

50 Don't worry about the topic

A good topic helps, of course, to arouse interest, but it's not as vital as you might think. It's all too easy to kill a fascinating topic, and to bring to life an apparently uninteresting one: it's the task that matters.

It's quite difficult to give a recipe for a good topic. In general, topics that are relevant to students' lives, or culture, or personal experience are likely to be interesting (see Tip 54); but sometimes ones that engage students' fantasies or imaginations, totally removed from their own reality, can be just as good. Your best guide here is your own knowledge of your students, and your intuitive 'feel' for what they will relate to with interest.

But in any case, even after you've found a topic that is interesting to most of the members of the class, this will help to engage them only at the beginning of the activity or text. Interest will be maintained only if the treatment of the subject is interesting as well. If the topic is, for example, 'football' – when you know most of the class play it and eagerly support the local team – then this is likely to raise students' motivation to participate. However, if the content of the text is merely a description of the rules of football, or if the activity consists of learning vocabulary items connected to the game, then students are likely to lose interest. A topic such as 'numbers', in contrast, looks boring; but if you ask each student to write down a number that is personally significant to them, and then share it with their classmates, they'll continue to be motivated to say and understand numbers in spite of the apparently uninteresting nature of the subject (see also Tip 99).

So by all means look for topics that interest your class, but remember that the important thing is not what they are, but what you do with them.

Keep activities short and varied 51

A lesson – unless it is very short – should normally be broken up into different activities. The use of short, varied activities prevents students getting bored, and helps them to concentrate.

This is particularly true of younger and less motivated students; but it applies in principle to any class. I have an EAP class whose members, a small group of highly motivated academic researchers, have told me that they find it difficult to concentrate during long (60–90 minute-) sessions all focusing on one task, and appreciate the fact that the session is planned to include varied components.

Normally, in a lesson of 45–60 minutes try to do at least three different things; though of course you may want to do four or five in some classes, maybe only two in others. If you've been spending time on a difficult reading text, perhaps go on to a game practising oral fluency. If you've been doing a lot of teacher-led work, then move to group or pair work. Alternatively, if you feel it important to get through a long text in one lesson, for example, perhaps take a break in the middle to do a brief activity for a few minutes, to give your students a 'breather' (see the reference at the bottom of Tip 12 for some ideas).

Keep in mind that there are a number of different ways you can vary activities. You can change:

- the skill; reading, writing, listening or speaking, or a combination;
- the focus; communication or accuracy-oriented language work;
- the level of difficulty or challenge; whether a task requires effort or is relatively easy;
- the speed; whether the activity involves rapid interaction or slower, reflective work;
- the classroom organization; teacher-led, group/pair or individual;
- the materials; textbook, paper, the board, computers, or hand-held

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54 Personalize

It's usually more interesting and easier to talk about things that are personally relevant than about things detached from students' own lives.

Textbooks these days are much more likely than they used to be to invite students to talk about their own experiences or opinions. But still, there's a limit to how much they can do so, since the textbook authors don't know the students. You, however, do, and are in a position to 'personalize' a lot of the tasks. Writing and speaking tasks are fairly easy to personalize: for example, you can ask students to write about their own experiences ('Write about a time when you were disappointed / amazed / delighted'), or give them discussion tasks to exchange information about each other ('Find out five things you didn't know before about your partner'). In work on listening and reading, you can ask students for their own responses ('What would you have done...?' 'What do you think of...?') to complement the standard comprehension questions.

A lot of grammar exercises use names of fictional characters as subjects or objects of the sentences. For example: *Sheila doesn't need ... help (no/any/some)*. Try asking students to substitute the name of someone they know, or someone else in the class. It's a very simple change, but immediately brings the exercise to life.

When working on vocabulary, instead of telling students to work on the sentences in the book, or to compose ones to contextualize the target items, ask them to make up ones that are true for them, and include the word *I* or *me* as well as the target vocabulary item. Or invite them to relate an item to someone they know; or a place they know; or a familiar situation.

It's very easy to tweak language exercises in this way, and demands no preparation. It just needs a bit of thought and awareness of the need to personalize whenever you can.

55 Use visual materials

Visual materials attract attention and interest; and the more colourful and appealing they are, the better.

For most people, it is sight which is the dominant sense: so much so, that if you don't give your students a visual focus that will keep their attention, they will search for another, which may distract them.

You yourself are probably the most important visual focus in your classroom. So be aware that you are 'on show', and use facial expression, gesture and movement to make what you are saying more interesting.

The second most important one is the board, whether a conventional white- or blackboard, or one with a digital display. Use it not only for writing but also for drawing. Don't worry if the pictures are funny – most of us are not very good artists! It doesn't matter, as long as they are just about recognisable.

Reading and writing are, of course, by their very nature based on visual material. It's best if reading texts are also illustrated, or use colour or varied fonts and headings that make them more interesting to look at; but this is not usually under your control. Use written or graphic materials also as a basis for oral fluency work. Students will find it far easier to think of things to say if they have something relevant to look at, or if the task itself is based on a visual stimulus. (See, for example, the one mentioned at the end of Tip 25.)

The main problem is listening, because a lot of the listening exercises in textbooks or online require students to listen to recording without seeing anything – and it's very difficult to maintain interest in a voice without seeing the speaker (see Tip 59). If you can, use video or a live speaker as the source of the listening text, or provide a relevant visual stimulus such as a picture or simple text that is relevant to the content.