

## 25 Top Tips for Secondary teachers

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by David Spencer



If someone were to ask me what I've learnt about teaching secondary school students in all these years, my answer would be simple: the importance of motivation. Here are some examples of activities that, in my experience, motivate students to participate in English lessons and that provide a real gateway to learning. Most of the activities need no special resources and very little preparation time.

The tips are not classified into groups (e.g. Speaking, Writing, Vocabulary...) since many of them would fit into more than one category anyway. I simply suggest having a look at each title and seeing what most interests you. It's important to point out that I am not claiming authorship of the activities – they are simply activities that I have picked up over the years from other teacher trainers, colleagues, conferences, books, journals, etc. I hope you, in turn, enjoy passing them on to your students and colleagues.

If you're interested in more ideas like these, be sure to check out the Gateway facebook page. You'll also be able to check out some videos showing me doing some of these, and other, activities with my own students on the YouTube channel.

**Happy Teaching!**

*Dave*



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<http://bit.do/gatewaytoptips>

## A gateway to...

### Discussing personal information

This is a classic Day One activity for the start of a new academic year. It's also an interesting way to help students for the first stage of any oral exam. Tell students to draw a five-pointed star and write their name in the middle. At the tips of the star, they write (a) the name of someone who is important in their life, (b) a date which is significant to them, (c) a number which is special, (d) a place that has some relevance to them, and (e) the name of a film/band/book/computer game that they love/hate/have seen recently... Students get into pairs, compare stars, and ask and answer questions to find out more about each point. Then ask students to tell you one interesting thing they discovered about their partner.

### Talking about the holidays

Draw three empty squares on the board. Tell the students that these are photos of their last holidays. The first is a photo of somewhere they went, the second is of something they did, and the third is of the best moment in the holidays. Give them five minutes to think and draw their 'photos'. Make it clear that no artistic skill is necessary (prove this by drawing your own 'photos' on the board to demonstrate the activity if you like!).

When they have finished, in pairs or small groups each student shows his/her photos and the other(s) must ask questions to find out in detail what each photo shows. The person showing the photos can only answer yes or no. Finish with whole class feedback, with students telling you one interesting thing they found out about their partner(s).

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## Breaking the ice

At the start of the year, students may well want to know more about you as a person if you're new to the group. Tell them to work in pairs/small groups and write questions to ask you. If you like, warn them from the start that you reserve the right not to answer questions. After five to ten minutes, ask for a volunteer. This volunteer is now you, the teacher, and so comes to the front of the class. The class ask the volunteer their questions and the volunteer has to answer as if they were you, guessing your answers if they don't know them. Finally, tell the class which of the volunteer's answers were correct and which were wrong and why.

## Question practice

Question formation in English is not easy, and since in most classes it is the teacher who asks most questions, students generally need all the question practice they can get. This simple activity motivates students to fire away question after question. Simply ask students, in teams, to prepare questions to ask you, but they always need the answer to be 'Yes'. Teams win a point for each question that gets a 'yes' answer (and is grammatically correct, if you want), but they get no points for any question that gets the answer 'no'. So if the question is 'Are you a great teacher?' they get a point, but if they ask 'Are you silly?' they get nothing (!).

## Teamwork

Tell students they have five minutes to find as many things as possible that they have in common with their partner. After five minutes, the students feed back to the rest of the class. This activity not only helps students to break the ice, but it also encourages positive elements such as empathy and teamwork.

## Talking about the weekend

Here's a simple idea to get students talking about what they did at the weekend. Write up one or two question words on the board, e.g. Who, What. Now tell them to continue writing down as many other question words as they can, either individually or in pairs. Then tell them they must write a question about the weekend (or it could be about their last holidays) for each one of the question words that they wrote in their list. When they finish, they can interview each other using their questions. Because the activity is structured and in stages, it works much better than simply saying 'Talk to each other about the weekend', which usually gets little response.

## Revising basic classroom language

For low level groups, it's important at the start of the year to check students know basic classroom language. One way to recycle this language is the 'A to Z' vocabulary game. In pairs/small groups, students think of something you can find in the classroom beginning with each letter of the alphabet, leaving out any difficult letters. So, for example, A - ?, B - board, C - chair, D - desk, E - eraser, etc.... Of course, you can use the same activity to recycle any group of words, or even irregular past forms, or past participles. By the way, in my opinion, in this sort of game creative 'cheating' should be encouraged!

## Playing with words

This activity is a simple vocabulary warmer. (By the way, you can also do this activity in the staffroom on a wet morning/afternoon while you and your colleagues are having a well earned coffee/tea break!). All you have to do is change the spelling of a word one letter at a time to make another word.

E.g. *rose* - *rise* - *rice* - *mice*.....

If you get stuck, just go back and try a different route. It's even easier with three letters!

E.g. *day* - *say* - *sat* - *rat*.....

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## Word association

This is the classic Word Chain activity. A student says a word and the next student has to say another word with some link to it. Continue round the class. So: *paper-tree-park-football-sport...* If students don't think a link is valid, they can challenge it. An interesting variation is to say a word that has NO connection with the previous word. If someone thinks that some type of connection exists, they can make a challenge. So: *paper-football...* A student could challenge this by saying you can read about football in the papers. Usually students are good at finding obscure or creative links between words. That's what you want because it leads to lots of discussion.

## Listen and repeat, but with a purpose

This is an activity I often demonstrate in my talks. I call it 'Quickfire Questions', and you can sometimes see short interviews with famous people using the same technique. All you do is call out two options. The students must call out the one they prefer. So it could be *Tennis or football? TV or the cinema? Hamburgers or pizzas? Chemistry or History?* etc. This is a very simple drill, but it's still communicative since the students are actually expressing a personal preference. It can be used to introduce/recycle a topic, e.g. food, sports, free-time activities...

## Vocabulary races

This is a great way to wake up students at the start of the lesson. Students work in pairs or small groups. Give them two minutes to write down words in an unusual category, for example: things that are usually red (e.g. tomatoes, fire engines, etc.), things that normally need electricity to work, things that are made of wood, things that have handles, words that have seven letters, things that are usually sticky, etc., etc. After two minutes, see who has most, get them to write their words on the board and teach any that are not known by the majority of the class, and then repeat with the next unusual category.

## Recycling lexical sets

Imagine we're teaching types of transport. Tell the students to draw three columns, and label them 'Land/Sea/Air'. Dictate a list of different types of transport and students write each one in the corresponding column. When you finish, students compare their answers, checking which column the word is in as well as the spelling. You can correct with a volunteer at the board. Your columns could be Sports (Indoor/Outdoor, Team/Individual), Rooms (dictate furniture, students write which room it usually goes in), Adjectives (Personality/Physical experience), etc.

You could also do Countable versus Uncountable nouns, Regular versus Irregular verbs, and even as a pronunciation exercise (words with the /i/ sound/ versus words with the /i:/ sound, two syllable words with stress on the first syllable versus those with stress on the second syllable, etc.).

## Playing with pronunciation

In this activity, students create their own tongue twister. First of all, choose a pair of sounds that your students find difficult to differentiate. Spanish-speakers for example typically have problems making the difference between 'b' and 'v'. Get the students to write down 5 words beginning with or containing one of the sounds (e.g. in this case 'b'), and then write down five words beginning with or containing the other (i.e. 'v'). Students then try to write a silly sentence combining as many of those words as possible and they then practise saying it. Help out as the students have a go at saying 'The victim was bitten by a very big vampire', or something similar!

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## Collaborative writing

Writing is often difficult and dull for students because it is usually a solitary activity. That's why this collaborative writing activity makes a welcome change for the students. On the board, write 'Yesterday something strange happened. I ...'. Then explain that, in turns, each student must add just one word to continue the story. They can also ask for a full stop, comma, etc. Continue until you have at least one paragraph. The end result is usually a mad but funny story.

From time to time, you can brush up the story together if you think there are grammatical problems or problems with coherence and cohesion. The activity lends itself to a focus on when and why we use different past tenses, and the use of linkers of time and sequence. You can also go back and make sure there are sufficient adjectives and adverbs, and you might want to elicit more sophisticated alternatives to words like *good*, *bad* or *nice*.

## Written role-plays

Teachers often find that it can be difficult getting teenagers to speak. Here's a way of getting round that problem. Each student has a piece of paper. Explain a situation, e.g. 'You are a parent. It is Saturday night. You told your teenage son/ daughter to come back at 11pm but it is now midnight. Suddenly your son/ daughter walks through the door.' Now tell the students to write down what they would say if they were the parent. Next they pass their paper to the person on their right and tell them to read silently what is on the paper. Now they imagine they are the son/daughter and write a reply to the parent's comment. Then they pass their paper to the person on their right again and continue as the parent, and so on. At the end they could work in pairs and take it in turns to read out the dialogues. This, at the very least, is a starting point for oral activities with secondary students.

## Improving your writing

To encourage higher level students to add complexity to their writing, write this sentence on the board: **A boy walked down the street.** The competition (in pairs, for example) is to see who can make the longest sentence by adding as many words as they can to the sentence. So one sentence could be: 'Last night, a fair-haired, blue-eyed American boy walked quickly and confidently down the narrow, winding street'. This activity can also come just before or just after work on adjective order.

## Focusing on spelling

This is an extremely easy but interesting way to get students focussing on spelling and recycling vocabulary. You simply write words in the air, slowly and clearly, letter by letter. As soon as the students think they know what word it is, they shout it out. The only thing to remember is to turn your back to your students as you spell the letters, or spell each letter back-to-front. If not, the letters will all be back-to-front for the students. Students could then spell words to the class or in pairs.

## Describing photos

If you simply ask students to describe a photo, they may not feel very inspired. So try this variation, which can also be used to present and practise modal verbs of speculation (*may*, *might*, *could*, *can't*, etc.). You need a large photo (A4 size for example). Cover the photo with a blank piece of paper and slowly unveil it, starting by showing a centimetre at the top. Ask students what they can see (very little!) and what they think the picture might be. Gradually show the students more and more of the picture until the whole thing becomes clearer. You can use the photo to introduce a new topic, getting the students interested in it right from the start.

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## Introducing a new topic in class 1

Here's an idea that works well as an introduction to a topic, or as a warm-up to a debate. Tell the students to divide a piece of paper horizontally into three columns. The first column should have the heading 'I agree', the second 'I disagree', and the third 'It depends'. Dictate short sentences to the students, who write them in one of the three columns, according to their opinion. So, if your class is about technology, you could dictate 'Life would be impossible without my mobile phone', 'Computers are making unemployment worse', etc.

When you finish dictating the sentences, students compare their columns in pairs and justify their opinions. When they finish, find out how many people agreed or disagreed with each statement and see what their main arguments are. The students have practiced listening, writing and speaking. You could now go on to read a text linked to the same topic.

## Introducing a new topic in class 2

Here's another simple way of introducing a new topic in class. Write the name of the topic vertically on the board. For example:

T  
R  
A  
N  
S  
P  
O  
R  
T

Students (individually or in pairs) think of a word beginning with each letter that they associate with the topic. So they may come up with:

*ticket*

*railway*

*arrive*

*network, etc.*

Any word they come up with is valid as long as they can explain and justify it.

## A dictation with a difference

This is a simple dictation idea that gets students listening, writing, speaking and thinking in English. Dictate two or three sentences to the class. For example, 'There was an old woman who lived in a beautiful house in the country. She had five black cats and a dog. She loved drinking tea and watching the television'. BUT tell the students to write down the OPPOSITE of what they hear. The idea of 'opposite' here is relative, which makes the activity more interesting. For example 'an old woman' could become 'an old man', 'a young woman', 'a young girl', etc. After the dictation, ask students to compare their stories and see how similar or different they are. Get some volunteers to read their texts out to the rest of the class. To finish, tell the students to work in pairs and turn their texts back into the original version that that you dictated.

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## Higher level writing

Here's a writing activity for B2/B2+/C1 students. You may have some Starter or Beginner level readers lying around at school. Give the students the readers and ask them what they notice. The students will probably spot that the sentences are all very short, only a limited number of tenses are used, and the vocabulary used is fairly basic. Tell the students to rewrite a couple of pages of the readers using linkers (of time, sequence, addition, contrast, etc.), a wider variety of narrative tenses (past continuous, past perfect, etc.), and a fuller range of more sophisticated vocabulary.

The good thing is that students don't have to worry about the content of the story and so they can concentrate simply on improving the style. It's also motivating for them to see that they can now improve texts that, when they started learning English, were maybe even a little difficult for them!

## Oral fluency

This Top Tip is a fun speaking activity for smaller classes. It's called 'Hidden Sentences'. Have two sets of cards. One set should have a different topic on each card, e.g. Sport, The family, New technology, Television.... On each card in the second set, write a sentence. The sentence should not have any particular connection to any of the topics. So, you could have: 'Personally, I hate it when it rains.', 'I've always loved detective stories', 'Everybody knows bananas are good for you', etc., etc.

Each student takes a topic card and a sentence card. They must not show anybody the sentence card. The students then have five minutes to prepare a short talk about the topic on their first card, BUT at some moment in their talk they must include the sentence on their sentence card, WITHOUT other students realising. When a student finishes giving their talk to the class, the other students must try to decide what the hidden sentence was.

## Playing with grammar

Draw a grid on the board (5 squares x 4). Put each of the following words in one square in the grid.

*don't/to/you/often/supermarket/anna/and/we/pizza/usually/eats/cinema/the/go/i/doesn't/never/goes/eat/dog*

How many grammatically correct sentences can the students make, using only the words in the grid, in ten minutes? What is the longest sentence they can write? In this case, the words in the grid help to revise basic, elementary grammar but you can change the words to revise any grammatical point that you've just taught, e.g. present perfect, conditionals, passives...

## Writing simple poetry

As you probably know, a haiku is a three-line poem. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven, and the third five. So here's an example, entitled 'Summer':

*Warm sun all day long*

*Ice cream melting in my hands*

*Cool nights by the beach.*

Give this as a model for your students and then allow them time to think up their own, allowing them to choose their own topic. First, they should brainstorm words connected to the topic. Then they need to think how to put them together, within the limit of the syllables for each line. When they finish, they can practise reading the haiku aloud to improve sentence stress and rhythm.