

Tips and Ideas for the First Day of Classes

Shad Schroeder

[charliefinney \[at\] yahoo.com](mailto:charliefinney[at]yahoo.com)

Hess Language School, Taiwan

One of the most important class days is the first. The first day can excite students about the class, calm their fears, and set their expectations for the semester. The first day is an opportunity for the teacher to get to know and begin to evaluate students and to express expectations for the semester.

Be Early

Be early for class, even if only a few minutes, so that you can write on the board what the class is, i.e. Conversation 305, Intensive Level 5. Being early allows you to arrange the room the way you want to and to make sure all the necessary equipment is there. Write your name on the board. Do you want your students first impression of you to be one where you run in like a chicken with your head cut off, or one where you appear organized and in control?

Be Accessible

When your students have arrived (or, frequently, as they are arriving) introduce yourself. If you use a nickname, explain what it means and why you use it. If you have office hours, tell students when they are and where your office is. Giving your students your pager and office or home telephone numbers allows them to call you when they won't be in class or to find out what work they missed, and makes them feel closer to you. You seem more accessible. Give them your e-mail account and tell them they can practice writing by sending you messages.

Nicknames

At this point you can write students names in your roll book. Encourage students to take English nicknames. Not only will this make remembering them easier for you, it allows shy students a false identity to hide behind when they answer questions or do role plays.

Location, Location, Location

Explain the location of rooms and areas in the building. Students need to know where the toilets, smoking areas, and vending machines are. Tell students where the school secretaries and the bursar's offices are. Don't forget to advise the students of procedures in case of emergencies.

Class Rules

Talk about class rules. Students need to know what the absence and homework policies are. If you don't allow cell phones or eating in class, it's easier to deal with it on the first day, rather than address it when it occurs. You may have to address it then, as well, but you laid the ground work on day one.

What's Happening?

Students should be told about school opportunities. Some schools have English clubs, or international student associations. If your school offers TOEFL classes or ESP classes, tell the students. Advise students of study areas. School breaks and holidays should, also, be addressed.

Asking students what they expect and want from class not only gives you ideas of how to tailor the class to your students needs, but it

starts them talking.

Show students the textbooks and tell them where they can buy them. This will ensure they have the right books and reinforce that they are in the correct class. However, if possible, don't jump into the book the first day. There are other introductory activities that can be used to get students talking to each other.

Introduction Games

There are a myriad of introduction games to get to know students and to get them talking. Very simple ones, such as introducing yourself and telling an interest, with the next person repeating the information and adding theirs, works well with lower level learners. A variation of this is to toss a ball, or other small object, back and forth, with the person catching providing the information.

Interview games are sometimes better for students too shy to speak in front of groups. Prepare a list of questions, such as "Who can play piano?", "Who can say 'good morning' in German?", and "Who has one brother?", and have students walk around and interview each other to gather the information. A variation of this is to put the questions on a Bingo board. If students shyly stand waiting to be approached, take them to other students and walk them through an interview. The teacher should also participate. This is a chance for you to get to know your students.

An activity that works well with classes that have been together for several months is Timeline. A timeline is a graph that notes important events, such as birth, school graduations, moving from one town to another, and marriage, and the dates they occurred on. Feel free to include less serious moments such as "my first kiss". Students enjoy learning special things about the teacher.

Before class, teachers prepare a timeline of their life. Teachers show their example, explain the idea, give the student paper, and have them prepare one. Tell students to list at least five or six events and not to put their names on the timelines. Collect them, when the students finish, number them, and tape the time lines up around the room. Students then need to walk around the room and interview each other to determine which timeline belongs to which classmate. Students can ask either open ended information questions (When were you born?) or yes/no questions (Did you get your first kiss in 1995?), but can not ask the interviewee's number. After students have determined which timeline belongs to which student, or after a set time, remove the timelines from the walls and ask students who is who.

These introductory tips and exercises work best with a two hour block of time, but can be adjusted for shorter classes. Stretching this into a longer class could become tedious.

All the time you are doing the exercises, you should be evaluating the students. Who has a good command of grammar? Who spells well? Who is shy, or outgoing? You can use all of this information during the semester.

Thank Students

Finally, thank the student for enrolling in the class. This is a simple thing, but in the first days of class, when a lot is happening, students need to know they are appreciated. This is, certainly, important with private language institutes, but university students need this, too.

Closing Comments

Remember when you were a student starting a new class. You wanted to know who those people next to you were. You wanted to know who the teacher was and what was expected of you. And you wanted to know where the bathroom was. Following this plan, or a similar one, will answer your student's questions and help you to get to know them better and faster.