The first day of class is one of the most important days for students and teachers alike as it sets the tone for the rest of the course or semester. Good first impressions are vital for establishing a rapport and connecting with your students. On the first day of class, both you and the students will probably feel excited and a little anxious. Make sure you have a well-prepared first lesson and keep your objectives for the first class simple and achievable. This helps to establish a solid foundation for the course. Here are a few ideas to help you and the students get the most out of the first class.

First Impressions

Arrive to class early! Coming to class early gives you time to get set up and deal with any issues that arise. When you arrive at class, check that your teaching aids such as the computer, speakers and projector are working correctly. You don't want to be dealing with faulty equipment with a class full of students looking at you as this takes away from your credibility. Furthermore, make sure you are dressed appropriately. Research suggests that clothing affects how people first judge you. A shirt and tie for men or a smart dress for women projects professionalism and boosts your confidence. Making eye contact, smiling and greeting students as they enter the class is also a good idea as it helps to immediately establish a friendly rapport.

Seating Arrangements

If possible, set up the classroom seating. The physical setup of chairs and tables can significantly influence how students learn. Seating arrangements can also impact how you communicate with your students and how the students interact with one another. Students often make judgements about the class and the teacher by the way chairs or tables are arranged. U-shaped seating is ideal for smaller ESL classes as it helps to create a more relaxed and open atmosphere that encourages student participation. In some situations, classes have tables rather than chairs. In this case, group the tables to form groups of four or five students as this number seems to be ideal for group discussions and collaborative activities.

Names

It is a good idea for you to start using the students' names as soon as possible. Depending on the country you are in, you may wish to use students' first names or nicknames. On the first day, have name cards for the students to wear, so you and the other students can remember one another's name. You could also draw up a seating plan with the students' names on. Learning a lot of names takes time. Don't be ashamed if you forget a student's name. Be direct, apologize and ask for their name. The more you use the students' names in class, the quicker you will remember them. Students often feel good when you know who they are. It also helps build rapport between you and the students. Games and activities that help students remember one another's name are also useful. Try our Portraits or Both of Us activity to help students with names. For younger learners, you can have the students play The Name Game. For more resources, have a look at our Greetings and Introductions page. Here you will find activities to help students greet each other, find out one another's name, and introduce themselves and others.

In most cases, English teachers' students are from foreign cultures and pronouncing names correctly can be a challenge, so don't be afraid to remind your students to correct you if you mispronounce their names. You could also ask a person from the respective culture or another teacher to help you with more difficult names. In some countries, there is a tradition of learners adopting an English name for class. However, many students are happier just using their regular name. Therefore, don't insist that students adopt a new name and allow them to decide what name they should be referred by in class.

Breaking the Ice

On the first day of class, start interacting with students as they gradually enter the class one by one. This could be a simple greeting and welcome and inviting them to take a seat. Having some relaxing music playing in the background can set a comfortable mood and help calm the nerves of both the teacher and students. If you sense that students are comfortable, try engaging them in conversation as this will make you appear more personable and approachable.

Introducing Yourself

Getting to know and feel comfortable with the teacher is important for students as it can help reduce some of the anxiety associated with language learning. The students will be interested in finding out who you are and what you are like. You should introduce yourself and give some background information about who you are. This helps the students relate to you and begins building the student-teacher relationship that's so important on the first day. Your introduction is also an opportunity to establish your own credibility. Tell the students about your qualifications and teaching experience. This will give the students confidence in your teaching ability. There are many ways to introduce yourself. Think about your own teaching style and do whatever works best for you. To keep energy levels up and reduce boring speeches, try turning your introduction into a game or activity the students can participate in.

A fun way to introduce yourself is to play 'Two Truths and a Lie'. In this game, the teacher writes down three sentences about themselves and explains to students that two of them are true and one is a lie. Try to make this interesting and not use obvious examples as students will spot the false sentence easily. You can also have students play this activity in small groups as a getting to know you activity.

'Two Truths and a Lie' is just one example of the many fun activities you can use. The Who am I game is not only great for introducing yourself, but you can also gain insight into your students' level of English, which is extremely useful on the first day. Teacher's Question Time is another entertaining way to introduce yourself to the class. This game provides the students with a chance to write and respond to a variety of questions.

Getting to Know You Activities and Games

A language class should be seen as a learning community, which simply means that for successful learning to occur students will need to interact with and support one another through the process. For that community to develop effectively, it is important that the first class devotes some time to allow students to get to know one another. This is no less important than getting to know the teacher. Therefore, don't forget to include some 'getting to know you' activities in the first lesson. Take a look at our Getting to Know You activities page for communicative resources that help students become acquainted with one another.

Helping students feel at ease in the first lesson, is a good way to facilitate relationship building. There is nothing better to make students feel relaxed than playing a fun ESL game. Playing games in the first lesson makes the students feel less anxious and improves their confidence to communicate and interact. Games not only enable student to student bonding but also help build teacher student rapport. As a way of establishing connections, games that include personal information such as name, age, hometown, favourite music, etc. are usually suitable. The Teach-This First Day of Class Games page has a number of games fulfilling these criteria.

First Class Activities

Your students need to understand that they are going to be active participants in your class. Asking students to introduce themselves, ask you a question, talk about their expectations for the course, or introduce a partner are all good activities for the first day of class. Try to keep all the activities you do in the first lesson fun and light. Don't start off with a grammar lesson that is going to kill the mood.

Apart from getting to know your students, an important objective of the first lesson is to get some general awareness of your students' language ability. One way of doing this is to use conversation grid activities that gives students the chance to engage in an authentic, independent, and cooperative conversation without direct teacher involvement. These grids can also be used with any topic as teaching or assessment activities. Learners usually enjoy them greatly.

On the first day of class, it is also important to try and get a basic understanding of some of the more popular and common interests shared by the group. This information can be leveraged throughout the course by making conscious choices with materials and activities that pander to these interests. Students are more likely to be engaged with topics that interest them, so it goes that higher engagement can contribute to more effective learning. One way of getting more insight into student interests is by using activities that help students talk about themselves. Through monitoring these activities and listening actively, you can pick up some useful ideas. Try our Giving Personal Information page and Small Talk page for resources to help students talk about themselves.

Class Rules

It is a good idea to establish class rules from the very beginning. Students need to be clear on your expectations of them as learners and understand what you consider acceptable behaviour. However, don't have too many rules and whatever rules you have make sure you stick to them. Students will normally test the rules to see how you react and to see what they can and can't get away with. Stick to your guns and don't bend the rules for anyone or you will lose credibility. Additionally, you will want to go through any other expectations you have for the class, such as homework or in-class participation.

It works well if you elicit class rules from students as they may surprise you and come up with a quite reasonable list of rules. You can also negotiate bonus points and rewards for certain group accomplishments as well as small penalties for transgressions. For example, with homework, students collect points when they turn it in, but fewer points if the homework is incomplete or receive no points if it is not done. Together you can think of a reward if the class reaches a given score, for instance, a different game, music, or video activity.

The important point here is that if you set rules on the first day of class in collaboration with the students, there will be greater 'buy in' as they have not simply been imposed from above, and it is more likely students will stick to them.

The Course

The students are going to want to know the course objectives and the basics of the course syllabus to help them clarify what they must do. Explain to students the significance of the course and how learning English is going to benefit them. In this way, the students will invest their time and energy into studying with you. Try to show enthusiasm for the course content. If you show interest in what you are teaching, this will rub off on the students. If there are aspects of the course you are not so fond of, consider adapting them or replacing them if possible.

At some point in the first lesson, it's important to go through essential administrative information such as office hours, breaks, assessment, attendance etc. It is also a good idea to explain to students how you plan to teach and deliver the course. For example, if you plan to incorporate a lot of student led learning into the course, try to give students a taste of this on the first day. Also, make sure you set aside a time for the students to ask questions about the class or course. Shy students may wish to come and speak to you at the end of class. Give these students time and try to answer all their questions.

Phones

Phones are generally an annoyance in the classroom and disrupt teaching and learning. First of all, be sure to set the correct example and turn off or silence your own phone so you don't give the impression of 'do as I say, not as I do'. Just as important, check school rules before taking any action regarding phones. Don't be so strict about this on the first day of class especially if you haven't discussed class rules with your students. Be reasonable and think of positive ways of dealing with the use of phones in class.

A good idea to stop phone usage is to introduce a small fine for offenders. This turns an annoyance into something that is quite amusing and benefits the community. You can ask the students to suggest a worthy charity on the first day of class and donate the money you receive at the end of the course or semester. Another strategy for dealing with phones in class is to offer offenders a choice of giving the phone to you or having their phone put in a paper bag, stapled shut and left on the student's desk. The bag offers the student reassurance that the phone isn't confiscated, but also stops phone usage as the bag is sealed and if touched makes a loud crinkling noise which discourages the student from touching it. Racks or boxes are also a popular choice to limit phone use. As the students come into class, they put their phone on the rack or in the box and get it back at the end of class. If you're teaching younger students, you can create a points system that rewards students each time they remember to turn off or put their phones on silent. At the same time, the system can be used to take away points from students who are caught using their phones during class. At the end of each week or month, award small prizes to the students with the most points.

Age Groups

When engaging with students on the first day of class, take into consideration any special characteristics of the group. One obvious characteristic of all classes is their age range. In this case, the way you would approach the first class with young learners would not be the same as you would with adults. For instance, playing 'two truths and a lie' might work well with teens or adults but would not make much sense with a class of 6-year-olds.

We can assume that young learners have not made an active choice to learn English, so going through details of the syllabus and the assessment would seem redundant. However, they will enjoy the class if the teacher plans interesting activities for them such as games, stories, or arts and crafts. In the first class with a group of young learners, it would be better to try and instil in students minds that the purpose of English class is to learn while having fun and making new friends.

The teenage years can be a challenging time, so some teens can be uncertain of many things such as how they feel about themselves and others. It is important to try to create a secure and structured learning environment. While teens are generally motivated and focused, this can change depending on how they perceive the relevance of class content and activities. Keep this in mind when choosing first day activities for a teen group, so, for example, avoid anything that might seem childish.

Adults are usually learning English either for professional or academic reasons. On the first day of class, they tend to be curious about the syllabus, course objectives and assessment. Don't be surprised, if you are asked some very specific questions about these aspects of the course, so it is important to be prepared to deal with these types of queries. If you have impressive credentials and experience, don't be shy in sharing these with adult learners as this will help alleviate some of the uncertainties they may have about you and the course. Even though, in most cases, it will not be their first English class, it is still important to make the first-class fun and easy-going by including activities such as icebreakers.

Final Thoughts

A lot of time and effort is needed to prepare for the first lesson. However, the results are worth it. An engaging and fun first lesson will put your students at ease and help create a positive learning environment for the rest of the course. No matter how well planned and executed your proceeding lessons are, a lack lustre first lesson can leave a lasting negative impression. Therefore, putting in an appropriate amount of preparation into your first lesson will definitely pay off. Good luck!