this application. Making your own would enable you to ensure that all the phrases and vocabulary you taught are actually used in the clues.

As the final activity, you can require that each group create a pictorial representation of the solution with each person’s defining characteristics. This allows you to touch on the various aspects of physical appearance as well as test their knowledge of comparatives and superlatives. And let’s face it, students love activities that allow them to make posters.

**LOGIC PUZZLES ARE GREAT TEACHING TOOLS WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF APPLICATIONS.**

Indeed, they don’t necessarily need to be tied to a single teaching point. They are great activities for those weeks between final exams and the end of the school year. Students stay interested, there is almost no teacher-talk-time, and you can offer up prizes for the first to get the correct answer, the best conditional sentence, or the best pictorial representation of the solution. Basically, logic puzzles, while educational, are also fun for all!
10 Twists on Bingo Perfect
For the ESL Classroom

**BINGO IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE GAMES TO PLAY IN ESL CLASSES.**
It is versatile, simple, and fun. I have played many different versions of Bingo depending on what I happen to be teaching, and Bingo is flexible enough that I can tailor it to just about anything. Here are ten twists on the classic game that you can include in your ESL class, too.

**USE A VARIETY OF BINGO IDEAS FOR A CHANGE IN YOUR CLASSROOM ROUTINE**

1. **LISTENING COMPREHENSION BINGO**

   This version of the game tests your students’ ability to listen to a word and choose the correct picture on their Bingo board. It works best with vocabulary that is easily illustrated. Start by having students create their Bingo boards using pictures of the vocabulary you will use during the game. At the start of play, choose a word and read it to your students. Do not let them see the word or a picture of it. Your students will have to use their listening skills to identify the correct picture on their boards. As always, five in a row wins.

2. **READING COMPRESSION BINGO**

   Similar to Listening Comprehension Bingo, Reading Comprehension Bingo starts with students selecting pictures to fill the squares on their Bingo boards. During play, you choose one word at a time and this time show the written word to your students. The class reads the word and marks the correct picture on their Bingo boards.

3. **SYNONYM BINGO**

   I love teaching vocabulary words in groups, that is, teaching three or four words with similar meanings at the same time rather than teaching a list of unrelated words. If you teach this way, and even if you don’t, synonym Bingo is a good way to review related vocabulary words. Students fill in their Bingo boards with various vocabulary words in random order. You choose synonyms for each of the words. To play, announce one of the words you have selected to your students. If a student has a synonym of the word you have chosen, she can mark it on her board. She cannot mark the actual words you show the class. Once she gets five synonyms in a row, she calls out Bingo.

4. **ANTONYM BINGO**

   Antonym Bingo plays in much the same way as synonym Bingo except that you choose antonyms rather than synonyms for the words on your students’ boards. To check after a student calls Bingo, have them read the words they marked along with the antonyms you called out to the class.

5. **PROBLEM AND ADVICE BINGO**

   When I am teaching conditionals, I like to play problem and advice Bingo with my students. It not only challenges them to put together conditional sentences, it makes them think logically about what to do in a given situation. To play, students fill their boards with advice they might give a friend. These advice phrases should start with “I would...” (Hint: the more general the advice, the more likely your students will be able to match them to a problem.) Your part is to call out problems that a person could have. They can be realistic or ridiculous, depending on the personality of your class. To play, you read the problem and your students choose the advice on their board that best addresses the situation. Once someone calls Bingo, post the problems that you have called on the board so your students can see them. Then, when the winner reads off his winning answers, he must put them into a complete sentence using the conditional form. For example, if you called the problem “I lost my dog” a student might choose to cover “I would call the police.” His sentence would be, “If I lost my dog, I would call the police.” Let the class decide if the winning player has chosen legitimate advice for each problem.

6. **COLOR BINGO**

   Beginning level students will enjoy this game that reviews colors. Have students write the names of colors to fill in their Bingo boards. (Note: Depending on how many colors your students are reviewing, you might want to use a three by three or four by four board rather than the traditional five by five.) Either show students a picture of the color and have them mark the color on their board or call out an object that is usually associated with a particular color (e.g. sky for blue, grass for green), and have students mark the correct color on their board.

7. **VERB TENSE BINGO**

   This is a challenging review of the verb tenses in English for advanced students. Have students choose two or three verbs and write the conjugation for those verbs in all twelve English verb tenses in random order on their boards. Tell students they must include at least one conjugation in each of the twelve tenses. You should have ready sentences that clearly call for each of the twelve conjugations of each verb. Read them in random order leaving out the verb. If students have the correct verb form on their Bingo board to complete your sentence, they mark it off. Remind students not to clear their boards when someone calls Bingo until that person’s answers have been checked.

8. **HOLIDAY BINGO**

   No matter what holiday is coming up, you can probably find a set of Bingo cards online. Review the holiday specific vocabulary with your students and then either play listening comprehension or reading com-
prehension Bingo with the seasonal words. This is a good way to bring vocabulary into your classroom that you might not cover in traditional ESL units.

**FIELD TRIP BINGO**

If you want your students to be on the lookout for vocabulary they learned for a specific field trip, you might want to try field trip Bingo. Students prepare their boards by filling in spaces with vocabulary they learn specifically for the trip. Students bring their cards with them on the field trip and mark off words as they encounter them. Rather than calling out when they have five in a row, students bring their boards over to you secretly. You check to see if their marks are correct. Students should continue to mark words throughout the field trip. When you return to school, award points for each Bingo a student was able to make (traditional, four corners, cross, X, outline the board, etc.) The student with the most points wins a prize – perhaps something you purchased on the field trip.

**TRADITIONAL BINGO**

While variations on the game are great, don’t forget the value that traditional Bingo has to offer. It is great for reviewing numbers with your students, and ESL students can always use practice with numbers.

**IF YOU ARE LIKE ME AND USE BINGO IN THE CLASSROOM ON A REGULAR BASIS, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CREATE REUSABLE BINGO BOARDS FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**

To do this, print a blank Bingo board and laminate it. Students can then use dry erase markers to fill in the boxes. You can also make boards from cardboard or cardstock (slip them in plastic sleeves if you like) and put Velcro dots on each square. When students make their own boards, they select from pictures and words that have Velcro on the back and simply stick them on the Velcro areas on the blank board.
Great Uses for Your Class’ Online Learning Management System

Many classes, even those that are traditional “on site” classes and are not online, now have an online “learning management system” course website (sometimes called the “course shell” or simply “course website.”)

These course shells generally feature a place to post announcements and documents, a way to email the entire class or individual students, and an online gradebook where the instructor can record grades for students to view their individual progress. While some instructors may scoff at these websites, especially if they meet face-to-face with their students daily or several times a week, there are numerous advantages to such a system. The overarching advantage is that the learning management system increases student self-responsibility for their learning by eliminating a lot of the “I didn’t know” and “I lost/didn’t get the papers” excuses and in general adds an extra method to communicate and connect with students.

**Use your class learning management system effectively**

1. **Emails to Students**
   
   An obvious primary advantage of the course shell is the ability to send out email blasts/reminders to students Sunday if you’ve forgotten to announce something important, such as the meeting in the library for a tour Monday morning. An equal disadvantage is the students who claim they didn’t get the email, mainly because their student account is not the main account they check (I just got a snippy email from a colleague on this very issue, of sending out an email to what was not her main account.) A proactive method of dealing with this is to advise -- and remind as necessary -- students that it is their responsibility to have their student email forwarded to whatever account they check regularly.

2. **Posting of Announcements**
   
   Another major advantage of the course learning management system is the ability to post announcements on the homepage. I used to run copies and pass out the weekly schedule Monday morning, -- now students are habituated to checking the site Sunday night for that week’s activities, saving paper and better preparing students so that they know which materials to bring to class. I also copy and paste important emails to the announcements page as a kind of permanent record. Students who miss class are therefore able to just check the homepage rather than call the instructor or classmates.

3. **Posting of Documents**
   
   Tired (and feeling guilty) about the expense and wasted trees in running off all of those multiple-page documents for class? Back really aching from carrying them around? Now just post them on the course shell for students to download or refer to as necessary. This also creates a permanent “database” of all of your course’s most important documents, in case of contingencies such as students “losing” them or not getting them due to an absence.

4. **Posting Grades for Students to View and Track Progress**
   
   Another major advantage of the course shell is the ability to keep the course gradebook online, so students can view progress whenever they choose and come to you with any concerns. This somewhat eliminates student’s claims of ignorance of their progress (and my failure to advise them) in the ending weeks of class when little can be done to improve the grade. If students are advised to regularly check the gradebook, then they become more responsible for their own progress.

5. **Online Threaded Discussion and Chat Features**
   
   Another great advantage of the course shell is the ability to set up an online threaded discussion in which students can post to a course topic such as gun control. Some excellent discussions have come out of threaded discussion, especially if each student is required to post at least once in response to the topic and once to a peer’s response—substantial posts of at least several lines that go beyond “I agree, good idea” to actually advancing the discussion. Most students opt to post more than required because of the level of interest they develop in the topic and each other’s responses during the course of the dialogue. The threaded discussions are also usually more organized than a face-to-face class discussion because there is no concern about “turn taking,” and rules of etiquette are more easily enforced. That is, the teacher can’t always, in rapid, face-to-face interchange, respond to something inappropriate, but such inappropriate remarks are immediately apparent and invite response, from both the instructor and other students, in writing. In addition, research shows that quieter students are more responsive and likely to contribute to online discussions due to the need of more time to reflect before entering a conversation than their more outgoing peers.

6. **Posting Assignments for Peer / Teacher Review**
   
   I still like the energy that comes out of a face-to-face peer review when students bring their writing into class and share with peer(s). However, there are definite advantages of doing it online: again, the main advantages are avoiding paper waste as well as more insightful comments/responses because there is more time to read and reflect. Rather than several peers offering responses that may be somewhat ill-thought out and abbreviated...
in a face-to-face unplanned response, students now get responses from their peers that are given after the other students have had time to read, reflect, and response to the writing.

**FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

There are also a few cautions to keep students on track in use of the course shell/website.

1. **KEEP HOMEPAGE ORGANIZED**

There are few things worse than a disorganized website. Because the context is reduced, and the designer is not there to explain it, a website must be intuitive and “user friendly.” I’ve recently stopped visiting a writer’s website I belong to simply because every time I sign on, I have to spend ten minutes or so reorienting myself to the site and remembering what to do, and I’m fairly experienced with computers. Most course learning management systems are these days set up so that its different features—announcement section, discussion threads, gradebook, and so forth—are clearly labeled for the novice user. Use them accordingly: if they are not clearly labeled, make sure the documents you post are: e.g., “Schedule for Week of December 16,” and try to group documents together, all of the assignments, announcements, etc.

2. **ORIENT STUDENTS TO THE USE OF THE COURSE HOMEPAGE**

Teachers often assume their students are computer literate, more so than the teacher himself. This is often correct, but not always—older students and economically disadvantaged students, for example, sometimes have little computer experience. They would therefore benefit from an orientation to the website: set aside part of a course period to bring in your laptop, if necessarily, to go to the website and introduce students to its various features.

3. **SET UP GROUND RULES**

Although often the ground rules should seem obvious, it is still necessary to introduce them. I usually post a few major rules regarding website use at the beginning of the semester: Set up your student email to forward to your main account (just as you would notify the post office if you changed your domicile), check the website at least a couple of times weekly, show basic courtesy and don’t post anything deliberately inflammatory to the discussion threads, etc. Because these ground rules should be obvious to responsible students, that is the context I use to introduce them: “This will be obvious to most of you, but --” etc.

WITH ALL OF THIS PROACTIVENESS ON THE PART OF THE TEACHER, WILL THERE STILL BE THOSE STUDENTS WHO CRY “BUT I DIDN’T KNOW,” “NO ONE TOLD ME,” OR “I DIDN’T GET THE HANDOUT”?

Of course. Just this semester, for example, I had one student who, plagued by a variety of technical mishaps, never was able to sign onto the course site and whose children somehow spirited away her thumb drive with all of her course materials stored on it to another city. There will always be those students who can’t or refuse to navigate a system, no matter how foolproof it is. However, with some proactiveness from the teacher, the course website/learning management system is an excellent learning tool.
Where Do I Start With PBL?

5 Steps To Building Killer Projects

PROJECTS ARE AWESOME!
I mean they can be a lot of work, but they are a great time for the kids and usually result in some laughs, or at least warm and fuzzy feelings, for the teachers. Of course part of why they are so awesome is the fact that students learn so much more from applying what they have learned in a different setting. It helps them get comfortable with the language, as well as to learn to use it in new or creative ways rather than the same old forms. Furthermore, it lets them realize that learning can be fun.

Having said all that, planning projects can be a lot of work. It can be hard to decide where to start. One thing is clear. It would be best if the planning could take place before the necessary language is taught in regular lessons. That gives the teacher time to add in any vocabulary or key phrases necessary for the project itself. If the project is added as an afterthought it must either stay within the existing parameters or start with a vocabulary/key phrases lesson to fill in any gaps in the students’ knowledge. Before we launch into the discussion of how, make sure you actually have time to complete a project based lesson. Many of these projects will take two to four classes to see through. That seems like a lot, but no worries! Here are 5 steps to building killer projects to help sum up a unit.

CONSIDER FRESH IDEAS FOR END OF UNIT FABULOUS PROJECTS

1 CONCEPTS
The concept is the bedrock of the project. What will they produce over the course of the project? What will the students actually enjoy (see point 2)? What material was taught and how will it be applied in the project? It’s not beneficial to do a super fun sports project when the topic is on ordering food in a restaurant. Fun, yes, but not effective. This process can actually be pretty tricky. So, the concepts for your project based lesson (PBL) must fit the language points and topics you are trying to teach. This leads to some pretty clear pairings as well as immediately letting certain topics out.

Start by asking yourself when you would use the language in the course of everyday life. Is it possible to replicate those circumstances in the classroom? Probably not, but is there a way to approximate those conditions in the classroom? Barring that, what is a fun way they can use in the language in the classroom setting?

Here are some examples of concepts that pair well with certain topics:
• Pen pals for introductions (Best case scenarios these are with people in the teacher’s home country, but if that is not possible it can be done between classes).
• Market activities for shopping units.
• Presentations that must use certain idioms taught in class.
• Make up a sport for comparatives and superlatives.

2 WHAT DO THEY LOVE?
Considering student interest and project concepts should probably happen around the same time. What do your students care about? What gets them interested? What do they talk about when you bump into them in the hallways? If you don’t have the answers to any of the questions you can ask some of your colleagues, especially those with kids (you should also get to know your students better). If at all possible, try to incorporate some of these interests into your projects. Student enthusiasm will skyrocket and you will have a better chance of drawing quiet students out of their shells. Something to note is that in certain age groups and certain cultures, male and female students have very different interests. Make sure you are not alienating one to please the other.

3 WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?
Often overlooked, this can result in teacher frantically buying materials with their own funds the night before. Not that there is anything wrong with teachers buying a few things for school, but it should really be by choice rather than necessity. A big part of this question is space. If you are planning a puppet show as the PBL for your personalities and physical descriptions unit, do you have space to put up the stage? Where will you store the puppets without them being destroyed? All these sorts of questions are pretty important to sort out well before deciding to go forward with a PBL.

4 DEVELOP A PROJECT OUTLINE
This can be very simple. How many days do you plan to allocate? What is the main project they will create? What materials do you need? What is a rough timetable? Below is a sample table that I have found useful in creating a PBL outline. It is partially completed as an example. In the primary outline area you can include notes about extensions, where you need to be (computer lab vs. classroom), or if there are materials that you need for only one day. Using this table, you can see at a glance, what you need, what you are doing that day, and where your students should be in their progress.

5 BUILD IT UP
PBLs are fun, but if they are presented to the class in the wrong light they can just look like a lot of work. “What do you mean we have to create an entire travel itinerary? We just spent three weeks talking about travel language.” We have all heard those complaints. It’s not another activity, it’s a cool project that we get to do instead of more lectures, vocabulary work-sheets, and phrase practice! It’s gonna be super fun, there’s posters, and presentations, all kinds of cool stuff. I am sure we are also familiar with the
appropriate language so I won't beat it to death.

The only other thing I would note is that it can be helpful to tie PBLs into your classroom rewards system in some big way.

**SO THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO CREATING A SOLID PBL.**

Yes it still requires a fair bit of creativity to come up with fun and/or realistic ways for the students to use the language, but I can assure you it is worth it. If you follow these steps, the process starts to simplify itself and before you know it you will be knee deep in projects. Enjoy!

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<th>Title: Travel the World</th>
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<td><strong>Project Deliverable</strong></td>
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Get Those Juices Flowing: 4 Steps Toward a Wealth of Learning

DO YOU FEEL YOU’VE FALLEN INTO A RUT WITH YOUR ESL CLASS?
Are you and your students simply going through the motions? Well, if you want to spice things up and get their minds working, tasks are the way to go. Let me tell you why. Tasks offer ESL teachers an amazing alternative. When using tasks for learning the lesson is based around the completion of a task with a real-world goal and the language the students learn comes from this. With tasks, students learn by being forced to communicate with other students to solve problems. Tasks provide the learner with an opportunity to use the language they need for genuine communication, increasing student motivation and encouraging more speaking. Tasks involve thinking skills we use in our ‘real lives’. They are a successful way of teaching language since they bring meaningful communication into the classroom, as students work towards the goals of the task. It is important to include activities that prompt students to work towards achieving specific goals using thinking skills. They learn to use the target language meaningfully as they communicate with each other and the instructor in achieving the goals of the task. Using tasks has some great advantages.

1. Tasks make lessons more fun. They provide an awesome change of pace.
2. Tasks provide a natural context for using language, and they promote the use of language that is personalized and relevant to the students.
3. The exposure to language is greater and more varied. The students are exposed to a whole range of phrases, vocabulary and structures in a natural context.
4. The language used during tasks comes from the students’ needs. The decision of what language is covered is not made by the teacher or the course book but by the students.
5. Students spend a lot of time communicating during tasks and since most, if not all students, need to learn to communicate, it is a great way to achieve this goal.
6. Students have control over what language they want to use and they have a wealth of language resources to choose from.
7. Students develop thinking skills like: planning, comparing, listing, analyzing, ranking, ordering, sorting, deducing, comparing, classifying, problem solving and explaining.

So, how do we use tasks in our classroom. Do we simply pick one and throw it at our students. Of course the answer is no. Though they are in fact easy to implement, tasks should be done as a step by step process. Let’s take a look at these steps.

CHECK THE PROPER PROCEDURE FOR ANY TASK

1. PREPARE YOUR STUDENTS
   You should never jump into anything without some type of warm up. Believe me, we all need warm ups and your students are not the exception. Here you need to introduce the topic, and give your students clear instructions on what they will have to do. If you wish, you could do a brainstorming activity with your students to recall some language that may be useful. Some teachers even like to provide their students with a model of what will be expected of them. They can take notes and spend a few minutes getting ready for the task.

2. TASK
   At this stage students complete the task they prepared individually, in pairs or groups. They have to use the language resources available to them, and the teacher acts as a monitor and offers encouragement. Ideally you should intervene as little as possible at this stage and offer corrections later on. This is why it is advisable for the teacher to take notes on what needs to be corrected while students are working, which will be useful for the feedback phase.

3. CONGRATULATE AND CORRECT
   Now that the task has finished, you need to praise and correct. First congratulate your students on a job well done. Tell them what they did well and ask them how they felt. After this, make all the necessary corrections. Highlight what things were not correct for the students to analyze. Ask them how they would say things differently.

4. PRACTICE
   Finally, you need to select language areas to practice based on your students’ needs and also what emerged from the corrections. The students then practice using activities to increase their confidence and use the language they have learned.

HELP YOUR STUDENTS DEVELOP THE SKILLS THEY NEED TO COMMUNICATE. Prepare them for the real world and help boost their confidence by using tasks.
6 Strategies to Get Advanced Students to Practice With You

ADVANCED STUDENTS HAVE PRACTICED ENGLISH FOR YEARS PROBABLY, AND, AS A RESULT, THEY OFTEN VIEW THEMSELVES AS EXPERTS. Also, they have enough language in their toolkit that they circumvent English concepts that are tricky for them. They obviously know they do not speak perfectly because they have contracted you, a native or more skilled speaker, to help them with their trouble spots and fix the nuances that will make their grammar better, their syntax sharper, and their pronunciation spotless. It can be hard though, to get non-native speakers to really practice what they need to practice! Here are some strategies that might help.

HOW TO GET ADVANCED ESL/ EFL STUDENTS TO PRACTICE WITH YOU

1 SELF-DEPRECATION

It is important, with non-native speakers, and especially if they have hired you to practice one-on-one, to put yourself on their level. If you appear better or smarter than your student, you will intimidate her and dissuade her from practicing trouble spots. You need to create an open, friendly environment where mistakes are made, and one of the best ways to do this is to make mistakes yourself or talk yourself down! Two applications:

• When she gets frustrated because she is having trouble pronouncing “these”, tell her it took you five years to pronounce a certain word in your foreign language.
• If she is frustrated about a word or phrase, ask her how they say it in her native tongue. Tell her how much more intuitive her people’s method is. Then mistakenly pronounce it a few times and show how hard it is for you to learn.

2 MAKE IT ABOUT THEM

If you are practicing conversation, only ask your students questions. Design the questions so they have to practice their trouble spots. They will struggle to use the troubling phrases/words because they will want to tell you all about themselves. This is human nature. If you are practicing grammar, give them writing assignments that focus on their past experiences and future desires.

• Have them write 500 words about an experience in their youth that first taught them the value of money. That could be a good conversation topic as well.

3 MAKE THEM THINK THEY ARE TEACHING YOU

Students that have managed to get this far in a foreign language and want to practice further are most likely overachievers. They prefer to be the leaders, the ones teaching you. Create problem activities where they have to explain something to you using trouble language or difficult grammar.

• For example: Create an activity where they have to explain the nuanced difference between meanings by comparing two different ways of saying something. “I probably would want to go to college one day” vs. “I maybe could go to college one day”.

4 TITLE THE CLASS SOMETHING ELSE

Do not call the class “Advanced Grammar and Pronunciation”. Call the class something like “Technical Aspects of Conversation for English Experts”, or, “Lose Your Accent in 2 Months”. These titles will appeal more to students that are advanced but not on a perfect fluency level yet and help encourage participation. They probably have already taken “advanced” English and want to think they are learning something new or value-added.

5 WORK AROUND THEIR SCHEDULES

These students are usually really busy. They probably have jobs and families, are young over achievers, or are more than full time students. Make sure to have class not just when they can squeeze it in, but at a time when they will be alert, open, and unoccupied.

• Early Sunday night is a great time if your schedule is flexible enough. They probably have not been working all day, and they can be more available to learn.
• Lunch time one day during the week could also work, as it provides a break in their work schedule and they can easily enough receive permission to participate as it a normal rest hour.

6 BECOME THEIR FRIENDS AND PEERS

Some teachers like boundaries and do not want to be friends and peers with students. Skip this strategy if you are one of those! If you are uncomfortable, it does not work. Consider though that advanced students probably do not need discipline and boundaries. They will benefit more from a release of those boundaries. Try to look at them not as students, but as people like yourself that want to perfect a language. They will feel more comfortable with you and worry less about making the mistakes that they need to make in order to get their language to the next level!

• Open up your class asking them personal questions about school, their kids, what they did on Saturday, etc.
• Tell them what you did on Saturday and about your children or boyfriend.

Aim to be just a little bit personal if this is uncomfortable, and you might be amazed how much further you can take your students!

ADVANCED STUDENTS CAN BE THE MOST FUN AND THE MOST REWARDING STUDENTS, AND THEY WILL SCRATCH YOUR ITCH TO USE ENGLISH AT A HIGHER LEVEL AND ANALYZE ITS NUANCES. They can also be frustrating though and difficult to teach and get to the next level of English mastery. Try applying a few of these strategies if you are having a hard time!
4 Ways to Challenge Advanced Learners with the Present Simple

THE PRESENT SIMPLE IS THE MOST BASIC TENSE IN ANY LANGUAGE AND IT IS THE FIRST TENSE THAT LEARNERS OF ENGLISH WILL LEARN AND USE, STARTING WITH THE VERB ‘TO BE’.

Curiously, however, no matter how advanced the learner is, there are often basic mistakes such as formation that are continuously made. In every single ESL course book for learners ranging from starters to advanced ones, the present tenses always pop up and they’re always the first tense to get covered. As learners advance, they naturally begin to roll their eyes and tire of the present simple tense often complaining that they know it and it’s "too easy." But without realizing it, the present simple is used in so many different scenarios in the English language and to master the language the basics must be mastered first.

While they probably know it deep down, ESL learners often forget that to know a language well there needs to be constant revision, even of the basics.

However, it’s not surprising that advanced students groan and grumble at the mere sight of the present simple as they feel they’re not challenged, which in some cases with less experienced teachers this could be the case. There are many ways that we as language educators can challenge and push our learners more, even with the basics like the present simple tense. What we need to bear in mind all the time is that they’re not learning the language at this stage, but merely revising it, therefore more autonomous and discovery learning needs to be encouraged to keep the learners stimulated.

PUSH YOUR ADVANCED STUDENTS MORE WITH PRESENT SIMPLE

1 DISCOVERING USES

At this stage learners know the basics of the present simple, but do they know their uses? Like native speakers they know how to use the tense, but rarely understand why they are using it. Refrain from telling the learners that you’re having a grammar review, it will surely be met with moans.

Instead begin you lesson by writing example sentences under each other showing all the different uses of the present simple (if you have access to powerpoint, it would be quicker to have this pre-prepared). Sentence uses should include: present simple for a fact (e.g. The cheetah is the fastest animal in the world), present simple for routine (e.g. Every morning Jenny wakes up at before her brother), present simple for timetable (e.g. Flight 451 to Manchester leaves on the hour every two hours), present simple for declaration (e.g. I love you), present simple with stative verbs (e.g. I know what to do), present simple for quoting someone (e.g. Maria says she’s ready), present simple for a plot (e.g. Ophelia tragically drowns in a stream), present simple for a headline (e.g. Five die in city house fire), present simple for jokes (e.g. A snail walks into a bar and the barman tells him there’s a strict policy about having snails in the bar and so kicks him out. A year later the same snail re-enters the bar and asks the barman “What did you do that for?”), present simple for sports commentary (e.g. Messi dribbles the ball up the centre field, he shoots, he scores, what a wonderful goal from Lionel Messi), present simple for the future (e.g. My flight leaves at 10 o’clock tomorrow morning), present simple for instruction (e.g. Finely chop the shallots and add them to the skillet) and present simple for a theoretical or planned situation (e.g. according to the CEO’s idea, I help seat all the guests and give a formal welcome).

After your example sentences have been listed or projected on the board ask your students to draw the connection between the different examples. At first they’ll be trying to think of really complicated connections and looking more at the meaning of the sentences rather than the connection between the structures. This activity is a perfect way of exercising the left side of the brain with logic and deductive reasoning. When they come to the conclusion, ask your learners then to produce the uses/rules of each example sentence by making reference to the examples. This activity will benefit your more advanced learners as it’s a form of discovery learning which helps to further build on your students’ prior knowledge and as it’s more challenging for them, they won’t grow bored so quickly.

2 GET COOKING

A fun and engaging way to review the present simple is through using a cooking video. I prefer to use a clip with a more famous chef that everyone is familiar with such as Jamie Oliver. Firstly, write the words present simple on the board without speaking and then instruct your learners to watch and listen carefully. Play a short segment of the beginning of a cooking show and pause the video. Ask the students why they believe you’ve written the term present simple on the board and showing a cooking clip. If they’re really advanced students they’ll pick it up almost immediately. Explain that you’re going to watch Jamie Oliver or whoever else cook lasagna for example. It is the task of the learners to write down the notes of the steps involved in cooking the lasagna. Stress the importance of taking good and relevant notes as they’ll be expected to produce a recipe using the present simple and the exact steps taken at the end of the show. This is a great way to incorporate both listening and writing skills while reviewing basic grammar points. As the learners have to be more active in the lesson with the reviewing of the present simple, they’ll forget their usual complaints of the tense being too basic for them and focus on the task at hand.
This kind of activity can work with any how to or instructional video, however, I find it works best with cooking and recipes as more learners can relate to this and it's more realistic in the terms of most people will cook at some stage in their lives.

3 JUST JOKING!

It’s been said that to know a language completely you need to be able to understand its humor. Integrating jokes in the English classroom when reviewing the present simple with advanced learners is fun and it will really test their comprehension. Start the lesson by asking if the students know any jokes in English. If they do, encourage them to share them with the class. Scour the internet and find some age and content appropriate jokes (one-liners are great for this) that use the present simple tense. Split the group of collected jokes in half. Project one or two of the first half of the jokes on the board and explain that the segments are part of an English joke. Ask your learners to try and guess the second part of the joke or encourage them to come with their own endings. On a worksheet have all of your split jokes in two jumbled up columns and ask the students to match the two halves to form the complete joke. Model retelling one of the completed jokes using your voice to exaggerate the necessary parts and take pauses in the right places. Work your way around the class having the students do the same for the remainder of the jokes. The most challenging part of this is the last exercise where learners are encouraged to write their own one-liner jokes based on the structure of the jokes they can see on their worksheet using the present simple tense. Working with jokes is not only fun, it helps to practice and review one of the uses of everyday English and of course it gives your advanced learners a review of the present simple tense without them even realizing it. The use of jokes is also beneficial for advanced learners as it can be very relevant to life as jokes and storytelling plays a huge role in everyday life.

4 CREATIVITY AND PRESENT SIMPLE

If you wish to review the present simple tense and more specifically routine and habitual activities it is easy to get stuck with what to do with advanced learners. Over the years of them learning English they’ve broken down their daily routines time and time again which not only gets monotonous for the learner but also the teacher. Creative thinking is a great way to get learners to think outside the square as quite often they are stuck on specific ideas after repeating them so often in the ESL classroom. Have your learners name a list of everyday household appliances. After listing the appliances such as vacuum cleaner and dishwasher, ask your learners to choose one. Explain to your learners that they are no longer human and for this lesson they’re their chosen appliance. With their appliance in mind, they must brainstorm a number of different activities that the said appliance does. This is a great time to introduce the idea of personification and giving inanimate objects human characteristics. After the lists have been drawn up ask your learners to write sentences using the present simple tense showing the daily routine of the household appliance and to make this activity even more fun and challenging each sentence could be read without naming the appliance and it could be treated as a riddle for the other participants of the class to guess what it is.

LEARNING AND REVIEWING GRAMMAR DOESN’T HAVE TO ALWAYS FOLLOW THE SAME ROUTINE AND MORE ADVANCED LEARNERS NEED TO BE CHALLENGED.

They’re right in the sense that repetitive lessons and grammar points get boring when they’re not mentally stimulated. Challenge your more advanced learners to keep them motivated and help them understand that even though it is only the present simple there’s still a lot to learn and review when it comes to working towards fluency in English.
Tested Out: 5 Alternative Assessments for Your ESL Classroom

NOT EVERY STUDENT PERFORMS BEST WITH A TRADITIONAL PAPER AND PENCIL TEST.

How can you get those low-performing students to show what they really know? Here are five alternative assessments that you can use in your classroom to help all students reach their potential.

TAKE A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENT

1 MAKE A DIORAMA

When you are done with a unit on animals, for example, you can have your students make a diorama to demonstrate their understanding of the topic. A diorama is a shoebox filled with small figures and scenery representing what has been learned. If your students have studied the rainforest, they can make a scene using small trees and animals found in the rainforest. They can either make them out of paper or clay, or in some situations you may have supplies in your classroom. Then, depending on their level, they can present this to the class. A beginner can just point and label the different parts, and a more advanced student can explain the different parts and how they work together. Afterwards, students may ask questions of the student presenter if that is appropriate for their level. Displaying the dioramas for some time in the classroom can also foster more conversation among the students. Dioramas are a great, creative way for students to demonstrate their knowledge.

2 MAKE ‘EM LAUGH

Some students may enjoy using a comic strip as a demonstration of their understanding. This works very well with a how-to or persuasive writing piece. It allows students to use their artistic skills along with a minimal amount of writing. Many students may already be familiar with a comic strip format which makes it even more user-friendly. Show the students some comic strips as examples, if possible. Explain that they will need to decide on their topic and plan out their strip, complete with drawings and speech bubbles. Provide them with a blank comic strip with four to six frames. Have them sketch it out on that first one. After you have reviewed their sketch and speech bubbles, they may make a final draft on a new comic strip. They may present it to the class. This activity can be used to demonstrate knowledge of specific content, such as a time in history, or to demonstrate understanding of a specific verb tense. The possibilities are endless with this assessment.

3 IT’S ALL IN THE PRESENTATION

Some students may have some reading, writing, and even computer skills, but may still lack in speaking ability. These students may like to prepare a brochure to demonstrate what they have learned. Make sure they understand that a brochure is usually used to sell a product, so they will be “selling” whatever they have learned to the class. If they have access to computers at school, they may even be able to make the brochure there. You should give clear instructions as to how much information and how many pictures you would like for each section. You definitely should provide a good example of what you would like the brochure to look like. If they prefer to do it by hand, drawing on the page and writing it would be fine as well. Once they have completed the brochure, you have the option of having them just hand it in for a grade, having them read it to the class, or reading it to the class yourself in order to share some information. A brochure is a great way for students to communicate their understanding to you.

4 THAT’S UP FOR DEBATE!

A fun way to assess students on a topic for which they can choose sides is to have a debate. This would be appropriate for students who already have some speaking skills. Your topic would need to be something that is arguable, such as whether there should be school uniforms in public school. If you are studying present tense or adjectives, for example, you can tell your students that you want them to use a certain amount of them in their argument. You may either let each student choose their side of the argument, or assign sides. If you allow them to choose, make sure that the sides are fairly even. Allow them to debate each other respectfully. Many students thrive when they feel there is some competition involved, and this may just do the trick. Having a debate in class is a fun way for students to demonstrate their knowledge.

5 LIGHTS, CAMERA... LEARNING!

Another fun way for students to show what they have learned is to act it out for the class. This can definitely work for any ability. If your students are beginners, they can act out their vocabulary words. This can be played as a game of charades, as one group of students selects a vocabulary word, and then silently acts it out, which gives the other team a chance to guess the word in the target language. Another opportunity would be for more advanced students to create a skit about the topic they have studied in the target language, such as an historical event. This would give them some reading and writing practice as they create the skit and then some speaking practice as they act it out. Many students enjoy acting as a way to show what they have learned.

MANY STUDENTS WILL FIND THESE ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS A WELCOME CHANGE TO THE TRADITIONAL PAPER-AND-PENCIL TEST. For many, it gives them a chance to show their strengths. Using alternative assessments also lowers anxiety for many students who worry about their performance excessively. These creative outlets or being able to prepare their information ahead of time helps those students. They give our students a chance to reach their potential. Of course, in every classroom, there will be a time where pencil-and-paper tests have their place and will have to be used. It is refreshing to know that when we are not required to use them, we have these alternative assessments at our fingertips.
How Colleagues Might Be Your Best Untapped Teaching Resource

AS TEACHERS, WE FREQUENTLY THINK ABOUT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ONGOING EDUCATION, BUT HOW OFTEN DO WE LOOK TO THE ROOM NEXT DOOR?

While conferences and classes are great, and you should go to one whenever you get the chance, sometimes the best untapped resource you have as a teacher are the other people in the building standing at the front of their classroom. Here are several ways your fellow teachers can be an encouragement and resource to you as a teacher (and you can be to them).

6 SIMPLE WAYS TO TAP INTO THE RESOURCES IN YOUR VERY OWN HALLWAY

1 JOIN FORCES

Working with another teacher in your school might actually help your ESL students become better speakers of the language— even if that person doesn’t teach English. ESL teachers have a problem—we make ourselves easy to understand. It’s natural, and our students are probably pretty happy that we do. It doesn’t take long for an ESL teacher to modify the vocabulary they use, their pronunciation, and their choice of grammar to help students understand what they are saying. And most of the time we don’t even realize we are doing it. It’s good, therefore, to get another teacher in your classroom to expose your students to another person’s style of speaking, someone who hasn’t simplified their language for the sake of classroom communication.

2 CREATE A RESOURCE BANK

There’s no need to recreate the wheel, right? But that’s just what a lot of teachers do when they feel the need to create resources for every lesson they teach. If you have other English teachers in your school, pool together your resources. Make files any teacher can use, and include worksheets, tests, and other materials. Sort them by topic or by class. Then when it’s your turn to teach on that subject, take a look at the resource bank and see what materials others have already created. You’ll save yourself time and effort while also encouraging and helping your fellow teachers with the materials you share.

3 BECOME A REGULAR VISITOR

Classroom observations can be really stressful, but it’s a lot easier to have a friend and coworker sit in on your class before the principal or formal evaluator does. By inviting a colleague into class, you get a chance to pick their brain about your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. Take turns sitting in on a lesson or two, and give each other feedback on how well the information was presented, how the students responded, how you interacted with the students, the materials you used, and any other items that catch their attention. When you have another set of eyes on your teaching, you can learn more about yourself as a teacher, and when you watch others teach, you will naturally find elements they use that you will want to incorporate into your own teaching.

4 GET TOGETHER

Your fellow teachers don’t just have to be a resource for ideas and teaching skills. Try just getting together to talk about what is going on. If you make a regular habit of hanging out, you will find an audience who can listen to your teaching woes and accomplishments and react with support and encouragement. If you like, set up a time to go out for drinks, have a potluck lunch once a month, stay after school once a week, and use that time to share ideas and stories. If you do, you may find the community that comes from your time together helps all of you steer clear of burnout and helps you release some of your frustrations in a healthy way.

5 GET MENTORING

One of the biggest encouragements to a new teacher can be the help and guidance that comes from a mentor teacher. For new teachers, the classroom can be a bit overwhelming. That is where an experienced teacher comes in. Not only can that person help with classroom management tips, curriculum guidance, and answer questions, they can also be a social support to new teachers coming into an unfamiliar school and sometimes a new country. A mentor teacher is great for introducing a new teacher around to the rest of the staff and being a first step for a novice teacher making school a second home. If you don’t already have a mentoring program at your school, think about starting one. Talk to the administration about a formal program, or just take the school’s newest staff member under your wing and show them around. It just takes one person to start a mentoring program, and one person can make a huge difference in one person’s life as well as the life of their school.

6 CHAT ABOUT IT

How much time does a teacher really have for additional meetings and get together? If the answer is less than you’d like it to be, think about starting a private chat room for the teachers in your school or community. Allow members by invitation only, and use your blog as a platform to share successes and struggles, questions and insights. If you make it a habit to peruse the board every few days (even if it’s late at night, very early in the morning or even during a free class period) you will find yourself able to help and encourage your fellow teachers as well as get help and encouragement from them.

YOU MAY BE THE ONLY TEACHER IN YOUR ROOM, BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN YOU HAVE TO TACKLE TEACHING ON YOUR OWN.

Your fellow teachers are a great resource and can offer valuable knowledge and experience to you. In addition, you have experiences and knowledge they will benefit from learning. So before you sign up for that conference, think about what your coworkers have to offer and what you can offer them. You just might find that you all have a lot to offer one another.
5 Important Things I Have Learned Through Experience

1. Understanding Instinct Versus Instruction

My first job working with ESL students was in a tutoring lab at a university language center. It was a great program where one-on-one tutoring was built into every student’s schedule and tuition. Four afternoons each week I met with students in a large room filled with tables, resources, and other tutoring matchups. Though I had a background in linguistics and writing, I found out just how little I knew about the English language when my students started asking questions. Actually, let me rephrase that. I learned how little I knew how to explain about the English language. Because English is my first language, I could tell students if what they said or wrote was right or wrong, but too often I couldn’t tell them why! Though I could use grammar very well, I didn’t know how to break it down into rules and patterns.

2. Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?

One of my greatest resources during these first weeks and months of teaching were my fellow tutors. Many of them had been working in the tutoring center for years, and they were well versed when it came to the whats and the whys of the English language. At first, I was timid about asking them questions about grammar. Wasn’t I supposed to know this stuff already? But I asked anyway, feeling that my students deserved complete and practical answers to their questions even if I wasn’t the one giving them. I learned something important through these conversations. My fellow tutors (and teachers) were the best resource I had when it came to understanding my own language. They didn’t mind answering my questions, and they could point me to resources in the tutoring center that would further explain their answers. I learned so much practical instruction from them that it rivaled what I was learning in my master’s program.

3. Please Hold...

I’d like to say every one of my questions was easily answered by my fellow teachers, but that wasn’t the case. Though they shared infinite knowledge with me, sometimes I or my students came up with a question that none of us could readily answer. During those moments, I learned something else. It’s okay to tell a student you don’t know the answer but that you will find it and get back to him or her. Teachers are the ones with all the answers, true? False. Even the best teachers cannot answer every question every student will ever ask, but the answers are out there. Sometimes it takes some digging or some research or some serious thought about why we do what we do when we speak. When you encounter a situation like this, be honest. Tell your student that you don’t have the answer right now, but don’t stop there. Look it up. Find out the answer. Then get back to your student with the right answer. Like a child whose parent says, “Because I said so,” your students will not be satisfied with a pat answer void of information. Taking time to dig up the meat of the answer will be more valuable to your students and will garner you more respect in the long run, so do it. You won’t lose face by saying you have to check on that before you can answer their question.

4. Blessed Are the Flexible...

It may not be an official proverb, but this saying helped me more on my first trip overseas than any other snippet of training I had received up until that point: blessed are the flexible for they shall not be bent out of shape. My ESL teaching career has been nothing if not unpredictable. My first overseas teaching assignment was one of the biggest surprises in my life. I found out just days before travelling to the other side of the world to teach that I would not be teaching grades 7-12 as I had been told but ages 7-12. Big difference! Needless to say my first classroom brought new
challenges to me every day. At that time, I reminded myself that flexibility is one of the greatest virtues of the ESL teacher. My classroom struggles often centered around the difference between teaching children and adolescents, but flexibility is a trait that all ESL teachers should seek to develop in themselves.

When you are teaching ESL, you are teaching people from other cultures, other areas of the world. There is no shortage of cultural issues that come up in the ESL classroom. Sometimes they are simple to get past – don’t point with your middle finger, I have told many a student. Point with your first finger instead. Other cultural issues that touch on deep personal values are not as easy to clarify or resolve. And if you are teaching a class full of internationals, you have even more opportunities for cultures to clash. Be flexible. It’s okay to put aside your lesson plan for the day to address cultural issues when you need to. In fact, being flexible about schedule, lesson plans, and activities will do nothing but help you as an ESL teacher. The sooner you learn that, the easier a time you will have.

5 YOU CAN DO IT

It’s also okay to put aside your advanced lesson to reteach the basics that your students should already know but don’t. It’s okay to take your students out of the classroom on a beautiful day and do some on the spot vocabulary development. It’s okay to change things up, be creative, play games, and have fun. You have to. Language learning is stressful, and your students will be looking to you for comfort, guidance, and direction. Sometimes the best thing you can do for your ESL students is to close the lesson planner and just take the day and its questions as they come.

TEACHING ESL CAN BE OVERWHELMING, ESPECIALLY IF YOU’RE NEW TO IT.

Take heart. We have all struggled. You are not the only one. And you will make it over these hurdles just like the rest of us did. Be flexible, be teachable, and be honest with your students and with yourself. When you do, you will find that things become easier each day, each week, each year. Before long, you’ll be the one sharing your bits of wisdom with the new teachers in your school!