

# Active Teaching Tips

1. Look at every exercise or activity and ask: "How can I make this more communicative?" Most often the answer lies in adapting what you have for pairs or small-group work. Although pair-work provides the most individual practice, there are times when groups of three are a better choice. Out of three individuals, at least one is likely to be less shy or reluctant and will inspire effort and provide a model for the others. In addition, groups of three generally provide greater accountability from each participant. For an occasional alternative that works well with discussion or opinion questions, try small groups of 4-5. If the group becomes larger, there is not sufficient individual practice. Three other highly effective ways to group students for multiplied practice in a single activity are as follows:
  - Two parallel lines (facing each other)—One line does not move; the other shifts one step to the right at designated times to give each person a chance to practice with everyone in the opposite line.
  - Concentric circles—(as above except with circles instead of lines)
  - Groups of 4 sitting or standing in a square (shifting speaking partners at designated times)
2. Any writing on the board should be MUCH LARGER THAN LIFE to help students in the back of the room. (Color-cued writing is helpful also.)
3. Give instructions verbally and in writing. This gives students two opportunities to understand.
4. Arrange the room so all can see, avoiding glare from any windows.
5. Placing chairs in a semi-circle helps create a sense of community for your students and facilitates assignments for pair or small group interaction.
6. Demonstrate with multiple examples rather than explanations.
7. On sticky notes or lightly with pencil in the margins, write the projected clock time for each activity. This will help your lesson flow and avoid rush at the end. One of the goals is to avoid "down time" when students must sit and wait in silence while a teacher tries to think of what to do next!
8. While students are engaged in an activity, continually walk about from group to group, not as a watchdog but as a facilitator/coach and cheerleader to keep students on task. This is a good way to give friendly reminders about staying in English!
9. When "visiting" pairs or small groups involved in activity, bend your knees (if you are physically able) in order to be on the eye level with your students who are seated. Or you can always ask students to stand for this interaction! They may be ready for a break from sitting.
10. Observe carefully when pair/small group interaction begins to slow down. Quickly bring the activity to a conclusion when you see this happening—even if your lesson plan dictates otherwise.
11. Always allow time for feedback from every group. This gives more purpose to small group activities.
12. If possible, make sure students have some printed text to take home, even if it is text they have copied from the board.
13. Seize the moment! For example, if you stepped in puddles because of the rain while coming to class, create a humorous Total Physical Response (TPR) activity to avoid getting wet.
14. When using CDs or video clips:
  - Always check (and double-check!) to see that the VCR/TV/DVD or tape player is working properly.
  - If possible, use a tape player that has a counter (makes rewinding or fast forwarding easy)
  - Make a list of scenes on video or portions of audiotape with corresponding numbers on the counter.
  - Be sure to cue tapes before students arrive.
15. To avoid students' use of their native languages in the classroom, invite them to participate in their own learning process. Compose a letter to give them on the first day of class that explicitly communicates what you expect from them. Some of the following ideas are from "Please speak English!" in *Hands-on English* (v. 2, no. 4):

Dear Students,

I want you to speak only English while you are in this class. This is very important for you.

(1) You will learn English faster if you practice English in class.

(2) It's hard work to learn English. If you try to listen and speak in English while you are in class your English will improve.

(3) You may know English grammar rules and how to read English but still have difficulty speaking the language. Forcing yourself to think in English will be of great help!

(4) If you don't understand something, it's my job to make it clear to you, so please ask me to explain again. Or, another student can explain something to you in English.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Your Teacher

16. Develop a file of short-duration activities to have on hand for those times when you run out of lesson before you run out of clock! You may consider the following types of activities that you can reach for on a moment's notice and be confident of fun:
  - Riddles and their answers (students memorize one part and move around the room to find a match.)
  - Idiomatic expressions with a common theme
  - Cross-cultural comparison of proverbs
17. Use plain 3x5 cards and felt markers or pens for matching games, word order practice, alphabetizing, categorizing—all for work in pairs or small groups.
18. Instead of copying ten exercises, copy one and think of ten activities you can do with it. A check list for using any text or content:
  - Talk about it (teacher to class) for introductory purposes (not too long this way).
  - Talk to each other about it.
  - Write about it.
  - Write about what someone else said about it.
  - Read what other students have written about it.
  - Give dictation for listening practice.
19. Use a thin white plastic tablecloth (taped to the wall) and marker pens. A good substitute for a dry erase board is a package of commercial cling sheets (from office supply stores—no tape or tacks needed). You may use white garbage bags from home as a substitute for cling sheets. All these pack easily. (Since you may not be able to use tacks or tape on the walls of your classroom, these white sheets are good to have.)
20. Keep printed handouts to a minimum, because of weight limitations for your luggage.
21. Dictations and newsprint sheets are good alternatives to copying.
22. Humor is difficult to teach ESL students. Try the simpler jokes told by children, e.g., "There were thirty sick sheep and ten escaped. How many were left?"
23. To help students remember the "s" on 3rd person singular verbs, mount a large cardboard "S" on a Popsicle stick. If you hear an error of this kind, simply hold up the "S" as a reminder for self-correction.
24. Bear in mind that you are re-labeling, not teaching concepts for the first time.
25. One of the best ways to improve your teaching is by taking five minutes or so as soon as possible after class ends to reflect on the day's session. Jot down what worked very well, what needs changing, and good ideas for next time.
26. Think of what you like to take pictures of when you travel and what artifacts you like to collect from other places. Take these pictures and artifacts from this country to use in your ESL classroom. Picture postcards have great appeal!
27. Some cultures have not yet linked learning and fun. To help you get to know students on the first day, write 3 or 4 questions on the board for them to answer about themselves. Throw a koosh or nerf ball for tagging who will have a turn answering these questions.

28. Be as physical as you can in the classroom—moving around the room, doing the Hokey Pokey (great to follow up on body parts), leading a cheer, etc. Keep things as lively as you can.
29. Do not be afraid to discuss any subject about your country, warts and all.
30. To develop rapport quickly, share photos of your family, your pets, your hometown, etc., on the first day. Or reveal information gradually as the class "interviews" you by asking questions.
31. A Pronoun Chart (with a picture symbol for I, you, he, she, it, we, and they) is helpful for practicing verbs, possessive pronouns, etc. For example, you say: "He's washing his car." Then point to another "person" for a student to say: "I'm washing my car."
32. Bring and use sticky notes to identify roles—husband/wife, father/son, customer/salesperson, etc.
33. Put each of your prepared lessons--along with any pictures, props, masters for handouts--in individual zip-loc bags. As much as possible, pack these in carry-on luggage to avoid serious stress if luggage arrival is delayed. For handy storage of teaching supplies in your room, take a few large paper sacks and fold down the tops for stability.
34. If you will have access to a VCR, consider sing-along videos that provide on-screen lyrics and entertaining visuals. Even without a VCR, consider singing—one of the most effective tools for teaching ESL. Songs teach culture, history, folklore, and idioms. They build learner confidence even before students have achieved spoken fluency.
35. If you teach ESL teachers who work with children, buy nursery rhyme stickers and write out/laminate the rhymes that are on the stickers. Issue stickers as students arrive. Ask them to get into groups according to the sticker they have. Give each group their printed copy of the nursery rhyme to copy and practice saying together. Have them practice reading Little Golden Books aloud.
36. Many countries have special low rates for mailing printed matter. For example, books in the U.S. can be shipped inexpensively by "M-bag" (mailbag). Check your local post office for current information. And plan ahead to take advantage of this savings!
37. If you will be teaching ESL teachers, consider leaving your teaching props/helps for their use and as gifts when you leave.
38. Sign up students to walk you home for a "Personal Interview" time; or ask them to show you where to shop.
39. Place a Want Ad for the board—asking for a volunteer to be "class artist," "audio-visual" specialist, "class helper," etc.
40. Do not take up a lot of class time trying to get across meaning (in English) to a single student. If there's a mental block despite your many efforts to provide understanding, do not hesitate to give a quick translation (or ask another student to do so). Then move on!
41. To get across the concept for contractions, hold your index fingers (nail side down) as you say the two words in full, then "hook" your index fingers together and say the contracted form. You may also hold both hands, palms up, for saying the full form and clasp your hands while saying the contraction.
42. Avoid contractions with "zero" beginners. This lessens confusion in learning the verb "to be."
43. For beginning students, make "telephone receivers" out of poster board (laminated). Connect these with a very long piece of black yarn (10 feet or longer). Students hold these as they practice conversations and lost inhibitions.
44. Do not assume that students understand, simply because they answer "yes" when asked if they understand. In their culture, saying "no" may imply that you have not taught well. Try asking questions that require more than a yes/no response. Also helpful is asking students to repeat in their own words what they have understood you to say.
45. Keep a sense of humor. Laugh with your students and at yourself!