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1000

Teaching Tips

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Penny Ur

Consultant and editor: Scott Thornbury



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Why I wrote this book

English teachers in the course of their teaching careers accumulate a wealth of practical know-how about classroom teaching. But few of them publish this knowledge – mainly because they simply don't have the time. (There are, of course, websites with teaching guidance of one kind or another, though many of these are not very practical, and it takes a lot of surfing to find good ones.) So an enormous number of experienced-based insights discovered by expert teachers in the course of their teaching careers are lost as far as future generations of teachers are concerned. The result is that many new teachers find themselves laboriously 're-inventing the wheel', or discovering a useful teaching idea much too late, when they could have shortened the process by learning from their predecessors. ('Why did nobody tell me...?!')

So having myself retired from school teaching – though I still teach academic English to adults – it seemed a good idea to write my own set of practical tips, from which other teachers might benefit.

I started teaching English in a primary school in Israel in 1968. It was a fairly discouraging experience at first, with lots of discipline problems and misunderstandings, since I didn't know my students' language very well, and wasn't familiar with the culture. I remember telling a colleague at the end of my first year that I didn't think I should continue because I was clearly not suited to English teaching. He told me to stop thinking so much about my own problems and look at my students: ask myself whether they were learning from my lessons, and whether they were motivated to continue learning. If

they were, he said, I was a successful teacher and should continue. So I did, and I did. I suppose this is my first and perhaps most basic tip: don't worry so much about yourself and your teaching, look at the students, and what and how they are learning. Anyhow, I went on to teach English in primary and secondary classes in State schools – with some breaks to teach university courses or to study – until I retired in 2006. I must have clocked up thousands of hours of classroom teaching. My professional knowledge derives primarily from that experience, and is the basis of the tips in this book.

I suggest you don't try to read straight through the book, but rather browse through it looking for headings that interest you. The topics are listed alphabetically, each followed by a set of associated tips. (If you don't find the topic you want, try the Index.) Each tip appears at the top of a page, followed by comments which include personal anecdotes, examples of classroom procedures, references to research or internet sources or anything else I thought you might find interesting or helpful.

Some of the ideas may be familiar; others you may have come across in the past but need to be reminded of; yet others may be quite new. In any case, be aware that not all may be right for you. My professional experience is, obviously, based on my own situation and yours may be quite different, as may your teaching personality and the character and expectations of your students. So you may find you need to modify or adapt some of the tips, or even completely reject them. Please don't regard them as directives from an authority, but as suggestions from a colleague: use them selectively and critically.

With this reservation in mind, read on. I hope that you will find enough interesting and useful teaching ideas to make your reading worthwhile.

Beginning and ending the lesson

Teacher courses often include a unit on 'lesson-planning', which relates mostly to the selection of the lesson components, and how these will be ordered. But it's important also to think about how you'll 'frame' the lesson with effective beginnings and endings.

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Start with a smile



It is important to make eye-contact with your students and smile as you greet them at the beginning of the lesson.

In my early years of teaching I was a bit scared of my students, and was tense and serious at the beginning of lessons. In retrospect, it took me far too long to learn to relax and smile – but it made a huge difference when I did. Don't be put off if some of the students don't respond; most of them will. And remember: a serious or neutral expression on your face does not convey a neutral message – it conveys a negative one ('I'm here because I have to be, not because I have the slightest pleasure in teaching you!'), which can be easily be changed by a smile.

Non-verbal communication, including facial expression, body language and gesture, plays a key role in maintaining your relationship with the students in a class. It does not, as a popular myth would have it, convey 50% or more of the actual messages coming across in a conversation, but it's still important. Try searching online for the phrase “non-verbal communication” and you'll find a lot

of very useful guidance. Most of the websites relate to personal relationships in the context of employment in general, but can be readily applied to classroom interaction.

Note, however, that the smile can also be over-used. The recommendation to smile at the beginning of the lesson does not mean that you have to smile all the way through it. How much you do so of course depends largely on your own personality: some of us are more smiley than others! But remember that, like constant, indiscriminate praise, smiles that are over-used lose their impact. Use a smile to respond to a student's successful or amusing contribution; or, together with a favourable comment at the end of an activity, to provide the class with a brief but welcome break from the effort of concentrating on serious learning tasks.

P.S. Smile at the end of the lesson too! (See [Tip 6](#).)