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How to teach conversational english to kindergarten

by Stacia Levy 918,978 views And while the conversation class may certainly be less rigorous than, for example, an advanced writing class, it has its own set of problems. In a writing class, I know what the students need, and the title “Advanced ESL Composition” alone suggests the curriculum: course readings and several student essays on related topics over the course of the semester, in drafts increasing polished and focused on structure, grammar, and punctuation. A conversation class, however, is less defined. What exactly is a conversation class? What is the curriculum? Sometimes there’s not even a course text available. Despite this initial lack of clarity, however, there are general principles of best practice that a conversation class can be built around. 9 Basic Principles of Teaching Conversation Classes 1 I’m always surprised when in the first days of class students turned to me or ask their classmates if they are holding the conversation “correctly,” if it is “right.” Rarely even in our native languages do we concern ourselves if the conversation is proceeding “correctly”; the point is if our meaning is coming through. This is what should be emphasized to students: it’s not a matter of “right” but whether or not your classmates understand you and can respond to you! 2 Before entering in academic conversations, students have to agree on some basic “rules for engagement”: listening to each other courteously; listening actively by clarifying meaning and asking for examples; advancing one’s own opinions clearly and politely while considering the audience, etc. Most students will really know these rules already from their first languages—there are probably some cultural universals in politeness—and can usually help in brainstorming five or so rules to be displayed prominently in the class. More than five will likely be too many to focus on and be useful. 3 There are few things more uncomfortable than being in a conversation on a topic you either intensely dislike or have nothing to say on. Most native speakers will excuse themselves from such conversations as soon as possible. Teachers should be wary of assigning controversial topics such as the legality of abortion or same sex marriage without gauging the climate of the class and having an idea of how receptive students will be to such topics. Some classes are perfectly capable of holding a mature conversation on these topics, others not depending on their language and cross-cultural and interpersonal skills. Teachers should ask themselves the following: Are my students capable of listening to their peers on the topic without erupting in anger? Can they advance their own opinions without undue embarrassment? One way around this concern is allowing students to come up with their own topics to use over the course of the term. Have them work in groups, write agreed-upon topics on index cards, and collect them. They do not have to be “academic” topics like the validity of global warming but almost anything students are interested in and can discuss for an extended time, such as favorite music. One class session or part of one in brainstorming topics will likely yield enough topics for the term, and the instructor can just draw an index card to use during discussion time. 4 Conversation occurs in small, not large groups. Having students work in small groups or pairs is usually more productive for a number of reasons: students are less self-conscious if they are “performing” in front of a small group rather than large, and they have more chance to speak in a smaller group. In addition, conversations generally occur in smaller groups, as any party or meeting will demonstrate—people gather in small groups to talk when given the opportunity. Setting aside regular time for students to get into groups for discussion will help them develop their conversation skills. 5 Some teachers assign conversational partners or groups for the term, and this has advantages, such as students get to know each other better this way, and they can quickly get into their groups when asked to, easing transitions. However, there also are advantages to occasionally rotating partners or groups, perhaps every few weeks. In this way, students get to know more of their peers and get exposed to more ideas while still having the structure provided by having a stable group for a period of time. 6 Too often conversations even between native speakers fall flat because the participants don’t know conversation strategies. In addition, there is a difference between an everyday conversation and an academic conversation. Many if not all of our students can carry on an everyday conversation without much difficulty. “What would you like for dinner?” “I dunno. Pizza? Chicken? What do you want?” Much of our day-to-day “conversation” goes on in exchanges like this and requires few strategies. But to have a real “conversation” on the topic of food choices, for example, the conversational partners will have to know different strategies for introducing the topic, drawing each other out, asking for opinions, advancing their own, using examples, and so forth. 7 It seems elementary, but it is often forgotten that students may not be participating because they simply don’t have the vocabulary to enter a specific conversation. Introducing some key phrases and words related to the topic will help this. For example, on the topic of different types of vacations today, students should learn words like “condo,” “time share,” “hotel,” “motel,” “extended stay,” “business class,” and “coach.” 8 There are specific strategies for entering, extending, and ending conversations both formally and informally. For example, with “Hey, Diana! How was your vacation to Hawaii?” I am signaling to Diana that I’d like to open an informal and probably brief conversation on the topic of her vacation that might extend a little into my vacation and vacations in general. However, with “What do you think about how we vacation today? Hasn’t it changed quite a bit from even ten years ago?” I am signaling a different kind of conversation—more in-depth and analytical as the conversation participants consider different types of vacations, and more academic. Knowing these strategies for different types of conversations will help students avoid confusion and even annoyance and gain experience in different types of conversations. 9 Because the focus of instruction, and of conversation itself, is on communicating meaning rather than on correctness, students should be assessed mostly informally. The instructor can walk around the class, sit in on conversations, and get an idea this way on the degree of participation of each student. Students can also be asked to hold a conversation in front of the teacher or class and be assessed by a rubric on the degree of responding to and advancing topics, on use of strategies and vocabulary, and so forth. Finally, more formal quizzes and tests can also be given in the form of listening to taped conversations and answering questions about topic, vocabulary, responses, strategies, and so on. Teaching conversation can seem challenging because at first blush it seems as if there are few principles to guide the instructor. However, keeping in mind such strategies as preteaching vocabulary, establishing small groups, and teaching conversational strategies, there is plenty to teach and do in the conversation class! P.S. If you enjoyed this article, please help spread it by clicking one of those sharing buttons below. And if you are interested in more, you should follow our Facebook page where we share more about creative, non-boring ways to teach English. Get the Entire BusyTeacher Library: Dramatically Improve the Way You Teach Save hours of lesson preparation time with the Entire BusyTeacher Library. Includes the best of BusyTeacher: all 80 of our PDF e-books. That’s 4,036 pages filled with thousands of practical activities and tips that you can start using today. 30-day money back guarantee. Learn more 0 30,771 0 0 47,105 0 0 33,162 0 0 40,283 0 0 12,597 0 It takes a special kind of person to teach kindergarteners. I learned this lesson on my first day of teaching at an English academy for kindergarteners. I thought I was already prepared for the job because of my experience with elementary students... Could I have been more wrong? I quickly learned that teaching kindergarten requires you to find a special balance between patience and strictness. If you’re too laid back, you’ll never be able to control a class of 10 to 20 overexcited five-year-olds. But if you’re too strict, they’re going to be afraid of you and won’t want to participate in classroom activities. Fortunately, since that day I’ve come up with some methods to maintain an orderly classroom and ensure that students are comfortable, happy and engaged while successfully learning and practicing English. In this post you’ll find my top tips and activities for a high-energy but productive English kindergarten classroom. As a rule, kindergarten students don’t respond well to teachers who run their classrooms like drill sergeants. Kindergarten students have needs that are completely different from learners just a few years older. Issues that seem minor to elementary students feel like an existential crisis to a kindergarten learner. For this reason, it’s important to always listen to kindergarten students when they’re upset in order to earn their trust. You also to need plan your lessons a little differently to keep them following along and having fun. Here’s how you can do that. 1. Develop an ESL Routine (and Stick to It) The best way to control your kindergarten English class isn’t to constantly reprimand them, it’s to create a routine and stick to it. Structure and routines tend to work well with young learners. Many find routines comforting because they always know what to expect, as well as what they should and shouldn’t be doing throughout the day. Try to base your routine on manageable blocks of time and make sure to prioritize application of English concepts throughout the day. Here’s part of the routine that I came up with when I taught kindergarten ESL students: Beginning of class — Teach the vocabulary word/sentence of the day and have students practice it 9:00 to 9:40 — Reading practice 9:40 to 9:50 — Questions and answers about the reading passage 9:50 to 10:00 — Break 10:00 to 10:20 — Conversational English practice 10:20 to 10:50 — Students complete one page in the conversational English workbook, then the class checks answers together 10:50 to 11:00 — Break 11:00 to 11:30 — Students practice the key grammar point of the day, usually something simple like the use of articles or verb tenses 11:40 to 11:50 — Song time (the students learn a new English song every Monday and continue to sing it for the rest of the week) 11:50 to 12:00 — Prepare for lunch (students line up, and in groups of three they wash their hands and grab their eating utensils) Getting your students on a routine like this isn’t hard, but you do need to be consistent and stick to it as much as possible, especially when implementing it for the first time. Once your students get used to it, they’ll know what to do and will participate more in class. Also, if you need a blank timetable template to help you structure your kindergarten classes, take a look at this one from BusyTeacher. 2. Gamify Classroom Management One of the biggest challenges that kindergarten teachers face is maintaining order in the classroom without coming across too harsh. Obviously, you don’t want to be overly strict and make yourself look like the headmaster from “Matilda,” but you also need to have your students listen to you. The best way to find the balance between being the fun teacher and the teacher kindergarten students listen to is to come up with fun little games that grab your students’ attention (while also getting them to participate in English). Here’s how you can do that. Call-and-response When students are being noisy, English call-and-response prompts are a fun way to grab their attention and get everyone back on the same page. Some example prompts are below. The more you practice them with the class, the more likely your students will stop talking and pay attention. For a truly gamified experience, you can keep classroom points on the board for every successful call-and-response interaction. “Eyes on me!” Clap your hands and say “eyes on me!” Have your students respond by pointing at you and saying “eyes on you!” “Who’s ready?” At any point during class, whenever you ask “who’s ready,” your students need to sit upright with their hands on their knees and respond with “I’m ready!” The Token Economy One of the best ways to motivate kindergarten students to participate and behave is by giving them rewards. Every time your students participate well in class, reward them with a token. At the end of the week or month, let them exchange their tokens for small prizes. With the token economy, you’ll want to come up with criteria students have to meet before receiving a token, so that everyone has the same opportunity. For this reason, I made the following requirements before I gave my students tokens at the end of a lesson: The student has to raise their hand and try to participate in three or more questions. The student can only be reprimanded one time for not paying attention in class. Students who fight with each other during the lesson are unable to receive a token. And believe me, kindergarteners are the first to know when you’re not being consistent or fair with your rewards! 3. Keep Kid-Friendly English Activities in Your Back Pocket A good kindergarten teacher is one who’s energetic and comes prepared with a lot of activities. Kindergarteners aren’t able to sit quietly at their desks for extended periods of time, so they really need to move around and have fun in order to get the most out of their English learning experience. Even if you’re teaching from a kindergarten textbook, it’s a good idea to have supplemental ESL activities waiting on the back burner just in case they move through your lesson quicker than you expected. Below are some ideas for activities that you can add in your lessons. Nursery Rhymes Nursery rhymes are great because they’re already geared towards kindergarten-aged kids. They’re also fun because they help the students practice simple English phrases, including routines, animals and days of the week, in a way that gets students excited and allows them to move around. If you’re looking for various nursery rhymes to include in your lesson, YouTube is loaded with resources. Two channels that are particularly useful for kindergarten lessons are Fun Kids English and Little Treehouse Nursery Rhymes and Kids Songs. With the rhymes and other songs on those channels, students can learn about shapes, the alphabet, numbers and a variety of other topics associated with kindergarten-level English. Telephone With your students standing in a single-file line, whisper a phrase into the ear of the very last student. That student will then whisper that phrase into the next student’s ear, and they whisper to the next student and so on. Once the sentence has reached the last person, they’ll say the sentence aloud, then the class will check to see if the sentence stayed correct the entire time. This is a great activity to practice pronunciation and is especially useful if you have a daily expression that your students learn. FluentU Incorporating fun but educational technology is one of the most effective ways to engage a classroom full of young learners. FluentU is an English teaching tool that you can rely on for entertaining videos that get language results. Its vast library contains plenty of videos aimed directly at children, and each video comes with interactive transcripts and quizzes to reinforce your lesson! FluentU takes authentic videos—like music videos, movie trailers, news and inspiring talks—and turns them into personalized language lessons. Flashcard Slap The game is one of my favorites to use with young learners. Kindergarten students especially love it because it gives them the opportunity to move around and have fun while learning English. To play this game, make flashcards that use the key vocabulary words and expressions you’ve been going over with your kindergarten students. You want to go with flashcards that use pictures, as most kindergarten students have difficulty reading—especially if their first language uses a different writing system. Place three or four flashcards on the board, with all but one being the correct card to choose from. In pairs of two, have students come up to the board with fly swatters (or something similar they can slap with) and say the vocabulary word or expression. The two students then slap the cards on the board and the first student to choose the correct card wins. If you’re looking for flashcards to download, or you’d just like some inspiration when creating your own, check out ESL-Kids’ flashcard section. Hot Potato Hot potato is another energetic activity that works really well with kindergarten students. Simply designate an object like an eraser, ball or anything that’s lightweight and easy to handle as your hot potato. While you play music, students pass the potato to the next person, and the student holding the potato when the music stops is expected to speak. The good thing about this activity is that you can modify it to cover a number of kindergarten-related English topics. For example, the student holding the hot potato can... Ask another student to introduce themselves Make a statement or answer a question related to the material they’ve been learning—examples include students saying their favorite animal, favorite food, time they woke up and more Ask another student a question Just make sure that the object is hardy and won’t break when dropped, because kindergarteners tend to get really excited when playing this game! As you can see, teaching kindergarteners English isn’t hard. You just need to be patient and willing to have fun with your students. If you want to teach a kindergarten lesson like a pro, you just need to be fair and consistent, energetic and plan activities that get them moving and participating in English. By doing this, you’ll be the teacher that kindergarten students listen to, as well as the fun teacher that they all love.

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