

1 Starting lessons

When I arrive in class to start my lessons, it often takes a long time to get students to quieten down and pay attention.

Aim

To make the starts of lessons more effective and engaging.

Introduction

The beginning of a lesson is crucial. You usually want to set a good atmosphere, re-establish contact with your students and then get onto the important work of the lesson as quickly, efficiently and enjoyably as possible. If something goes wrong at this stage, it can affect all the rest of the lesson.

Teachers use different terms to talk about these sorts of activities:

- **Lead-ins** are part of a single flow connected to your main lesson focus. So, for example, if your lesson has the aim that ‘students will be better able to use Conditional Type Two’, your lead-in would be something that directly ‘leads into’ and starts *that* part of the lesson.
- **Lesson starts or ‘warmers’** are slightly different. They are typically stand-alone and outside the main flow of the lesson and usually have very different aims, i.e. often group-building rather than linguistic (though this is not to say that a cleverly planned lesson start couldn’t segue neatly into the main flow!).
- **‘Icebreakers’** are activities used right at the start of a course to help a new class of students get to know each other and feel more comfortable working together. They might include ‘Getting to know you’ activities and name games (often involving mingling), where students meet and talk to a large number of other students.

Technique: Gatekeeper

With teen classes and younger learners, position yourself just inside your classroom door as students come into class. Meet, greet, chat and welcome students warmly and individually as they arrive. Being there as they come in allows you to quietly assert that they are arriving at your shared classroom. You can take the opportunity to immediately direct which part of the room they should go to, where to sit, what task to start working on and so on. Students will get the message that the lesson starts as soon as they arrive.

Technique: Don't wait for the right time for the 'lesson to start'

Teachers sometimes sit uncomfortably for a minute or two at the lesson start time, looking around, waiting until most students have arrived in the room, perhaps asking questions like, 'Is everyone here?' or 'Is there anyone else?' before finally sighing and saying, 'Shall we start now?' This always feels uncomfortable to me, and I get the impression that I then have to do something big or impressive to actually 'start' the lesson. It works much better if you:

- 1 Think of the lesson beginning as soon as one student is in the room.
- 2 Start chatting with the early arrivers (and make late arrivers feel they have missed something).
- 3 Segue (i.e. move smoothly) from the chat into the lesson's first main task as seamlessly as you can (completely sidestepping the clunky 'lesson-start' moment). Some teachers do this by subtly manipulating the conversation so that they can drop in some of the grammar or vocabulary points that the lesson will focus on. They can then seamlessly stand up, write one or two sentences that have just been said on the board and proceed with the language focus work they wanted to do.

Technique: Greet individually

Try to say, 'Hello', 'Welcome back' or another greeting to as many individuals as you can, while they arrive. This is a far more powerful and personal welcome than saying 'hello' to the class as a whole (and hearing, 'Hello, Mr/Ms Kim' called out in chorus).

Technique: Don't hide in plain sight

It's good to be able to make eye contact with students as they arrive. If you are writing on the board with your back to them, or rummaging around in your desk, you miss that chance.

Technique: Start at the very beginning

Try setting immediate, simple tasks from the first moment that students arrive in your classroom. This could be achieved by directing them from the door as they arrive (see above), by writing task instructions on the board (and training students to always check this as they come in and settle down), by leaving a task sheet or exercise on each chair or desk or by establishing and following a regular routine, such as, 'When you come in, always start by comparing your homework answers with the person next to you'.

Technique: Board welcomes and running themes

Take a minute before students arrive to write a short welcome message on the board. This could be partly greeting, e.g. 'Welcome back', partly informational, e.g. date, weather, the day's lesson plan and/or partly starting to focus students for the lesson itself.

Some teachers choose a running theme to add to the board each day. Students look forward to checking this as they come into each lesson. Themes might be:

- 1 Quote of the day (use the Internet to find some interesting comments by famous people).
- 2 Proverb of the day.
- 3 Funny news headline of the day (you could hand out a related article for students to read in the lesson or later).
- 4 Joke of the day.
- 5 Anagram of the day (or other word puzzle).

You could add in a puzzle or language-learning aim to any of these ideas. Do these regularly, and students will start looking forward to the next day's puzzle. Discussing them and possible solutions can be a great lesson opening.

Here are some examples, for variations on a quote of the day. You could write it:

- In a mixed-up word order.
- In phonemes rather than ordinary letters.
- With a spelling mistake.
- With a missing word.
- With one word substituted with a word that is completely wrong in this context.

Techniques: Focussing starts

Some things seem to attract interest and focus attention especially well at the start of lessons. Here are a few ideas that you could use to lead in to the main activity of the lesson. Many of these will be easiest to do if you have an interactive whiteboard in your room.

1 Hidden → revealed

Introduce one or more hidden things that are speculated about and then slowly revealed. For example:

- The teacher has a large picture on the board, but it's covered up. She invites students to guess what it is and then slowly uncovers part of it ... for more discussion ... and so on.
- The teacher writes up some unusual key words on the board. She explains that they all come from one text. What do students think the text is about?
- The teacher projects a text on the board (e.g. a website), but covers up large parts of it. Students try to guess what it is about.

2 Broken → reconstructed

Show students something that has been broken up, and invite them to reassemble it.

For example:

- A printed text that has been cut into pieces.
- A sentence on the board that has had its words mixed up.
- A picture that has been cut up like a jigsaw.

3 Mystery → solution

Creating little mysteries that students have to think about and solve can draw attention and focus minds. For example:

- The teacher shows an odd, blurred or unclear photograph and asks students to discuss and decide what it shows.
- The teacher gives a one-sentence statement about something strange that happened, perhaps in his or her own life (e.g., 'Last night I woke up screaming'). Students may only ask yes / no questions to try and work out what it is all about (e.g., 'My neighbour's cat climbed in my window and sat on my face while I was asleep').
- The teacher has a large bag and explains that a stranger – before running off – came up to him or her, pushed the bag into the teacher's hands and said it was vital to look after it. The teacher asks students who they think it belongs to, whether to keep it, etc. On their suggestion, the teacher decides to look into the bag. He or she then extracts an (unexpected) item from the bag and invites speculation about the owner, and the purpose of the item. The teacher then takes a second item ... and so on.

Techniques: Quiet starts

ELT can sometimes seem to encourage buzzing, active, noisy starts to lessons: discussions, pair-work speaking activities, mingle tasks and so on. If this sounds like your typical lesson, you might want to experiment with the opposite, just to see how it feels. Instead of lots of activity and speaking, try a really quiet, atmospheric, even mysterious start. For example:

1 Storytelling

The students arrive, making their usual noise. The teacher is sitting in some central location, with a book in his or her hand. The teacher smiles a greeting at the students, but doesn't say anything. When everyone has arrived, the teacher starts reading, surprisingly quietly, but with feeling. Students 'shhhh' each other so that they can hear what the teacher is saying. Very quickly, the class settles down, and their attention is fixed on the teacher and what he or she is saying. The teacher is reading a rather exciting vampire novel, and the students find it interesting. The teacher continues to read without explanation or tasks or comprehension questions for ten or more minutes, then stops, smiles and puts away the book. Even now, there are no questions or tests from the teacher. Some students ask what happens next. The teacher asks if they would like to find out. If enough say 'yes', the teacher replies that he or she might read more ... tomorrow ... or another time.

2 Puzzle

Throw out a slightly odd fact, perhaps from an upcoming text (for example 'Charles Lindbergh only took four sandwiches with him'), and then keep silent. Students will initially be puzzled, but might soon come back with questions – and will start to learn about the story (Lindbergh was the first man to fly solo non-stop across the Atlantic!).

Techniques: Energising starts

Most ELT teachers quickly collect a number of favourite movement-based activities and games, especially for use with younger-learner classes. These can be handy at the start of a lesson (or at other points) to help wake sleepy students up and give them a chance to stretch their legs – and perhaps laugh a little. There may not be any specific language aim, but working together and speaking in English may help to get students re-engaged with using the language. Here are just a few examples:

1 Sequence memory

Ask the class to stand up. Explain that you will do a movement, and they should copy it (e.g. your first movement could be rubbing the top of your head). Ask a student to do the action, and add a new action (e.g. rubbing the top of his or her head and then waving to a friend), which everyone (including you) should copy. Indicate a new student who must repeat the previous two actions and add a new one. Continue in this way until it becomes impossible or too funny.

2 Mirroring

Pair students up, standing eye to eye, directly opposite each other. Explain that A is standing in front of a mirror, and B is the mirror. Every time that A moves, B should copy it exactly. Encourage students to start with very slow actions. Swap roles after a minute or two.

3 Acting out a story

Tell the class to stand up. Start telling a short story that has a number of distinct actions in it (e.g. taking a box off a shelf, catching a ball, waving to someone, etc.). As you mention each action, mime the action, which students should copy. After you have finished, go through the story again, but don't do the actions yourself. See if the students can.

4 Secret passing

Ask students to stand in a wide circle. Pass out some hand-sized objects (e.g. an orange, a glasses case, a toy car) to different students. Any student who has an object should discreetly pass it round the circle in either direction. Any student who doesn't have an object can pretend to be passing an object. After thirty or forty seconds, stop the passing and pretending. Invite a random student to take three guesses to try and find where the objects are. Then restart the passing, and play it again a few times.

Questions for reflection

- Which adjectives would best describe your lesson starts? Organised? Noisy? Chaotic? Focussed? Efficient? Engaging? Time wasting? Inspiring?

9 Closing lessons

My lessons always seem to end in a bit of a muddle and anti-climax. I usually get my timing wrong, so we finish up doing six or seven minutes of Hangman.

Aim

To find satisfying and useful ways of closing lessons.

Introduction

Closing your lesson well may be as important as starting it well. You might want to avoid any sense that it is rushed, chaotic or confused – or that you have run out of things to do after an activity finishes earlier than you expected. Perhaps you'd like your students to leave feeling that they have had an interesting, enjoyable class, that they have achieved something useful and that they are looking forward to the next lesson.

When you watch experienced teachers, the way that their lessons conclude neatly and on time, with everything tied up, can seem almost magical. But a lot of this is simply to do with being able to predict how activities will go from much earlier on in the lesson, and adjusting as they work.

Another aspect is to do with use of specific closing activities, such as revision games or a review of the lesson.

→ For ways of dealing with students misbehaving at the end of lessons, e.g. packing up too soon, see Chapter 6 Unit 2.

Technique: Teacher summary

For many students, the lesson that you have just taught will be forgotten as soon as they are through the door. I don't just mean the taught content of the lesson, but even what it was that happened. You may be able to help later recall of lesson content by helping recall of the actual shape, structure and flow of the work. The memory of activities done might just help to revive and anchor memories of the language used.

At the end of class, take a minute or two to simply state what the lesson has been about and perhaps to answer any short questions that arise. The summary could be a teacher monologue, or it could involve some eliciting from students. The teacher could note key points on the board, as he or she says them, or refer to a projected list of items.

In this lesson excerpt, Izolda is summarising the lesson she has just taught:

So, I hope you enjoyed that activity. Let's finish by looking back at the whole lesson. First of all ... do you remember what we did first of all? How did we start the lesson? (A student responds.) Yes, that's right. We looked at vocabulary about the environment. Can you remember some of the words? (Students call out.) Good. And after that, what did we do? (Students respond.) OK ... We read a story about Paolo who lives in Brazil, and we answered questions about the story. What grammar did we study? (Students respond.) Yes, words like 'slowly'. What do we call them?

Techniques: Encouraging student reflection

A good way to close a lesson is by initiating learner reflection on what they have studied and what they have learnt or not learnt.

1 Board sentence

Write a sentence head on the board, e.g. 'The most difficult thing in today's lesson was ...'. Invite students to write their own ending for the sentence in their notebooks. Hold out the board pen, and invite different students to come up and write their version for others to see and discuss. Alternatively, for a more anonymous response, hand out a large pile of paper scraps and ask students to write answers on the scraps (which you can then collect in and read a sample from, which might be helpful in informing your planning for the next lesson).

Here are a few more ideas for sentence-heads:

- The most interesting thing I learnt today was ...
- I'm sure I'll forget ...
- The bit of today's lesson that really bored me was ...
- Next lesson, I hope we ...
- I need to spend some time revising ...

2 Quick individual reflection

Ask every student to look back over the coursebook pages, handouts, tasks and exercises used in the lesson and make a note of:

- The three most interesting or useful things that were studied.
- One important thing they have learnt and will try to remember from this lesson.
- A question that they want to ask about something in the lesson.

Encourage them to be specific rather than general, e.g. naming a specific set of words they learnt rather than saying 'new vocabulary'. When students have written their answers, pair them up to compare notes. If you have time, you could ask for some students to tell the whole class.

3 Pair or group buzz

Put students into pairs or small groups. Ask them to answer your questions as quickly as they can. Call out a series of questions, allowing about a minute for students to spontaneously say

everything they can think of in response to each one, without reference to books, notes, etc. Questions could include things like:

- List all the new words that came up today.
- Name some surprising things in today's lesson.
- What did people laugh about in today's class?
- How did your personal energy levels rise and fall though the lesson?

4 Pair/group letter to absent students

Ask students to write a short summary of the lesson for any student who happens to be absent. This could be a letter or email, or any form you choose, perhaps even an immediate update on a class website or Facebook® page or a series of Tweets on Twitter.

5 Closing address

At the start of each lesson, appoint two or three people to take on the responsibility of making a summary speech at the end of the class. As the lesson unfolds, they make notes about what everyone is doing, interesting things that happen, etc. Before the end of the lesson (perhaps instead of a final task), allow the two or three students to meet up and decide what they are going to say. Invite them to the front and let them give their 'closing address' to the class. When you first do this, students will probably give a fairly factual summary of the lesson. As they become more familiar with the task over time, the style and content of reports will change, and you'll probably get more amusing and creative interpretations.

6 Reflection tennis

Pair students up, and seat each partner some distance from the other. In turn, each person has to recall something specific from the lesson (e.g. a word, a grammar point, a fact, part of the story, etc.). They call out their answer and, as with a tennis match, the imaginary 'ball' goes over to their partner, who must now name a new thing to 'hit the ball back'. The game goes on, back and forth, until they run out of ideas. One reason for sitting pairs slightly apart from each other is that this forces them to speak a little louder, which allows others to overhear their ideas, which, in turn, gets more ideas in circulation around the room. It also makes for a jolly, noisy and pleasantly chaotic end to the lesson. If you want a quieter version, simply seat the two students in each pair close together. You could focus the game more tightly by setting a specific question (drawn from the lesson content) at the start of each game, e.g. name words that you can find on a farm.

7 Reflection against a syllabus

At the beginning of a course, give students a copy of the syllabus they are following (e.g. a list of can-do criteria statements). This could be in a folder, diary or book, or perhaps digitally stored on a local computer or online. Ideally, each syllabus statement should have space to allow students to add comments, dates and other information and to grade their achievements (e.g. 0 = Not achieved yet; 1 = Partially achieved; 2 = Fully achieved). At the end of each lesson, ask students to compare what they have studied in the lesson against that syllabus, self-assessing as to what they can do well now (and what they still can't do). As time goes by, students will very clearly be able to see their progress and get a sense of what still needs to be studied.

8 Reflection feeding into action plans

Whatever form of reflection you facilitate, it's also useful to get each student to combine this with preparing an action plan, i.e. a statement about what an individual student needs to work on. It is often filled in on a form and can be preceded by or followed with a tutorial.

Action plan
NAME:
Recent work
I feel confident about:
I need to spend some more time working on:
When and how will I do this work?
Future work
My priorities for the next part of the course are:
I particularly want to work on improving:
I think I need to study the following new things:
My teacher can help and support my work by:
Will there be any changes in <i>how</i> I do my English language study in the future?

An action plan such as this is not something to do every lesson, but is valuable as a way of reviewing progress after a period of time (e.g. every two or four weeks, or every half term). Make sure that students consider a wide range of skills and systems work (e.g. speaking, reading, writing, listening, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation).

Technique: Avoid the last-minute rush

When an activity overruns, taking much longer than expected, you will need to have ways to shorten it so that everything can conclude before the lesson's end time.

Try to look ahead to this from as early in the lesson as possible. Keep the end point in mind. If you predict that the activity is likely to overrun, don't wait until the end of the lesson and then cut it off unfinished. Keep making small micro-adjustments to timing, pace and instructions while you work so that the activity will take less time (e.g. stating a shorter time limit than you planned or telling students to do the first five questions, rather than all ten as you had anticipated). By remaining aware and acting preemptively, you can avoid a last-minute shock. It is typically more effective to retrieve time from stages in the middle of the lesson than trying to rush through the closing ones.

Technique: Don't start a new task; extend the old one

If one activity finishes, and it's within about ten minutes of the end of the lesson, think twice before starting a new activity. It's often better to add to or extend the current activity (e.g. introducing a feedback or report stage), rather than starting a completely new stage (which you almost certainly do not have enough time to give instructions for, run and conclude).

What you can do will depend on the specific task that students have been doing, but here are a few examples:

- 1 Get students to write a new question or two in the style of the grammar or vocabulary exercise they have just finished. These questions can then be passed on to other students to do.
- 2 Ask students to prepare a report-back (to present either to another pair or to the whole class).
- 3 Ask students to repeat a speaking task, but changing the roles around.
- 4 After a reading or listening task, ask students to put away the texts/transcripts and see how much they can remember (or possibly act out).

Technique: Don't draw attention to what didn't happen

It's not usually a great idea to say to students, 'I was going to do something really interesting next, but I'm sorry we have run out of time'. It leaves everyone feeling that their teacher can't plan very well and that something important has been missed. If you run out of time, keep it upbeat, and let students focus on the things they have done which they enjoyed.

Technique: Planning timing from the end

When planning how the lesson ends, you may find it helpful to work backwards from the last moment of the lesson to calculate how long you need for each step. This will give you a clearer idea of just how long before the end you need to conclude the last main activity. For example, here is a backwards plan for the last ten minutes of a lesson.

- o Lesson end.
- 1 Tell students that they can pack their bags and get ready to leave.
- 3 Set homework.
- 4 Tidy up books. Collect work in.
- 9 Feedback and questions about the activity.
- 10 Conclude discussion activity.

Technique: Have a regular closing stage

With younger learners, you may find that it helps to always do the same thing at the end of every lesson. Students will know what to expect, and the predictability and habit may help to quieten them down and discourage too-early packing up. This stage might include:

- Setting homework.
- Filling in a diary.
- Collecting a new reader from the library box.
- Repeating the 'poem of the week' (or any other text you or they select).
- Singing a song (Scott Thornbury, the series editor, comments that, 'I once took a course in Maori in New Zealand at an Adult Education centre, and every lesson ended with a song which we stood up and sang – there was something sort of reassuring about this, as well as giving a wonderful sense of closure').
- Writing and chorally repeating the 'word of the day' from the board.

Technique: Withholding

Here is a simple technique for discouraging students from packing up early and racing to get out of the door.

Earlier in the lesson, sow the seed of something that will only be revealed right at the end of the lesson. For example, you tell the class a riddle (e.g. 'What is the only word in English that is pronounced exactly the same when you cross out the last four letters?'). Let them think about it and suggest answers, but don't confirm any solution. Tell them that you will let them know the right answer at the very end of the lesson. In the last few minutes of the lesson, remind them of the riddle, let them speculate again – then tell them the answer in the final few seconds of the lesson. (Answer: 'Queue!') Some other ideas:

- A joke. (You save the punch line for the end.)
- A test. (You save the scores for the end.)
- A video clip. (You stop the playback just before the last scene; ask, 'What happened next?' and only reveal it at the end.)
- A story or anecdote. (You don't tell them the ending until the end of the lesson.)
- A puzzle that students work on. (You save the correct solution for the end.) For example, 'Jill is visiting Jack and sees a picture on the wall. She asks, "Who is that?" Jack says, "Sisters and brothers I have none, but that man's father is my father's son." Who is it?' This example demonstrates that a puzzle can be quite complex despite using very simple language! (Answer: 'Jack's son'.)

Techniques: Better fillers

Do you habitually always use the same filler game when you have spare time at the end of a class ... and does it always seem to be Hangman? Take a little time to research online or in books for short games that could extend your repertoire, e.g. Ur, P. (2012) *Vocabulary Activities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The most useful games are likely to be ones that review and recycle language that has come up in the lesson, or which get students to look back or think back over what they have learnt.

The following are some popular quick games that can be used to revise language from the lesson:

1 Anagrams

On the board, write up a number of anagrams of words from the lesson. Students try to decipher them as fast as possible.

2 Phonemic anagrams

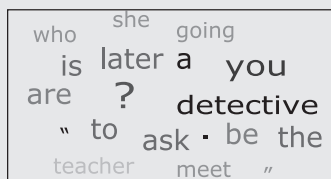
Same idea, but put the words up as mixed-up phonemic symbols.

3 Mixed-up sentences

Similarly, write a sentence that uses a structure from the lesson, but with the words in a mixed-up order.

4 Word clouds

Write several words and punctuation marks in random places on the board. Students see how many good sentences they can make from the items. For example:



(Answers include: 'She is a teacher', 'Are you going to meet the detective?' 'You are going to ask the teacher later', 'Is the detective going to meet a teacher?' 'She is going to ask, "Are you a teacher?"')

5 Back to the board

You invite a student to come to the front and sit facing the class, with his back to the board. You write a word from the lesson on the board so that the class can see it, but the student can't. The class define the word or say synonyms until the student at the front guesses the word or gives up. Also works well as a team game, with game players from the two teams taking turns at the front.

6 Sentence-making challenge

Write up three words, perhaps using noun, verb, noun (e.g. *builder, drop, piano*). Challenge the students to make sentences following these five rules: (1) They cannot add any more nouns or main verbs, (2) They can change the form of the words (e.g. *builder* → *builders*; *drop* → *dropped*), (3) They can add 'small words' such as auxiliary verbs, pronouns, articles, prepositions, question words, adverbs, etc., (4) They can add punctuation, (5) They can use the original three words in any order, repeat them if they wish or omit one or more.

Show an example (e.g. 'The builder has never dropped the piano'); then allow a few minutes' thinking time. Collect ideas together on the board – and enjoy them! There is no correct answer, but sentences might include: 'I dropped the piano on the builder', 'Where's the builder?' 'Under the piano', 'That builder's always dropping my piano!' 'That piano is mine, not the builder's.'

(I got this idea from Scott Thornbury's *Uncovering Grammar*.)

Technique: Pause; don't stop

Some practitioners of the Silent-Way method make a deliberate point of *not* timing their activities so that they conclude, wrap up or reach a natural pause at the lesson's end time. Instead they just stop whatever they are doing when the time runs out, often right in the middle of something. At the start of the next lesson, they simply pick up where things left off. One effect is that the teacher has no need to feel stressed about timing activities, hurrying people up, worrying about fillers and so on. The work is allowed to take however long it needs and allows you to link lessons – one to another, in a natural way.

Questions for reflection

- Do your lessons tend to end elegantly or in a muddle? What small change could make these endings more effective?