

The way a teacher begins a lesson has a significant impact on its success as it sets the right tone and helps to engage the students and focus their attention on the topic of the day. The first part of a lesson also allows students to get familiar with the expected learning outcomes of the session. If a teacher goes straight to the main task of a lesson without some lead-in or opener, there is every chance that students won't be ready, making it harder for them to achieve the aims of the lesson.



Apart from routine activities done in the opening minutes of a lesson such as taking attendance, there are many ways teachers can spice up the beginnings of their lessons. Here are ten useful ideas you can use to start your class.

1. Use Homework to Flip the Lesson

Homework is most often assigned to have students review course content, consolidate the content of a lesson just taught, or simply for self-study. However, by using a flipped classroom approach, homework can be used as an effective way to open a lesson. In the flipped approach, students are presented with the topic of the next lesson through homework. In a flipped classroom, homework content can be delivered in many forms. This may include, discussion boards, a research task, or reading and listening texts. In class, a quick review of the content covered through the homework can be done through activities such as discussions or quizzes. In this way, students can come to class knowing what the theme or focus of the lesson is and be better prepared for the activities to come. This approach works best when the content is either matched to the students' interests or relevant to their immediate learning needs.

2. Setting a Challenge

A less conventional lead-in to a lesson could be to simply ask students to attempt the skill being taught from the outset. For example, ask students to give a presentation at the beginning of a lesson if the objective of the lesson is for students to understand how to give an effective presentation. From completing the challenge, students should be able to reflect on their presentations and consider what they were able to do well and what their shortcomings were. This can be a springboard from which to elicit from students what they believe are the key components of successful presentations. These reflections should hopefully align with the learning objectives of the lesson. Through this process, it should become apparent to students the relevance and significance of the content that will be covered in the lesson.

This type of opening tends to work well for lessons where the focus is on a productive or functional skill such as the example given here or other skills such as writing an email or making a phone call.

3. Reviewing the Previous Lesson

You may find students easily forget what they did in the previous lesson, so it is always worth reviewing what they have studied in the last class. This helps keep the material fresh in the students' mind and helps them recall the vocabulary and language they have studied. Furthermore, it allows you to connect the previous topic with the new topic. Regular reviewing of previous lessons is also useful in preparing students for assessment as it helps consolidate what students have learned.

To make reviews fun for the students, try creating a quiz game where the students answer questions for points. A Jeopardy-style game works great for reviewing previous lessons because you can choose the topics you want them to practice.

Teaching is a great way to review what students have learned. Therefore, you could also have students teach something they have learned in class to their peers. Additionally, rather than the teacher clarifying a point, ask students if they can answer a question from a classmate. For students, returning to class after a period of absence, you could review important points from the missed lessons by eliciting input from the class.

4. Media

Since modern classrooms contain useful multi-media equipment, it is easy to exploit audio-visual content to help kick off an interesting and successful lesson.

Pictures are useful for creating interest in the topic you are about to teach. You can use photos, drawings, cartoons, paintings, symbols, flashcards, magazine ads, etc. Pictures allow students to be creative as they are open to different interpretations. You can use pictures to introduce or elicit vocabulary, predict the content of a reading or listening text, or guess a main idea, etc. They provide a talking point and help students share their opinions and ideas.

In the same way that using pictures helps raise interest in a topic, playing a song is great for catching students' interest. If one of the language points of the lesson is the present perfect, look for a song that has words like 'Have you ever...?' or 'I've been to...' in it, mainly in the title or chorus. You could also use a song with a past simple theme and ask students to write down all the past tense verbs they can hear.

Videos can be even more appealing than pictures and songs as they have both audio and visual stimuli. They are great not only for generating interest in a topic but also to focus on specific points of the lesson such as vocabulary or functional language. Moreover, video can be useful when trying to expose students to other important aspects of learning a language such as the cultures in which the language is used.

5. Class Discussion

Discussions can be used to begin a class with higher-level students. Pose a question or questions to the students about the topic you are going to teach to generate discussion and debate. Class discussions help to improve the students' critical thinking skills and get the students thinking about what they know about the subject and what they want to know. This in turn helps them retain more information.

It is important to give students time to think about the answer(s) first. Students usually feel more comfortable expressing ideas and answering questions if they have some time to think about them first. Just as important as thinking time is to consider if the discussions are going to take place in pairs, small groups, or the whole class. It can be a good idea to start with pairs or small groups and then move to a whole class setting.

Assigning roles is an effective strategy for group discussions. Possible roles may include:

Manager: ensures that the group stays on task, on topic, and that everyone contributes.

Recorder: records critical points from the discussion along with findings or answers.

Presenter: reports the group's ideas to the rest of the class.

6. Error Correction Activities

Using error correction activities to start the class is an interesting way to review and draw attention to language points such as punctuation, spelling and grammar rules. An effective activity is to write sentences on the board which are related to the topic you are teaching and contain mistakes for students to spot. Begin by asking students to come to the board and correct the mistakes. One benefit of this activity is that it adds movement to the lesson by getting students out of their seats, which can help enliven students at times of the day when attention spans can wane.

Error correction activities at the start of a lesson are also useful when students are making the same mistakes repeatedly as they offer the opportunity to review a particular language point or structure and hopefully avoid repeating the mistake during the lesson.

7. Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a very easy way to begin a class and is very simple to do. Brainstorming entails eliciting everything students know about a topic. You do this by writing the students' background knowledge and ideas on the board. Write up any vocabulary or information that is useful to the lesson. Try to connect ideas or content together to give the students a platform to work from.

A great way of doing this is working with mind maps. Start out with a simple central idea based on the topic of the lesson like 'The Future', 'Travel' or 'Clothes'. As you elicit other words and ideas from students, add branches to the map and make connections between them. To make the mind map easier to understand, try colour coding the information. This will help students easily identify and categorise key ideas and see how they connect to one another. Mind maps are great for starting a new topic as they activate prior knowledge from which students can make connections to whatever input material is being used.

8. Using Vocabulary Activities

Vocabulary activities are a good way of reviewing specific words learned in past lessons or can serve as a preparation for a new topic. One obvious situation for employing a vocabulary game or activity is as a pre-reading or pre-listening activity. For example, this could be done by taking key or unfamiliar words from the text that is going to be read in class and distributing them to the class in small groups. Each group is given a different set of words. In their groups, students are then required to find the meaning, pronunciation, and an example sentence for each word. Students then form new groups to exchange their respective completed word sets. This type of activity is a more fun and interesting way of previewing vocabulary than the so often used definition matching type activities. Other useful vocabulary games can be found on the Teach This [ESL Vocabulary Games](#) page and [ESL Word Games](#) page.

9. Previewing the Lesson

Previewing the lesson gets the students thinking about what they are going to study. It lets the students know what to expect in the lesson, so they can mentally prepare themselves as well as reduce any anxiety they may be feeling. Explain the objectives of the lesson and how they are going to be achieved. It is also very important to explain the significance of the objective and how it will benefit the students. In other words, tell students how the lesson can help them in situations outside of class. For example, the objective of the lesson might be to have students produce outlines as part of the writing process. Some students may not see the point of this and see it as a waste of time. But by simply explaining how outlining can save time and result in better essays and ultimately better grades, it can result in a positive shift in student motivation.

10. Playing a Game

Playing a game is an excellent way to begin a lesson. It makes the students energized and brings enjoyment to the whole class. It also gets the students involved in producing English by doing something fun.

Kinaesthetic games, those centred around movement, are a great way to spice things up especially if they have spent most of the day in more passive types of learning. This type of activity can be as simple as a game of stand-up/sit down in which students are asked basic [yes/no questions](#). When answering 'yes', they stand up rather than simply calling out the answer. When answering 'no', they sit down. The main take-away here is that it doesn't require a great amount of creativity to integrate movement into your lesson openings. If prepared carefully, an activity like this is not only effective for getting students energised, but it can also help in reviewing content from previous classes or activate students' prior knowledge for the topic you're going to teach.

But don't forget that while games are fun and can help set a positive tone for the class, they are not just about having fun. Games should help to introduce or practice the topic or subject matter of the lesson. Most games can be easily adapted to introduce any language point or topic. Check out our [Fun ESL Classroom Games](#) section for enjoyable games to play with your students.

Now that you have read through these 10 ways of beginning a language lesson, try using them in your next class. See if your students become more motivated and engaged in the learning experience. The opening is a key part of the entire framework of the lesson. It's not easy to rescue a lesson that gets off to a bad start, so it's important to think of effective and interesting ways to open your lessons.