

Teaching Tips

These helpful Teaching Tips borrowed from www.englishclub.com are written in plain, jargon-free English. They'll be of particular use to new teachers and experienced teachers may find them useful as well.

Teaching Tip: Pairwork / Groupwork

How:

1. Make a list of pairs of names before the lesson starts or while the students are coming in or just tell them when the time comes: "Gianni, you work with Paola; Chiara, you're with Stefano this time".
2. If there is an odd number of students make a group of three but break them up later in the lesson and put them into pairs with someone else so they get more chance to speak.
3. You could put them in small groups to start with if the activity allows. You could even make the activity a competition in small teams if the activity allows, seeing which team gets the most answers right. Use the board or a piece of paper for keeping score.
4. Change the partners quite often so that the students don't get bored with their partner. This is especially important if there is a student who isn't very popular with the others.

Why:

1. It's good for the students to speak to each other in English. Making students speak to each other instead of the teacher maximises STT (Student Talking Time) and minimises TTT (Teacher Talking Time). This is a good thing because the students are the ones who need to practise their English — you, hopefully, don't! A lot of students will be using their English to speak to non-mother tongue speakers anyway so they might as well start getting used to it. Some of them will never use English to speak to mother-tongue English speakers at all!
2. It's good for the students to work with another student sometimes rather than alone (see Teaching Tip "Checking Together" for further explanation).

Extra Info:

Don't put your students into groups bigger than three because they don't get enough chance to speak in such a large group so they switch off, start fidgeting, get frustrated, let the hard-working students do all the work, fall asleep etc. In a pair, one student is speaking and one is listening and formulating a response, in a group of three, one is speaking, and usually the other two are listening and formulating responses, in a group of four (or more), one is speaking, one or two are listening and formulating responses and the other one is asleep, aware

that s/he hasn't got much chance of getting a word in edgeways. Or of course, in a group of four, two speak to each other while the other two often either fall asleep or end up speaking to each other too, in which case you might as well have put them in pairs in the first place.

If you have an odd number of students don't pair the extra student up with yourself — make a group of three somewhere because the other students aren't daft — they will realise they are missing out on the teacher's attention and they will be right — you will be short-changing them by not monitoring them as you should.

If you've got some talkative and some quiet students, pair the quiet ones together for the fluency activities (as opposed to the vocabulary / grammar activities) to encourage them to talk more. Don't put one talkative student in a pair with a quiet one, thinking that the quiet one would speak more if his / her partner was the chatty type. It's a wrong idea — the talkative one monopolises the conversation and the quiet one is happy to let this happen.

Teaching Tip: Reading Aloud

How:

1. Pick a student and ask him / her to read the instructions for Activity 1/2/3 or whatever. E.g. "Marco, please read the instructions for Activity 2 for us".
2. Pick a different student each time.

Why:

1. It saves you doing it.
2. You can check pronunciation.
3. The other students may well understand the instructions better when read by another student.
4. The students are more likely to listen to another student than to you.
5. If they all read the instructions silently they will all finish at different times. If they listen to someone reading the instructions out loud they all finish at the same time.

Extra Info:

Getting students to read aloud used to be unpopular because the powers that be said that it was unrealistic as we never do it in real life — you read books silently, don't you? Things have changed since then as it has since been argued that we do do it, e.g. "hey, listen to this, it says in the paper here that Prince Charles is already, secretly, married to Camilla!" Listen — "Prince Charles allegedly married Camilla Parker Bowles in a secret ceremony at Windsor Castle yesterday. The ceremony was attended only by the prince's closest family and friends. A palace spokesman denied the rumour, saying that..." etc.

Teaching Tip: Checking Understanding

How:

1. Ask your students "Is that clear?"
2. If it's clear, fine. If anyone says "No, can you explain that?/ Can you explain again?", don't. Ask if one of the other students can explain it.
3. If nobody understands it, go through an example step by step together. They should get it then.
4. If they still don't get it, go through another example together.
5. If the poor things are still lost either
 - do the whole activity together as a class, if possible or
 - give up and go to the next activity.
 If it's a word they are having difficulty understanding, you could set it for homework and get the students to explain the meaning to you next lesson.
6. Another way to check understanding of instructions is to ask the students to imagine that you are a new student who has just come in — can they explain how to do the activity?
7. Another way to check understanding, not only of instructions, is by concept checking (see Teaching Tip "Concept Checking").

Why:

1. You need to check that the students have understood because they are unlikely to tell you if they haven't — they will simply bumble through the exercise, doing it wrong, probably aware that they are doing it wrong, and losing confidence.
2. You need to ask "Is that clear?" rather than "Do you understand?" because the chances of a student saying "No, I don't understand" are very slim — they will feel very stupid. Would you admit to not understanding something in front of others in a classroom situation? Nobody would!
The student who doesn't understand will be convinced s/he is the only one who doesn't get it and will not want to admit that in public. Questions like "Is that clear?" shift the blame to the quality of the instructions instead. Neutral ground — much nicer.

Teaching Tip: Guessing Answers

How:

1. When there is a list of possible answers, encourage students to guess the answers (by saying things like "There are two words to choose from and only one gap to fill so you've got a 50% chance of being right!").
2. Encourage students to look at the words before and the words after the gap (in a gap-fill — a.k.a. cloze — exercise) to help them decide what type of word is needed in the gap. Will the answer be a verb? an adjective? a noun? In most exercises this will limit their choice of answers and therefore increase their chances of guessing the right one (see the previous point).

3. If they are still looking a bit blank it's probably because they are suffering from "gap-fill tunnel vision" which means that this is what they see:
Irrelevant gobbledegook an _____ with I needn't read this because it comes after the gap.
Would you know what to write in the space? Nobody would!
4. Encourage them to try to guess the meaning from the context (i.e. the sentence or paragraph the gap is in). Lets look at the same example again, this time with the context:
It rained yesterday when I was out but I hadn't got an _____ with me so I got wet.
In this example the context tells us that the missing word is probably going to be "umbrella".
5. This technique also works well when there is a word which the students don't know in a sentence.
If they have never seen the word "umbrella" before and it is in the sentence then the sentence will look something like this to the student:
Irrelevant gobbledegook an *umbksjdhfskjfla* with I needn't read this because it comes after the gap.
Some students will panic at this point and ask you what an *umbksjdhfskjfla* is. You don't need to spoon-feed them the answer. If the students use the context to help them they will probably be able to work out the meaning for themselves (see point 4 above) and thus gain confidence as learners.

Why:

1. The students know a lot more than they think they know — the posh term for this is "passive knowledge". This basically means that somewhere in the past they have seen or heard this word or phrase but they don't remember it consciously. (They don't know they know — they think they don't know, but you know better, you think they know — confused yet?) Anyway, if you can get them to make a guess, the chances are that they will get it right quite a lot of the time. If you put the students into pairs or small groups the chances are that with their combined passive knowledge they'll get most of the answers right, though they won't know how they did it. They'll probably think it's just luck. It isn't.
Of course, the upshot of all this is that they get most of it right and consequently feel very good. Their confidence is raised and that is half the battle with speaking a foreign language.
2. In real life (outside the classroom) the students will be put in situations where they don't know all the answers or they don't know all the words etc. If they have developed the confidence to trust themselves to make an educated guess here and there it'll help them survive linguistically.
3. In many English language exams it is necessary to do gap-fill / cloze exercises.

Students taking exam courses should be encouraged to make guesses left, right and centre in order to avoid ever leaving a space on an exam paper. If nothing is written in the gap the student will receive no marks. If something is written in the space there is a chance, a fair chance, that the answer will be right.

Teaching Tip: Monitoring

How:

1. While the students are doing an activity you walk slowly round the classroom and listen to their conversations.
2. You can sit down too, if there are enough chairs, but try to sit in the background a bit or the students will direct their conversation to you.
3. Look at one pair whilst actually listening to a different pair nearby. Correct the pair nearby (which will probably make them jump because they thought you were listening to the pair you were looking at) just to keep everyone on their toes — they never know when you're listening to them so they can't ever switch off or revert to their mother-tongue.
4. Be ready to massage any flagging conversations back into life, to stop students monopolising conversations, to stop students falling out with each other and to offer encouragement and praise where appropriate. Listen and supervise.
5. Take a piece of paper and a pen with you on your travels round the classroom so that you can jot down any howlers (which can then be dealt with at the end — see Teaching Tip "Error Correction" for further explanation).

Why:

1. If you spend your life in the classroom sitting down, this is your chance to stop numb-bum syndrome — get up and wander round. If you spend your life in the classroom on your feet, this is your chance to put your feet up (not literally) — sit down to listen to the students.
2. Monitoring gives you the opportunity to hear how the students are coping with the activity and to make notes about pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar points that are causing difficulty. See the role as one of listener / supervisor / facilitator / encourager — not as one of error corrector.

Extra info:

Although it's a good idea to indicate that you're actually listening to the students (even to the point of feigning interest in what they are saying) you shouldn't crouch down to table height in order to listen to the students — it looks silly.

Apparently, (according to books on body language) tipping your head to one side gives the impression that you are listening avidly to someone so if you were thinking of switching off and not listening to your students at all

(..me..??..never!!), tip your head to one side first and they'll be none the wiser!

Don't correct mistakes very much when you're monitoring — jot them down and do a bit of error correction later because if you get caught up correcting one student's mistakes during the activity you can't monitor the other students properly and by the time you get back to monitoring you find that everyone has reverted happily to their mother tongue.

Teaching Tip: Error Correction

How:

1. Let the students make mistakes. They need to. We all learn best through making mistakes. Trial and error is the name of the game.
 2. Give the students time to realise they've made a mistake and try to correct it themselves. If they can't, maybe someone else can help them. If nobody can help then you can either step in and give the correct form or make a note of it for later.
 3. As far as possible, correct mistakes anonymously. Do this by making notes of students' mistakes as you monitor (see Teaching Tip "Monitoring" for further explanation) then putting them on the board later and give the students themselves the opportunity to correct them, in pairs or small groups. If no one knows the right answer, give it to them, but only as a last resort.
- Anonymous error correction is a kind way to deal with mistakes. It isn't important who made the mistake originally — the point is, can the students all correct it? Tend to doctor the mistakes so that even the perpetrator doesn't recognise them as his / her own. For example:

Original error: "I have been to Paris last year". = On the board: "I have been to London last week".

Extra info:

Mistakes are good things and students need to know that they are. Try to explain like this: "Please make lots and lots of mistakes in my lessons — new mistakes, mind you, not the same old ones over and over. I like mistakes because we can all learn from them and because if you don't make any I won't have a job. If I find a student who doesn't make any mistakes in my lesson I will move that student to a higher level class because s/he obviously isn't learning anything at this level.

Learning English is like learning to ride a bike — you fall off a lot, but you get the hang of it in the end. You will make a lot of mistakes but you will be able to communicate effectively in the end. Very few people become successful international cyclists and the chances are that even though you can ride a bike you are not a professional cyclist. Very few students reach mother-tongue (supposedly error-free) level but many students learn to communicate very well in English in spite of this. You will probably never have error-free English so accept that you will always make some mistakes — just try to

learn from them and learn to live with your linguistic imperfections.”

When a student makes a mistake it is usually counter-productive to say “No!” / “That’s wrong!” / “Are you serious?” / “How long did you say you’ve been studying English?” etc. It’s often kinder to say “Not bad” / “Nearly” / “Good try” / “That’s an interesting mistake” etc.

Some say that a teacher shouldn’t laugh at student’s mistakes. But they’re often very funny so why shouldn’t he? It breaks the “mistakes taboo” and makes linguistic risks and disasters an acceptable part of the classroom culture. Students catch on very quickly and you can have a good giggle together when someone messes up.

The ability to correct themselves when they make a mistake is an important one for students to develop. Encourage it and give them time to correct themselves — don’t jump in immediately to correct them, keen though you are to prove that you are doing your job. Most students (and indeed some teachers) seem to think that it is the teacher’s job to correct students’ mistakes but this is not necessarily so. Yes, teachers can correct their students endlessly but how will that help the students when they go out into the big wide world — who will be there to correct them then?

It’s much better for the students if they get into the habit of listening to themselves when they are speaking and correct themselves as they go along. Obviously they won’t be able to correct all the mistakes they make but they will be able to correct a lot of them.

Teaching Tip: Checking Together

How:

1. When the students have finished doing an activity on their own, put them in pairs or small groups and tell them to check their answers together.
2. Tell the students that if the answers are the same, they are probably correct but if they are different they need to explain / justify their choice of the answer to their partner — in English! They can change their answers if they like.

Why:

1. It’s a good idea to let the students check their answers together before feeding back to the teacher because

it gives them the chance to rub out / cross out any glaring errors before the teacher sees and thus avoid looking stupid in front of the class.

2. If a student hasn’t a clue about some of the answers it’s reassuring to find out that their partner hasn’t the foggiest either. The students realise they are not alone. They can also copy their partner’s answers (if their partner has some that they don’t) but their partner might not be right!
3. Peer teaching is considered a good thing in the world of EFL. Peers are equals. So in this case a student’s peers are a student’s fellow classmates. Working together and checking work together is a form of peer teaching. This means that instead of the know-it-all (and/or) mother-tongue teacher always teaching them, the students can teach each other (by explaining grammar points, correcting pronunciation, explaining new words and phrases etc). The beauty of it is that the students are all equal to each other and are in the same boat, linguistically speaking.

Teaching Tip: Concept checking

How:

1. Ask the students a question closely related to the target concept. For example:
If you are working on a third conditional sentence like this: “I would have done my homework if I had had enough time”, your concept checking questions could be these: “Did you do your homework?” “Did you have enough time?” If you’re checking the understanding of instructions which say “Guess your partner’s answers to the true or false questions below” you could ask “Do you need to speak to your partner at this stage?”

Why:

1. It’s another way of checking understanding (see Teaching Tip “Checking Understanding” for further explanation).

Extra info:

Think up concept check questions before the lesson and jot them down somewhere. As a rule they don’t come spontaneously when they are needed in a lesson.