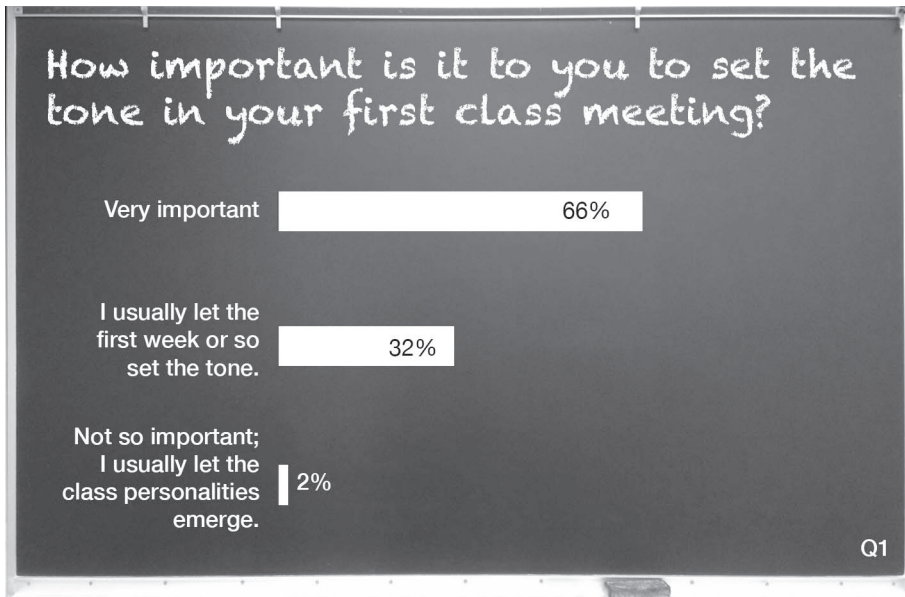


Chapter 1

Setting the Tone in the Classroom

Most teachers believe that it is important to set the tone of the class early on. This chapter deals with creating the right atmosphere in the first week or two of the course.

Figure 1



Icebreakers

Teachers often use some kind of get-to-know-you or icebreaker activity in the first or second class meeting. These activities can serve several purposes in setting the class tone and getting started with instruction. They tell students that they matter as part of a learning community, make students feel comfortable, and show them what they have in common with their classmates. They also help teachers gain valuable information on students' backgrounds, their lives (are they working? do they

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have families?), their goals or purpose for being in the class, and some of their strengths and weaknesses.

It should also be noted that some teachers do not use an icebreaker in the **first** class. Some icebreakers may seem like games, and we don't want our students to think they enrolled in our class to play games. Instead, many teachers use the first class for diagnostic testing and save an icebreaker for the second day. Doing this communicates high expectations: The students know that the teacher wants to evaluate their academic skills right away. Another strategy is to weave some instruction into the icebreaker to show students that they can learn while engaged in a task. In a class that meets for two or more hours, I usually like to accomplish all three: some assessment, some instruction (even something as simple as what a heading looks like in MLA format), and some icebreaker with a homework assignment that develops from the icebreaker.

"Students are most excited about a class on the first meeting; make it great. A more than usual amount of 'housekeeping' tasks might be expected, but also plan an activity that really gives students a taste of what's to come. Let them leave having learned something."

Darlene Branges

Many teachers' go-to icebreaker is to put students in pairs, ask them to interview each other, and then stand up to introduce their partners. These introductions should be kept short, especially in large classes. Students can be encouraged to tell one interesting fact about their partner, for example. Another strategy for this activity is to ask students to find out what they have in common with their partner. This lends some focus to the interview and introduction and is a simple and effective first step for turning a group of strangers into a community of learners.

It's also a good idea to get students out of their seats in the first class or two, especially if they have been sitting for a long time listening to the teacher or taking diagnostic tests. Many teachers like to use a Find Someone Who activity, either in a list or on a bingo board. These work

well in the second class meeting; you can use what you learn about your students in the first meeting to construct the activity.

Some of us like to have students stand in a circle on the first or second day of class as well. Students can arrange themselves in the order of their birth month, or alphabetically by their first names or the name of their home country. While they are standing, they may simply introduce themselves, or you may challenge them to memorize their classmates' names (as each student introduces himself, he repeats the names of all of the students who went before him). I usually tell my students that they need to see each other's faces right away, as communication doesn't take place while one is looking at the back of the other person's head. I tell them on the first day that they'll be working together in every class session, so it's important for me to have them meet each other as quickly as possible.

Cathleen McCargo notes that "establishing classroom community in the initial classes is extremely important." She writes that she "allows students an opportunity to learn about each other through structured pair interviews."

Other icebreakers allow students to share more about themselves. Some teachers ask students to discuss their names (perhaps what their name means or the significance of their name in their family or culture). Others ask students to write their names on cards or name tags and write four interesting facts about themselves in the four corners of the card before mingling and talking. And other teachers like to play Two Truths and a Lie.

If you use Two Truths and a Lie, it is best to start with yourself, not only to model the activity but also as one way to introduce yourself to the class. In fact, allowing the students to learn a little about you while you learn about them is important in setting the tone. Besides Two Truths and a Lie, I have recently been asking students to brainstorm questions for me in groups. I tell them they can ask me anything, but they usually don't get too personal. Once each group has brainstormed at least three questions, the class comes back together and they ask me the questions.

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I usually follow up with a writing assignment for homework: Students write a letter to a classmate who was absent, telling that student a little about me.

Rebecca Wolff reports that if she has a student who already knows her from a previous class, she has that student introduce her. She writes, “It is fun to see how much they remember about me, and it also opens up the class to questions and creates a comfortable tone.”

Megan Calvert introduces herself in an activity that gets students ready to interview each other: “I write answers to questions about me that I want my students to know in a web around my name, and the students have to guess the questions. There’s lots of opportunity for silly jokes, and it helps them think of questions they can ask their partners in a subsequent interview activity.”

And, finally, some icebreakers can ask students to stretch their thinking skills. One that I have used asks students to dig into their backpacks, purses, or wallets and to pull out three items. They then tell what those three items *symbolize* about themselves. I always model this first. I pull out my key ring, which has only two keys on it, my driver’s license, which qualifies me to ride a motorcycle, and my business card. I tell students, these show that I value a simple life, I like to take risks, and I love my job! I usually have students share their objects in groups, and then ask each group to report on one or two interesting objects to the class. This gives me the chance to say, over and over, “Yes, but what does that *symbolize* about you? How does that object tell us who you *are*?” Then the students write short essays about their objects/themselves. I like this because it pushes students in my upper-level composition class to think in an abstract way in the very first week, and it tells me who has this ability as well as who might need more of my attention as we move along.

In another activity to stretch students’ thinking skills, Lori Ward likes to ask students to come up with three items they would need to live on a desert island. She uses a think-pair-share strategy, allowing students to come up with a list on their own, to share the list with a group and then again with the whole class. The discussion that develops shows

students that, in her class, “it’s being resourceful that will be most important in helping students ‘survive’ the semester!” An activity like this also gives you, the teacher, an opportunity to praise students’ creative thinking—an important strategy for setting students up for success early on.

In fact, it’s a good idea to set students up for success in any first-week activity. Keep the task simple and gauge the students’ comfort level before launching into an activity. If you don’t think your students will be comfortable sharing personal information on the first day, construct your activity with that in mind. If you create an atmosphere of trust at the outset, students will be willing to take risks and share on a more personal level later on.

And one final consideration: Whatever you choose as an icebreaker, it’s important to consider whether your students are taking only your class or whether they are enrolled in two or more ESL classes at your school. If they are enrolled in more than one class, keep in mind that they are doing icebreakers in their other class(es) as well, and if they are continuing students who have been in your program before, they have surely done icebreakers before. This makes it important to “change it up” and use different icebreakers in different semesters and with different skills! Imagine how boring it must be to interview a partner three or more times in one week!

“I always make sure the icebreaker activity uses the skills in the class title. For example, students do a reading and writing activity for a reading and writing class. I always make sure the activity involves communicating with their classmates and sharing that information with the entire class.”

Janine Sacramone

Learning Names

If our students only knew how hard we work to learn their names! ESL teachers clearly understand the importance of calling people by their names in a learner-centered environment, and they know how much it matters to students that they know them as people. But learning so

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many names in a short time is a challenge! Teachers report many strategies for quickly learning students' names.

First, it's a good idea to review your roster before you go to class. If your institution provides a photo roster, that is a big help! Then when you call the roll in the first class, ask the students to correct your pronunciation or to let you know if there is another name such as a nickname that they'd like to be called. Repeat each student's name, and if necessary make a note in IPA (or a similar phonological system) on your roster of how to pronounce it. Showing students an eagerness to learn creates an atmosphere of "we are all in this together."

Some teachers like to have students wear name tags or to write their names in large letters on a "tent" for their desk. This works well to get you started, but students will surely lose their tents, and you won't want to use a lot of class time collecting and distributing them, so you have to memorize the names at some point.

Elizabeth Rasmussen takes pictures of small groups of students at their desks, holding their name tents. Of course students can opt out of the picture, but so far she reports that no one has. She relaxes students by telling them something like, "Ali, pretend you are telling the other two how to stay awake in class." That usually makes them laugh while she's photographing them. Then she tells them learning their names is her homework for the next class.

Most teachers use a variety of tricks to memorize names. I seem to be able to remember names if I associate name + country + hair. However, this got me in trouble early in my career when I taught a particular group of students—all female, all from Malaysia, all with their hair covered with scarves. I admit I never learned their names! More recently, I'm usually fine until someone changes a hair style or wears a hat!

Many teachers report that making a note of a physical feature helps them remember students' names. Look for something distinctive about the student and make a note of it. Really look at each student's

face. You can watch them and quiz yourself while they are completing a diagnostic test and they probably won't notice!

"I test myself after breaks and at the beginning of class by trying to say all their names aloud in front of the class. It's fun for them to watch their teacher be a learner, and it shows them that I care."

Megan Calvert

Another strategy is to use a seating chart. You can assign seats, but usually students will tend to sit in the same general part of the room—especially in the first week or two. Our ability to form spatial memories is quite strong! Georgia Mae Oates reports, "For some reason, my students usually sit in the same spots for the first few sessions, and in my mind's eye their name appears in the air above that spot!"

Elisabeth Chan offers this clever tip: Associate the student's name with his or her backpack. "They may change their clothes and seats, but usually their backpack stays the same."

Once you are on the road to learning the names, say the students' names as much as possible, and have them call each other by their names, or recall each other's names for you. Assign some written work in the first few classes. When students turn it in, you can say, "Thank you, [name]." When you are ready to hand papers back to the students, don't have students pick up their own papers. Instead, pass them back, trying your best to match the papers to the students (handwriting gives me another important visual cue!), and say the students' names aloud. Tell them you are trying to learn their names. Apologize for mistakes. Showing students that everyone works hard to learn, and that everyone makes mistakes when they are learning, helps to set the right tone in your class.

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“Encourage students to call each other by name. Also, help students learn to pronounce their names in an ‘American English-friendly way’ by using only the sounds of English and having one clear, primary stress. This is a great pronunciation lesson!”

Shirley Thompson



A crucial first step in creating a student-centered classroom is setting the tone in the first few class meetings. Teachers ensure that everyone gets to know each other as quickly as possible to create a collaborative atmosphere. Teachers learn students’ names and personalities as they assess their strengths and weaknesses with English and begin instruction.