3 Tips for Teaching English Firsthand Online

By Series Editor Michael Rost

As we move to online teaching, we may feel conflicted. We may believe that we are going to need to simplify our classes to such an extent that the students will quickly become demotivated. While there are challenges to creating motivating classes in all contexts, there are some concrete steps we can follow to make our online classes engaging and communicative. This posting offers 3 broad tips:

1. *Provide a positive class culture*
2. *Use a single portal for all course content*
3. *Flip the classroom*

These tips are referenced to the use of the English Firsthand series, though the advice can be adapted to other content.

Most of us have mixed feelings about teaching and learning online – I certainly do! My mixed feelings arise from the dilemma that preparing a comprehensive online course requires so much upfront planning and preparation, and most students will take advantage of only a tiny fraction of all that effort. "Normal" classroom teaching and learning, by contrast, is an iterative process. Even if you have an assigned textbook and curriculum, both you and your students can make ongoing, incremental adjustments — or "negotiations" if you will — in how to deliver the content and in how to assess the learning.

In addition to this preparation dilemma, I also have mixed feelings about online learning because of the style of interaction that is possible. Like most teachers, the most positive experiences in my career have come in the classroom, from interactions with students – from seeing up close and personal how my teaching can impact the lives of students. Online teaching seems at first glance like, well, just an echo of that feeling of exhilaration we can get from live classroom teaching.

But the conditions surrounding teaching and learning are always evolving – and have been evolving even before the pandemic struck – so we do need to broaden our repertoire of teaching styles. We need to embrace the reality that effective, even exhilarating, teaching and learning can and will take place through online interaction.

As series editor of the English Firsthand series since its inception over 25 years ago, I'm proud to say that each of the five editions of the series has evolved in response to shifts in the world of education – in technology, in communicative language teaching methodology, and in cultural shifts. If we view our current situation as another shift, another call for evolution, I think we can adapt and even thrive. To do this, we "stay positive," which means we need to focus on successful educational outcomes.

This Blog posting provides 3 broad tips you can use with the *English Firsthand* series, or which you can adapt to other content and methodology that has a communicative focus.

Tip 1: Build a positive "class culture"

As a teacher, you are the leader of your class, and all leaders create their own class (or company or family) culture, whether consciously or unconsciously. Class culture refers to the fundamental values and attitudes of the class. Through deciding to establish your class culture, you can build a successful, enjoyable atmosphere, setting a tone of mutual respect and maintain clear expectations. Your class culture also sets students up to hold each other accountable for maintaining a positive learning environment. A vibrant class culture will establish a "growth mindset", which sets the expectation that "we are all in this together" and that we all intend to succeed through communication, collaboration and support.

That may seem like a lot, a lot of responsibility on you — because it is!

And it may seem impossible — *but it's not!*

All teaching situations present us with what seem to be "impossible circumstances." I remember my first teaching assignment as a raw 21 year old high school teacher in the Peace Corps in Lomé, Togo, West Africa. I was assigned 5 classes a day, with groups of 80 to 100 students in open-air classrooms. We had no textbooks, and certainly no technology, not even electricity.

Of course, at first glance, it was "impossible" But with inspiration and guidance from my trainers about how to establish a "positive class culture" (though we didn't call it that back then), I was able to create a positive teaching environment. The students were responsive! Most of them bought in, they collaborated, they learned together. Of course, I needed to remind myself daily of my "mantra" for staying positive, staying focused on positive outcomes, trying out new ideas with the students. (There were days I could have succumbed to just being a caretaker, just going through the motions, taking attendance, enforcing rules, doing drills, writing stuff on the blackboard for the students to memorize, giving tests, and recording grades.)

Without a class culture, we just drifting...

So my advice here is: Focus on creating a positive class culture, with a growth mindset. Work on building this class culture every day, in small incremental steps. Keep your students oriented toward expanding their communication.

Amazing things are possible!

A few things I've tried in this area:

- Greet each student at the start of class – especially in online classes. Say their name, make eye contact, ask how they are doing.
- Play some relaxing music for the first few minutes as everyone gets ready to start.
- Begin each class with something positive — maybe an inspiring YouTube video, an uplifting Instagram post, a clip of heartening news, maybe a short lesson on giving compliments – and then have each student compliment one other person in the room.
- Use constant "participation gambits" during the class. You can have students write short answers in the chat box in your discussion room, for example. (Do you prefer vanilla or strawberry ice cream? – write your answer in the chat box.)
- Remind students of the goals of the class – especially at the end of each session.
- Use the 80-20 Rule: 80% of your feedback should be positive – rewarding positive effort and attitude shift.

Tip 2: Create a single portal for class content

Powerful content is critical for effective online teaching, so choose your content well! In the English Firsthand series, we have curated and developed and sequenced some very powerful communicative activities. So if you adopt this series, you will have a built-in reservoir of teaching material. Teaching material includes: pdfs of the activity material that students refer to during activities, audio files, video files, tests, and – for you – Teacher Manual guidelines, tips, supplements, references.

It's a good idea to prepare in advance how much content you will need for the course. *English Firsthand* for example has an online repository called *Pearson English Portal* that has all the teaching resources. If you don't have a published course with pre-set content,

you will need to create your own "portal", such as a Google Drive file that contains all of the text, Powerpoint, video, and audio files that you plan to use.

Teacher Resources in the [Pearson English Portal](#)

Be sure to provide everything the students will need to engage in your course. If you're creating your own material, I would recommend erring on the side of having more challenging content than you may think is appropriate — challenge and engagement are key! One of my mantras is:

> 66 Let the content do the teaching!

As the course leader be sure you yourself are happy with the content of the class you're going to teach. Happy, engaged teachers are important for conducting an effective course.

Tip 3: Flip the classroom

A "flipped classroom" is an instructional strategy and also a type of blended learning that focuses on student engagement and active learning. The flipped classroom intentionally shifts instruction to a learner-centered model in which time in the classroom is used to explore topics in greater depth and create meaningful learning opportunities, particularly through pair and group work. In a flipped classroom, students are initially introduced to new topics outside of the classroom — through audio and video-based assignments and tasks and through reading and writing tasks.

English Firsthand allows you to "flip" the classroom easily. Many teachers, particularly authors Marc Helgesen and John Wiltshier, have been using a flipped classroom model with the *English Firsthand* series for years.

If it helps, make a list. Take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the left, write "At Home"; on the right, "In class." Decide what you want the students to do on their own, and what you want them to do during online meeting times.

Here's such a list for *English Firsthand* 1:

At home, students can do:

- Vocabulary Building, with Student Book and audio (page 1 of each unit)
- Listening, with Student Book and audio (page 2 of each unit)
- Conversation, with Student Book and audio (page 3 of each unit)
- Language Check, with Student Book (page 6 of each unit)
- Real Stories, with Student Book and audio (page 8 of each unit)

In addition, at home students can do these bonus activities:

- Listening serial story, "Start Up" episode on video, correlated to language functions of each unit (on MyMobileWorld version of the course)
- Conversation Coach practice, on video, repetition of Conversation section in Student Book (on MyMobileWorld version of the course)
- Vocabulary extension exercises with Quizlet (on MyMobileWorld version of the course)
- Your Story, on video, correlated with Real Stories in Student Book
- Personal presentation, using free video software, such as FlipGrid

Start with small steps, to make sure the students aren't overwhelmed.

And be sure to get their feedback on which activities they find most useful.

In the classroom (that is, in the video class meeting), students do:

- Pair Work, with Student Book (pages 3-4 of each unit), using "breakout groups" in video meeting software platform (such as Zoom or Skype); each breakout group can be about 10 minutes in length, and students can then change partners and do the activity again (with authentic content, as in the English Firsthand series, task repetition stays "fresh")
- Group Work, with Student Book (page 7 of each unit), using "breakout groups", of up to 15 minutes in length, students can work in small groups to complete collaborative tasks
- Personal Presentations, an extension of the Real Stories section in the Student Book (page 8 of each unit), students can show their video presentations or do them "live" to the whole class, or to break out groups.
- Whole group "Q and A", "discussion" and "reflection": Students can ask the teacher questions about assignments, teacher can pose questions for discussion and reflection, particularly at the end of class; teacher can re-focus on language teaching points, and build "class culture".

The key is that class meeting time is used for creative output. The students should feel that they're the ones doing the work!

So remember, flipping the classroom is a strategy to "get more bang for your buck" in the live class meetings.

Do whatever you can to make your online class meetings engaging and enjoyable for everyone, including you.

"Vary the texture", just as you would do in a live meeting – inject different kinds of input onscreen (visual/graphic images and video clips, auditory/voice and music and sound effects, textual) and introduce different experiences during the class. The online class meeting should be more than just looking at your face (however attractive you may feel you are!).

Summary

Online teaching presents many challenges, particularly if we have to plan classes under duress. The corona pandemic has caused massive upheavals in the way we do everything, so it's important to adapt to a necessary shift in our way of teaching as well. We can think of the pandemic as providing an opportunity for creating a new age of global cooperation on all levels – teaching us that we need to share our global resources and our knowledge, in order to survive, in order to thrive, and in order to learn how to solve the problems of the future.
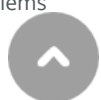
If we remember the basic principles of teaching, and remind ourselves of the reasons that we chose teaching as our profession, we will find a way to make online teaching meaningful and rewarding. As I often say to teachers in my teacher training courses, learning new technologies is helpful, but the success of your class will depend on your leadership and planning, as well as on your empathy with your students and the challenges they face. The three "tips" presented here can be used as guidelines for helping you prepare and carry out your new classes. Good luck! We're all in this together!

About the Author

Michael Rost is the series editor of *Impact Issues* and other ESL/EFL series published by Pearson, including *English Firsthand* and *Contemporary Topics*. He is also the principle author of Pearson English Interactive, a four-level fully online course. Dr. Rost has written widely on language education, particularly oral communication development. You can access his academic publications at [Google Scholar](#).