

A Guide for Your First ESL Lesson

You're headed for your first lesson with a new English-as-a-second-language (ESL) student. The initial intake form you have in hand provides some information on the person, including country of origin, length in the United States, education, work history, and interests. You also have a description of the student's ability to speak, understand, read, and write English.

You're wondering what you should do during the first lesson. Wonder no more. The primary goal is to get to know your student. To get you started, here are some ideas for a successful session.

Your Overall Approach

Don't try to do too much.

You simply don't have to cover a lot of pages in the teaching text. Relax. Introduce yourself. See if the student can do the same, in English. Share something about yourselves, if possible.

Do some preliminary, informal assessment.

This/her is your first chance to evaluate the student's oral and written English ability. This/her will set your course for the second session and those that follow. Take notes about the student's English ability—what the student does well, what needs improvement, specific difficulties with pronunciation.

Don't use the student's native language too much.

If you're able to speak to the student in his/her own language, you'll surely bring a smile to the student's face. Tell the student the best way for you to teach English is for both of you to speak only English during the lessons.

Keep corrections to a minimum.

While the student is speaking in English, avoid corrections. You may have to ask the student to repeat something you don't understand. You may try paraphrasing what you think the student said and ask if that's what was meant. Whatever the English level, let the student use it to communicate. This allows you to get to know each other.

Speak naturally.

Use complete English sentences, even if you know the student understands very little. You'll feel more relaxed because you're speaking normally, and the student will experience the natural flow of English. Encourage students who can speak some English to talk as much as possible, while you speak less.

Making Specific Preparations

From the first moment you greet your new student, do whatever feels natural, just as you would if you were meeting a native English speaker. If your student is at a beginning English level, you can teach a beginning greeting:

“Hello, how are you?”

“Fine, thank you. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks.”

Follow the greeting with an exchange of names. Prepare name tags for each of you. Point to the tags to indicate your names. Don't worry if the student doesn't read in his/her own language or if his/her language uses a different alphabet. Even if the student can't identify his/her name and yours on the name tags, the student will begin to recognize them by sight.

It's important to teach something meaningful to the student during the first lesson. When the student learns something that can be used in the “real” world, the student will be motivated to return.

Consider the student's occupation and the communication skills needed on the job. If the student is a carpenter, try teaching tool-related vocabulary. When the student is ready for more, introduce stock phrases related to carpentry. Find a picture of carpenters working on a building site. Teach sentences about what's happening in the picture. You can also conduct a dialogue or role play between a carpenter and another worker or supervisor.

Speaking of pictures, bring in a picture of you and your family. Tell your student about everybody—names, ages, occupations, where they live—whatever you wish. The level of comprehension will determine how much you describe. Ask the student about his/her family and if he/she would like to bring a picture of them to the next lesson. Let the student get into the “flow” of conversation as much as possible to make points, without correcting errors. Make notes about grammar and vocabulary to teach next time.

Begin to evaluate the student's English skill level, but don't interfere with the primary purpose of the first meeting—getting to know the student! Here are some suggestions for doing both.

During the beginning greeting, you may determine whether the student understands what you're saying. If the student doesn't, there may have a blank look; if he/she does, the student may participate in the exchange. You can assess if the student has near-native English pronunciation; that is, if the student has command of individual sounds, and uses the appropriate intonation.

As you exchange names, you can gain more information about the student's speaking and listening abilities, as well. Does the student make some attempt to provide his/her name? Is the student able to use it in a complete sentence?

Point to your name tag and say, “My name is Joe.” Hand the other name tag to the student and ask, “Please read.” If the student looks confused, point again and draw your finger along the name. Give the learner time to respond. Write, “My name is (student’s name).” Ask him/her to read this sentence.

Ask the student to write his/her name. If necessary, point to your own name tag. Say, “My name is Joe.” Print your name on a piece of paper as you repeat, “My name is Joe.” Then, ask the student to do the same. Remember, the student may be able to write his/her name, but not be able to understand your request.

Two other techniques for evaluating the student’s English skill level entail giving a series of directions and asking questions about a picture.

In the first technique, prepare some tasks that require only physical, not oral, responses. For example, “Give me the pen.” “Please sit in the chair.” “Please close the door.” Note how well the student responds.

For the second technique, select a picture other than the one of your family. Start with easy questions and move to more difficult ones. The goal is to reach a point where the student can answer with phrases or sentences, rather than yes/no or one-word answers.

Time to go!

Before you realize it, the first session is almost over. It’s time to hand the student a textbook, whether you have used it during the first lesson or not. Open the book and show some of the things he/she will be learning. Even if the student has never read in his/her own language, requiring you to spend several lessons on oral skills to prepare for using the book, give it to the student now. This will be a proud moment for the student, a rewarding one for you!