



Your First ESL Lesson in China

A guide to making your first ESL lesson a success for you and your students

By Anthony Ward

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Enjoy it

The most common question I get asked is 'can you give me some advice?'. The first thing I say to this is enjoy it. Before we get too technical, it's important to note that ESL teaching is about having fun. The kids in China will love meeting you, and it's amazing what you can learn from teaching them. You will be nervous, but that's normal. The likelihood is that you will have adrenaline on your side, however it doesn't matter if you don't have the perfect lesson, as it's just as much a learning experience for you as it is for the students. What is important is that you reflect on your teaching and think what you can do better next time. Even the most experienced teachers have bad lessons. Just remember to be yourself and show kindness throughout your school as it goes a long way. Chinese people recognize that as an important quality of being a teacher.

It is also important for you to understand that every teacher is different. What might work for one teacher may not work for another. We should learn to respect that there are many ways you can teach and there aren't necessarily right or wrong ways (within reason). I encourage you to think big, take some educated risks and be as creative as you possibly can. The advice you will see in these documents is from five years teaching experience and from being formally invited to observe other teachers.



Greetings

Good morning class! A statement often used to begin a lesson. This may seem like a simple greeting; however, this can be really effective to ensure students understand the separation between break time and 上课 (shàng kè - to start lesson). Many teachers walk into the classroom and say their chosen greeting once without expecting a reply. This leads to some students not acknowledging class has started and therefore a lack of awareness from the get-go.

A simple but effective piece of advice is to clearly say 'good morning/afternoon' (or whatever you choose) and encourage the students to say it back to you. Nowadays most students in China have a basic understanding of English, so they should understand this and be able to reply back. It is unlikely that everyone will reply the first time, so it's a good idea to repeat. Repeat the greeting until all the students have replied to you so that you know you have all students' attention, and then it's now time to learn. This technique is widely recognized as making a big difference.

Be Firm but Fair – Rules

It is important, or some would say imperative, that you set the rules on the first day to set long-term boundaries. You hear teachers saying, 'I don't want to be a killjoy though' and the reality is, you are the teacher. Rules are expected to be enforced. The students will find fun in the fun activities but it's important they know when to stop. It's a balancing game, and students will respect you for that.

So how do you implement rules? For kindergarten and primary schools, there's a fantastic song with actions that the kids can do. Below are two videos, one led by a man and one by a woman:

Man - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQxK-Ah7has>
Woman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kii8Nr5UYpc>



Repeat the song twice at the beginning of the class and maybe a third time at the end. You can also repeat this in your next lesson as a warm up too, or every month to remind the students. Repeating is very important throughout all aspects of learning to reinforce standards and most importantly learning.

For middle to high school, there's also a video that you could potentially use to explain the rules:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWXPCP8t00M>

Following this, show a PPT about rules, then encourage the kids to create a poster with all the rules they need. The best poster gets stuck up on the wall and is used as a reference for when the students break the rules.

One good idea I've seen is when teachers get all their kids to sign a poster with the rules on it to declare they have read and understood them. The particular one I watched was a teacher who made it into a scroll and acted out like it was treasure and pirates - very creative. This can potentially last all lesson and introductions may be shortened to only a warm up.

Planning Your First Lesson

It is highly likely that the school will want your main focus to be speaking; therefore, your activities have to reflect that. As mentioned above, engagement is important and is often the driving force of ESL teaching. As a result, your activities have to include everyone. Teachers often fall into the trap of choosing one student who always puts his/her hand up, such as Kevin, while Bubbles (yes they do have interesting English names) is staring at the wall. Bubbles along with his 35 other classmates who are not Kevin at that moment are bored.

Single hands up can't always be avoided but the message is, don't rely on it. You have to ask yourself the question, 'does my activity engage all students?' And 'how am I going to engage everyone?'. The best option is group or pair work. A simple idea is to have a picture on the board and ask, 'What can you see?'. Number the students one and two and give them two minutes to speak to their partner. This results in students speaking while you are listening and understanding their ability.

These group activities can extend to matching pictures with words/sentences, putting the sentence in the right order, or ordering flash cards from biggest to smallest. There are so many things you can do in a group. Extra tip - A3 paper is great for team games such as 'write as many adjectives to describe...'



Following on to your main content, it will be clear that the students will want to know where you come from on your first lesson, so it is definitely

worth showing some pictures of your home city and/or country. Kids love seeing food so definitely try and include some of your local food. However, this is not the 'teacher show'; be careful not to make it all about you. There have been teachers in the past who have made their lesson a shrine about themselves including one teacher who showed pictures of them drunk at a festival. This is not acceptable. To avoid it being a 'teachers show', always throw it back to the students. For example

Teacher: 'This is my home city Newcastle, which city do you live in?'

Students: 'Chengdu'.

Teacher: 'Excellent! Can you name any more cities? Talk to your partner for two minutes and think of as many cities as you can.'

Extra Challenge

For higher abilities, can you name any more cities in England/USA/Europe/Asia capital cities?

This activity gets all the kids doing, thinking and most importantly speaking. Keep it quick, and don't linger too long for the kids to get bored.

Overall Structure

Don't over complicate your first lesson. Keep it simple. It is highly likely that you will have a maximum of 40 minutes per lesson. It might sound long, but it flies by. A basic structure would be a starter, main activity and a plenary. In regards to what I've discussed already, your warmer could be; going through rules, your main activity would be introducing yourself and getting to know the kids and your plenary could be a quick game that links to the main activity. Although these are some ideas, what's important is that the creative ideas come from you. Don't be shy to think outside the box and bring your character to the class, something that other teachers could not bring. Most importantly, enjoy it.

Extra Resources

Twinkl

Twinkl is an excellent quality website of resources that is widely used in schools across the UK and around the world. It has a wide range of topics including ESL resources and includes; ppt's,

worksheets, decorations and many more. Prices start from £4.49 per month, however the price matches the quality.

<https://www.twinkl.com/>

First Lesson Video

Alongside this document, I created a video that demonstrates some of the ideas explained. Here you will see some videos from inside the classroom that will help give you some first lesson ideas.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEriC6iDm80&t=20s>

Independent Activity

Separate a piece of paper into two columns. In the first column, title it as 'want' and the second as 'don't want'. The category is 'your first lesson'. Write what you want and don't want in your first lesson in each column. Think of all possible ways you can achieve what you want and how you can avoid what you don't want. When you have taught your first lesson, highlight what you achieved and maybe did not achieve. From that you are reflecting on your teaching to create better lesson for you and the students.

About the Author: Anthony Ward is an ESL Teacher at Tianshan No.1 Primary School (天山一小) in Shanghai. 2019 marks his fifth year working in education, during which time he has been an ESL teacher in Beijing and Shanghai and graduated with a PGCE in Education Studies with Modern Foreign Languages. Anthony has worked closely with Teach English In China for several years, as a Brand Ambassador, Camp Leader and content creator of many popular YouTube videos. He has extensive experience in team management and has presented many ESL lectures at universities across the UK.