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TEACHING TIPS FORUM

Activities for the First Day of Class

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What do you say after you say “hello” to your students on the first day of class? Apparently, a difficult situation for most teachers is the first day of class. It is critical because it sets the tone for the semester. Structuring the first class is as much a part of an instructor’s teaching style as lecturing or leading discussions. If you prefer to plunge directly into the subject matter with a lecture or discussion that will set the tone and specify the themes for the entire semester, the first day of class is not much different from any other day.

Students are often shy and at a loss as to how to start a conversation, especially when meeting new people. As a result of this, the first English-speaking class at university can be uncomfortable for both teachers and students. Teachers, however, can make it easier by providing ideas on how to “break the ice” in various situations since planned activities can allow for trust building while having fun.

Over the years, I have become aware that one of the biggest difficulties facing teachers at all levels of school life is the difficulty in creating interesting first-day activities within the class. While trying to encourage every student to actively take part in communicative activities, there will be some students who lack the confidence to speak out in class, especially for the first few lessons. How, therefore, can we encourage

students’ participation in the English classroom?

In this paper, I would like to recommend some practical ideas and various activities, which I have adapted and accumulated from quite a number of sources, to promote a first-day session in English classes, with emphasis on encouraging students to interact with one another, in pairs or in groups in a communicative way. By applying such activities, you will also learn tips for conducting the first day of class effectively at different levels or in mixed ability classes. They can also be adapted to a wide range of student groups you teach.

How will you begin?

In preparing for the first day, I would like to recommend that you think about what you will be doing from the minute you step into the room until the period is over. The first day is unique, and there is usually no pressure to cover a certain amount of material. So, you can concentrate on getting to know your students, being clear on the course policies and expectations and giving them an overview of what to expect for the term.

Naturally, on the first day of class, students are always interested in the following questions:

- How much work will the course require?
- How will the course be evaluated?

- How will the class be run?
- Will the course be appropriate for their needs and interests?
- Who are the other students in the class?

These concerns, can all be addressed during the first class. However, how can a teacher handle them effectively? How can you draw students' attention to the relevant information as you move along? You could start by introducing yourself and then introducing the course or subject. But you may forget to introduce the students to yourself and to each other. This is recommended for the first class since students will always respond more favourably to teachers who learn their names. Depending on your style, students' preference, and the atmosphere you want to create, you may choose to:

- ask the students to introduce themselves, perhaps saying something about themselves such as where they live, years of study, majors, career goals, or the reason for taking the course.
- pass out a note card to each student and ask for specific background information (as above), related courses taken previously, address, phone number, etc.
- allow five to ten minutes at the beginning of the class for the students to ask questions concerning yourself (as their teacher), the course and its requirements. This helps to ensure that the students understand their responsibilities in the class.

One activity that I usually do in the first class is very simple. I have all the students stand up. They can sit down when they have introduced themselves and asked me a question in English. They cannot repeat a question so they have to listen to what other

students ask. Standing up is a form of gentle pressure and students try very hard to think of an original question so that they can sit down. With a bigger class, I have students pair up and each pair has to ask me a question.

This gives me a great opportunity to assess the students' language ability. I usually get a mixed level of students. So, while some students can manage questions like, "Have you ever played baseball?" Others ask me, "What do you like sports?" Instead of correcting them, I rephrase, "What sports do I like?" The remaining students may try to form questions by substituting sports with other words.

This is also a good opportunity to teach that some personal questions are not polite or welcomed. Each semester, one student asks me, always with a grin, "How old are you?" causing the whole class to laugh. I smile and answer, "I am not very old", and the students get the message that it was not an appropriate question.

Tips about Choosing and Creating Activities

Planning a good warm-up activity for the first class is important for several reasons. Besides helping the students get to know each other, a good ice-breaker will help the students feel confident in a group situation. Activities can include a wide-range of skill builders, such as question formation, attentive listening skills and giving appropriate responses. The more activities you introduce, the better your students will get to know each other. In addition, student participation and teamwork will be encouraged within the class. Students will come to understand that these skills are required to successfully complete the course. The first-day activities are a good way to

ensure that groups get off to a good start. It is particularly useful to use interactive activities that encourage students to identify each others' strengths or other characteristics relevant to group work and the task at hand.

Here are some important tips to remember:

1. Remember games you choose can support points you plan to make in class later on. If you can possibly refer to something your students did in a game, that can make it more understandable and memorable.
2. Make sure that you can do the game in the time and space allotted. The game will lose its impact if you have to continue it another day. Whatever you design, try it out yourself and approximate how long it will take a student to answer. Then multiply this by the number of students in the class. If you want to take about 30 seconds per person, model the way you want your students to respond. If you leave the instructions too vague as to how you want them to respond, certain talkative students can dominate the time. Whoever speaks first often establishes the model which subsequent speakers will use.
3. Know how to play, lead and facilitate the activity. This will keep the game moving, preparing you how to explain the whys and hows.
4. Practice the game first yourself. You can get the students' perspective this way. Don't have your students do an activity that you cannot do or would not want to do yourself.
5. Design the games to fit your learning objectives. In other words, don't have your students play a game just to fill in the time. This separates having fun from learning. You can do both at the same time.
6. Modify games to fit the class. The way you set up a game for your senior English class should be different from how you arrange it for your freshman grammar class. Just because a game has certain rules does not mean you cannot change them. If you ask a question, choose one that everyone can answer easily. Speaking up in front of strangers is always uncomfortable, so make it simple. I used to ask new students in the first class to add to this sentence – "A good student is someone who" Right away we are talking about learning and about the positive attributes of a good student. I keep a list of what students say and afterwards comment that as a group they know a great deal about a good student already. I could ask each person to comment on a bad student, but prefer the positive spin for starting off.
7. Project possible pitfalls. Think about how your students will react to the game. What if they hate the idea? What if they take longer than anticipated to perform the activity on a certain part? What if they don't understand part of it? Now how would you handle these situations? Be prepared. In addition, make sure that what you are asking students to disclose is not too personal or something that would offend them. For example, a question like "What was your most embarrassing moment in the classroom?" could cause uneasiness.
8. Be flexible. If you think that students might not be enthusiastic about part of the game, maybe there is another way to achieve the same effect. Think about what activities you can modify or eliminate due to lack of interest or time.

Communicative Activities that Work

As an experienced teacher, you probably have a few favourite activities that you use every year to get acquainted with your new students. Activities such as “Find someone who...”, “Who am I?”, “ask and tell”, “Describe and draw” may have worked for you in the past so stick with them.

However, if you would like to spice up your first class activities, the following activities may be useful for you. These activities apply to small classes, big classes, and to discussion sessions. Plans for the first session, like plans for any other session, should be developed and adapted to suit the needs of the course.

To help ensure the success of your first class session, plan ahead carefully and specify your objectives in detail. Visit the classroom before the class meets to familiarize yourself with the surroundings

and to give yourself a chance to change the physical setup if necessary. The activities below have been used many times, in many different ways, by many teachers. They are not original or new, but they are tried and true.

I: Irish Blessings: A Gaelic Blessing

Have you ever heard or read Irish blessings? Of course, it is nice and simple and most importantly, you can adapt it to be a part of your first-day activity. As focusing on positive events and feelings helps create a happy atmosphere in the class, especially on the first day, this activity is supposed to help your class remember a happy event or good feeling. Moreover, it allows students to warm-up their reading comprehension skills as well as grammar skills before they study the lesson.

Here is the original version of Irish Blessings:

May the roads rise up to meet you.
May the wind be at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face.
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.
May your home be filled with laughter.
May good fortune be yours.
May your joys never end.
May there always be work for your hands to do.
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.
May the hand of friend always be near you.
May your words always come true.
May people smile when they meet you.

(Taken from
<http://geocities.com/celticrose67/Welcome.html>)

In this activity students have to put together sentences which have been broken up into two halves. (For example: May the roads --- rise up to meet you. May people smile --- when they meet you.) Cut up the

broken sentences so there is one sentence for each pair of students in the class. (If there is an odd number, the teacher can take part. The above example is for a class of 24 students.) Students walk around the room to

find their “pair”. Once they have, they sit down. Check by getting each pair to read out their sentence.

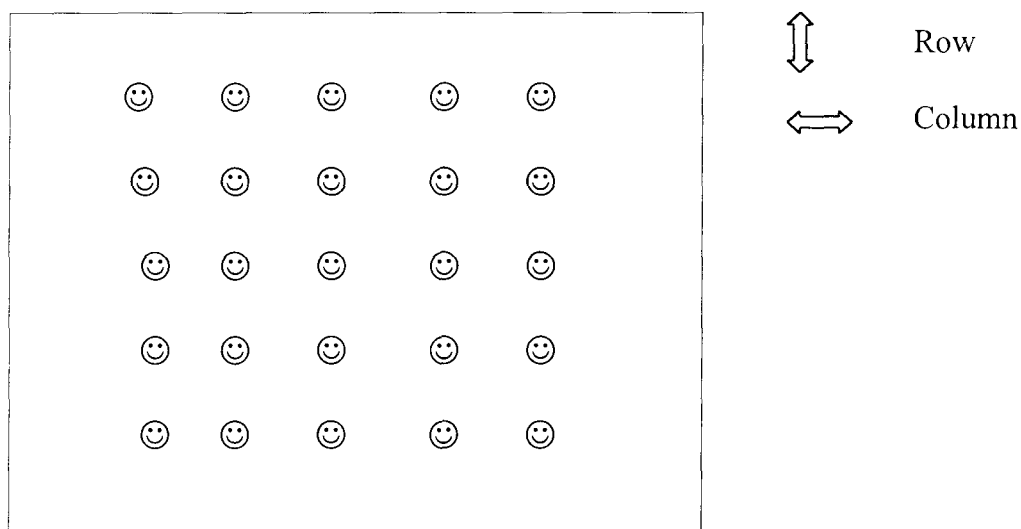
However, there is a variation of the activity where, instead of copying the

original version of Irish Blessings, you can vary this - make additional blessings in your own version to suit the students’ interests or the atmosphere of the first day class.

Here is an example of the adapted version:

May your class be filled with laughter.
 May Mr/Ms/Mrs (your name) hold you in the palm of his/her hand.
 May there always be homework for your hands to do.
 May the better score be certain to follow each score.
 May your dream about A (grade) always come true.
 May teachers smile when they meet you.

II: The Row and Column Game



Arrange the students to sit in the Row and Column (as illustrated). First, choose a column of students to stand. Then ask questions and the students who answer correctly may sit down. Students should raise their hands and introduce themselves before they answer. Continue asking questions until only one student remains standing. The row of students that this student is in, must now stand up. Play is

repeated until only one student remains standing in the row, then the column of students that the student is standing in must now stand up and answer the questions. All students may assist the standing students. This game is quite competitive and exciting because the students who want to sit down have to compete with other students. This game usually takes about 15-20 minutes or until you run out of questions.

Because this activity is intended largely for fun, questions for this game can be adapted to the level of your students and their interests. Questions can be taken from any category such as music & cinema;

sports; geography; science; art; holidays; numbers; facts about countries, etc. Do not mind if the students do not know the answer; tell them to guess. Below are some examples of questions for this game.

1. Who is the lead actor in the movie Mission Impossible 2? (Tom Cruise)
2. What is Bruce Willis' ex-wife's name? (Demi Moore)
3. Name the movie starring Reese Witherspoon. (Legally Blonde, Sweet Home Alabama, etc.)
4. In what city will the 2004 Summer Olympics be held? (Athens)
5. In tennis, what does "love" mean? (zero)
6. What is the largest ocean in the world? (the Pacific)
7. What is the capital of Brazil? (Brasilia)
8. How many moons does Jupiter have? (16)
9. What is the chemical abbreviation for silver? (Ag)
10. Who painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican? (Michaelangelo)
11. What country is Pablo Picasso from? (Spain)
12. What holiday is October 31? (Halloween)
13. In what month is Thanksgiving celebrated in America? (November)
14. How many black and white keys are there on a piano? (88)
15. What country's flag is called the Union Jack? (United Kingdom)

Alternatively, all students stand up. Ask a question and when a student answers correctly, they can choose a row or column to sit down. Play continues until all students are seated.

III: If I were an animal

Write the following sentence on the board.

My name is, and if I were an animal, I would be a becauseand

First demonstrate for students: "My name is Mr. W., and if I were an animal, I'd be a panda because I'm always eating and sometimes I wish I could be on a diet." Then give the students a little time to think about what animals they might like to be and why. Encourage them to be creative, different and unique. Let the first student to your right in the circle start the activity. After the first student finishes, you repeat, "My name is Mr. W. and if I were an animal, I'd be a

panda because I'd like to be able to lose weight. And this is Paul (the first student), and if he were an animal, he'd be a monkey because he likes to dance a lot."

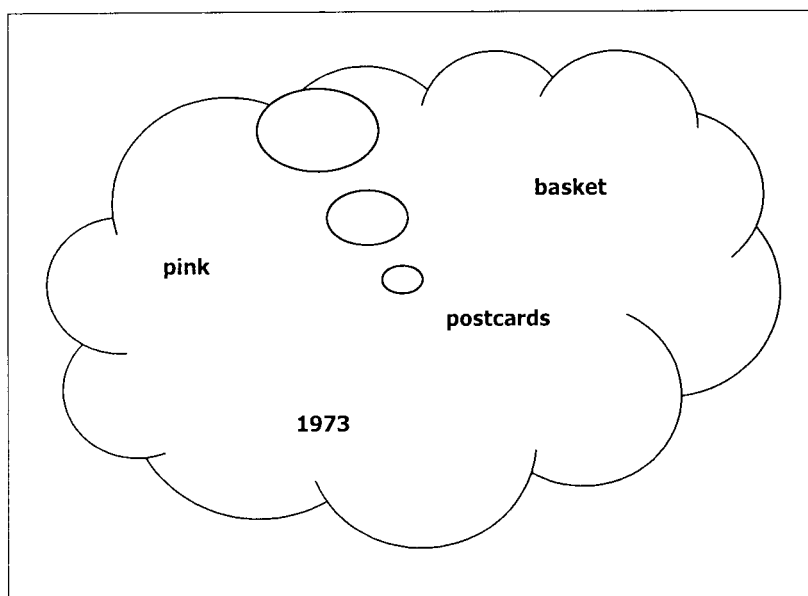
Then move on to the next student. After each student speaks, you could possibly try to let the class repeat all the other students' names and animal combinations in order. That is always good for a laugh. The activity is complete when everyone finishes. However, you can ask the students to

continue writing their story for their first writing assignment. When you have completed the activity, you might know all the students' names and something about them. From this little activity, you can also learn a lot more about your students such as who is able to follow simple directions, and

how good their writing abilities and creativity are.

IV: The White Cloud

Write the answers for personal information questions in the cloud on the board as follows:



Students work in pairs and try and guess the question according to the information in the cloud. Then the teacher elicits the questions from the students. Reply only "yes" or "no". "Were you born in 1973?", "Do you play basketball?", "Is pink your favourite colour?", "Do you collect postcards?" Such questions could be considered correct. Each item in the cloud will be erased once the student gets it right. Continue the activity until no information remains in the cloud. Now students write their own personal information in the form of one word answers in a cloud on a small note card. Then work in pairs again and try

to guess the question for the information in their partners' cloud. Once each pair finishes, students look for other partners. Let them write down the name of the student who gave them the correct question. This allows them to talk to and get to know as many people as possible within the time frame (10-15 minutes). After a while, stop the activity, irrespective of whether they have finished or not. As a quick follow-up, let each student give the complete information from what they have written in their cloud.

The author

Wisetpong Wongtip graduated from Chulalongkorn University with an M.Ed. in TESOL. He teaches English at the university's language institute and is particularly interested in interactive classroom activities as well as intercultural communication. When not teaching, he writes articles and freelances as an interpreter for national and international conferences.