

Five Ideas for the First English Lessons

It's the beginning of the school year and you have to explain rules, go through classroom procedures, expectations, this year's syllabus...not always your students' idea of an interesting first lesson. So, how can you spice up those really-important-but-not-so-thrilling info sessions? By getting your students out of their seats and giving them a few activity breaks! Here are five different activities suitable for the first week of English – pick one, two or all five of them to get your students smoothly through their first lessons.

1. Two truths and a lie

This is a classic which really belongs to the first English lesson of the year! If your students are new to each other they can talk about themselves to get to know each other. If your students already know their classmates, they can talk about their summer vacation. Use yourself/your summer vacation as a model first. Tell your class two true stories and one untrue story about what you did this summer. Make sure you describe and give details for all three of them. Let your students discuss a little bit before they vote for the one they think is a lie. Give your class some time to think and plan their own two truths and a lie – this is the perfect time to hand out notebooks for notes and ideas. Then everyone tells their three stories to 1-3 classmates (one if you want the shy ones to feel safe, three if you want to spark discussions). Sum up in class and encourage people to share the best stories.

2. Categories

This activity can be played in a number of ways, either individually, in pairs or in small groups. Draw the following grid on the board and ask your students to copy. Of course, you can alter the categories and letters, all according to what you need. Maybe this is the time to revise last year's vocabulary?

Letter	Countries	Sports or activities	Adjectives	Jobs	Animals	Foods
A						
F						
B						
L						
P						
E						
R						
H						
C						
W						

For the youngest ones you can leave out the letters and see how many words they can remember in each category instead. Using wider categories like the sea, the environment, travel, school, space, music...also works well, especially if you use topics they know. Want to spark more passion and enthusiasm (and louder shouting) over these vocabulary lists? Set a timer and make it a competition!

3. Group spelling contest

This activity encourages students to move around, cooperate and think about English spelling – all at the same time. Print 5 copies of the letters on the handout below or make your own letter signs. Divide your class into groups of 6 (*ideally*) and give each group member one of the following letters: L-I-S-T-E-N (if it's not possible you can let a few students coach a team or be judges). Explain that you are going to call words that they have to spell with their letters, which means they have to move around to get the letters in the right order. Some of the words are shorter, so only the people holding the letters in the word can step forward. The first group to spell the word correctly wins the point. Of course you can print other letters and use other words if your class needs more or less challenging words. Do a test round or two to make sure everyone gets the idea.

Words to call:

TEN	IN	IS
SIT	LISTEN	TIE
LIST	LIE	TILE
IT	ISLE	LIES
SENT	SET	TIN
SILENT	LENT	NET

4. First letter – last letter

This is a simple, yet efficient activity to retrieve English vocabulary and think about spelling. The students work in pairs or smaller groups. The goal is to keep the chain of words going as long as possible. One student says an English word, for example “summer”. Then the other student must mention a word beginning with the last letter of that word, for example “run”. The next word of course has to start with “n”: nothing – give – extra – and so on.... Look at a few examples on the board together before starting the game. If your class loves competitions you can divide them into competing teams, and set a time limit for a team to come up with a word.

5. Change seats

This is an oldie, but still works well for restless students. Explain to your students that they have to get up and find a vacant seat whenever they are part of a certain category (let them stand behind their desks if bumping up and down on chairs creates too much chaos). The teacher makes the calls. Start by using basic categories like “all girls have to change seats” or “all blue-eyed people have to change seats”. When everyone understands the rules you can move on to get to know them better like “everyone who has more than two siblings has to change seats” or “everyone who loves math must change seats”. If you're bold you can use this activity to make a new class seat plan. Laughs guaranteed!

L

I

S

T

E

N