

First day: First classes with young learners

An article including tips and suggestions for approaching first lessons with young learners.

Introduction

With the possible exception of saying goodbye to students that you love teaching, the most difficult classes are always the first ones. Even after twelve years of being in the classroom, my heart always beats faster and I toss and turn a little more in bed before the start of each new class. It's not surprising, really – how could the second class possibly be more difficult than the first one? Like anything that seems so obvious, it is worth examining why we think this is true, so that we can work out if it really needs to be that way. Here are some reasons why first classes are usually the most difficult ones:

- **Lack of information:** We don't know all the personality traits, learning styles, difficulties and strengths, etc., that new students may have.
- **Fear of the unexpected:** Even favourite, tried-and-tested lessons can fail. And that's just one of the 100 things that could happen, even if they are very unlikely. What if something happens that you hadn't even dreamt about?
- **Back to square one:** This new class doesn't know how to do any of the things you've been patiently teaching your other classes, e.g., pairwork, using English classroom language, or phonics. Not only do you have to start teaching those things all over again, but also the activities that rely on these will be impossible for at least a few weeks.
- **Matching up:** What expectations do they have from their previous teacher? What will they think if you do something different?

But do you really have to worry about all these things? Some of these worries, like the dream I had a few months ago of a bird flying into the classroom and ruining my first lesson, are best dealt with by learning not to worry so much! But even this unlikely occurrence can be covered by the three magic points of planning for a new lesson:

1. Find out as much as you can as soon as you can

I have often had to start a class with a list of names as the only information I have. Even this can be improved by having a photo with each name, so you can start to use their names from the first minute – very useful for both discipline and making a personal connection. This is just a start. There is plenty of other useful information that could easily be found out from your students' parents, classmates, or previous teachers that will help you plan a class that is good for a new group of students. Ages and previous language study are obvious, but information such as the students' hobbies, best and worst school subjects, and their reasons for joining the class will help a lot too.

Getting all this information before the class starts may be difficult. Luckily, you can find out a lot of these things in a well-planned first class. Having a range of activities that tests students' powers of memory, logic, and physical coordination will give you a good idea of what kind of games and activities they will like in future classes and the most effective way of teaching them. Having activities where students tell the class something about themselves will also help with judging what they like and need, even with very simple language such as *Do you like bananas?/No, I don't.*

This personalisation also helps to show the students that you are interested in them as people, and that they can use English to really express themselves. Finally, activities where students can choose the language they use can help you assess what students already know.

2. Teach as much as you can as soon as you can

You will be relieved to hear that I'm not suggesting that you should teach as much of the syllabus as possible in the first lesson – far from it. In the first class, the important thing you need to show is not *what* you are going to teach but *how* you are going to teach it. If, for example, you want to have a policy of the teacher only using English in the classroom, you have to start on day one. The same thing is true for your policies on homework, discipline, pairwork, games, rewards, etc. Again, it's possible to make your life a lot easier by starting all this before the first class – maybe by sending a document or two explaining your policies and the reasons behind them to the students and/or their parents a week or so before class starts.

3. Plan for the unexpected anyway

Even if you have managed to get and give all the information you can before the lesson and have a lesson plan that has worked a hundred times before, the new class will in some way be different to how you picture it – because it's full of human beings, specialists in being unpredictable! While it might still be possible to go through your standard first lesson after you find out that one of your students is nearly fluent, can't see the board, or has a speech impediment, you will be really losing a chance to treat the students as individuals and get the best out of them. Totally scrapping your lesson plan halfway through the lesson is something few teachers can cope with, so the best thing is a lesson plan that has flexibility built in. Here are the characteristics of a flexible lesson plan:

- The first activity should be a quiet but stimulating sit-down whole class game, e.g., a memory game.
- The second activity should be a more active and/or noisier one.
- You can switch instantly between these (and all the other activities in the lesson) when the students lose concentration.
- There are many different kinds of short activities.
- There are physical activities you can quickly switch to if the students get restless.
- There are quiet, calming activities you can use if the students get over-excited.
- The timings for activities are written on your lesson plans as minimums and maximums (e.g., 5–9 minutes) rather than estimates. The minimums and maximums are then added up to show you how many fillers you need if things go quickly and how many stages need to be optional in case things go slowly.
- You don't need to finish any of the activities to move onto the rest of the lesson.
- The activities are open-ended and can be extended and adapted if they are very popular.
- The prompts for the language used should be easily extendable, e.g., using classroom objects for eliciting vocabulary rather than just a limited set of flashcards.
- The language at the start of each activity is easy but can be extended and made more difficult depending on the knowledge of the class and their ability to pick up new language quickly.
- The incidental language you use in class is also adaptable by level (e.g., 'Books, please', 'Open your books, please', 'Can you open your books, please?').
- There are competitive and non-competitive/cooperative activities.
- There are back-up plans if some of the equipment is missing or stops working (e.g., colouring pencils, internet connection).
- The class finishes on a high, so they look forward to the next lesson. The lesson plan should contain several ways of making this possible, so that it doesn't depend on finishing all the other activities

Wish list / checklist

When you have planned your own lesson, you can use the checklist below to make sure your first class lesson plan covers as many points as you would like (60–90% would be a good aim).

First classes with young learners – checklist

| Checklist point | ✓ |
|---|---|
| You do something the students already know to boost their confidence. | |
| You do something new that your students may not know yet. | |
| Your students will have fun. | |
| You can test the level and knowledge of the class. | |
| You can test how quickly the class picks up new vocabulary and/or grammar. | |
| There are activities using several different learning styles. | |
| You get to make a personal connection with your students. | |
| Your students have a chance to work together as teams, groups and/or pairs. | |
| You learn your students' names and some information about them. | |
| Your students feel like they are being treated as individuals. | |
| Everybody has an opportunity to talk. | |
| The class is a good example of the methodology you want students to get used to for the rest of the course | |
| The language you teach will help you teach future lessons – e.g., classroom language, phonics, etc. | |
| Students are introduced to your policy on English use (e.g., teacher only speaks English; instructions are given in English but grammar explanations in L1, etc). | |
| You have a list of materials you and your students will need | |
| You plan to use activities that work well with all kinds of classes. | |