

# Experiences

## A Pocket Guide to **Career skills**

A practical guide to career skills  
for English Language Teachers

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# About the author



## Rachael Roberts

Rachael Roberts has been in ELT since 1989, working in Portugal, Brazil, Poland and the UK as a teacher, teacher trainer (CELTA and DELTA) and materials writer. As well as writing adult and upper secondary titles for other publishers, she is the author or co-author of *New Total English Intermediate, Premium B1+*, *Real Life Advanced*, and the most recent one – *High Note* for Pearson.

A firm believer in lifelong learning, Rachael has an MA in ELT from Warwick, and recently completed a Diploma in Coaching at the same institution. She also enjoys language learning (speaking five languages to varying degrees of proficiency), practising meditation, mindfulness and Tai Chi, and walking her extremely small and fluffy Schnoodle, Teddy.

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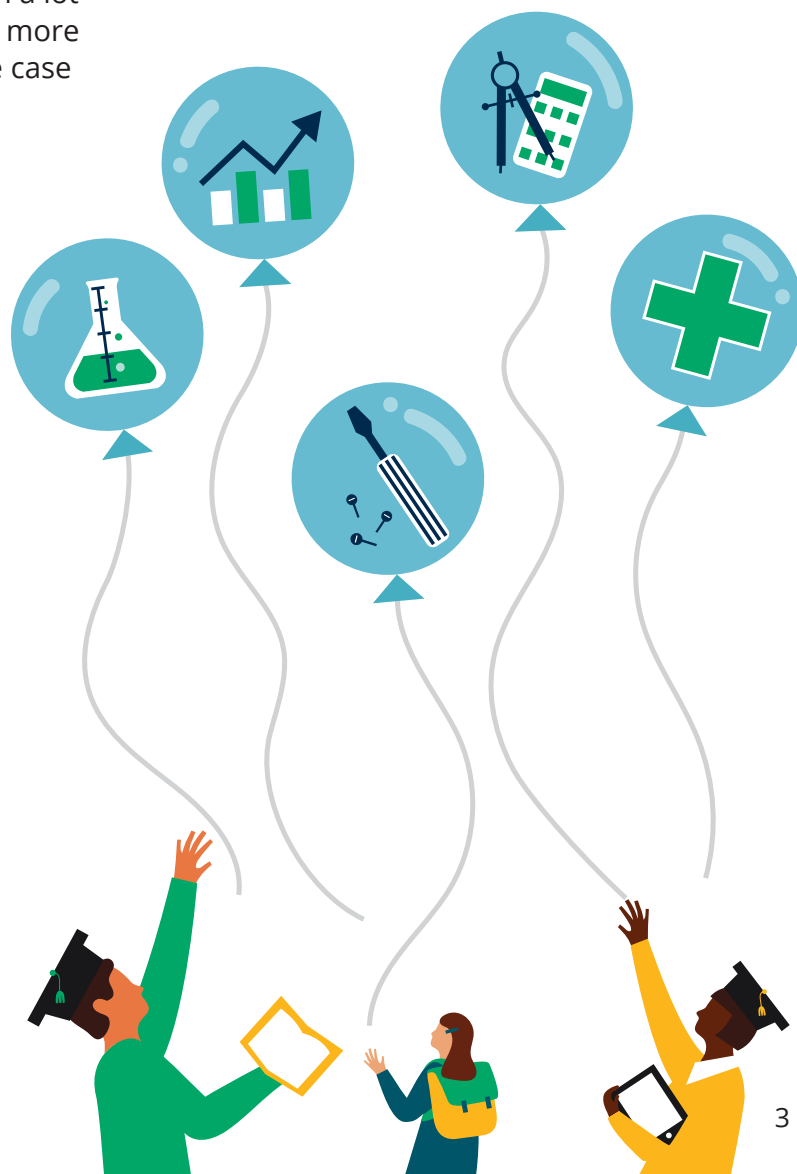
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# What are career skills?

Career skills are soft skills or qualities which are highly valued by employers. For example leadership, team working, communication, decision making, problem solving, goal setting, the ability to self-reflect and assess, creativity and drive.

While students leaving education these days are probably the most qualified they have ever been, employers often state that they are lacking in such skills. This may be partly because the world of work is generally becoming more challenging. Increasingly, employers are not simply looking for people who will work hard and do what they are told. They need, and expect, employees to be able to deal with a lot less predictability and to be able to work more independently than might have been the case a few decades ago.

Helping students to gain qualifications and knowledge, teachers need to be preparing their students for this rapidly changing world. We can do this through embedding skills such as communication, teamwork or problem solving into our usual work on language and language skills.



# Communication Skills

## What are communication skills?

As language teachers we are clearly teaching our students to communicate. However, as well as teaching them the grammar and vocabulary they need, we also have a bigger role in teaching them how to use language to communicate effectively in a range of situations.

For example, how to select language appropriately using the right register, or rhetorical techniques such as metaphor or irony and how to use language to convey meaning, considering any conventions of the genre or a logical flow or line of reasoning. Communication is, of course, always with others, and so we also need to take into account such skills as active listening, turn-taking and audience awareness.

## Some ways to bring communication skills into your classroom.

### Register

Encourage students to always consider who they are communicating with through a piece of writing or a spoken interaction.

Some ideas for raising awareness:

- ➔ Show them different examples of speech or writing and ask them to try and identify the relationship between the speaker/writer and the intended audience.
- ➔ Show them examples of inappropriate register, and get them to identify why it is inappropriate and how it could be improved.

### Metaphor

Raise students' awareness of how frequently metaphor is used in daily language and encourage them to note down examples that they find, perhaps organised by theme. E.g. weather-related metaphors. 'The homework was a breeze.' 'I'm a little foggy about what happened next.'

### Structure and organisation

We are generally aware that certain types of essay have fairly set structures, but genres of speaking can also follow these kinds of patterns. For example, telling an anecdote, or giving an excuse. We can help our students to notice features of different genres, so that they can reproduce them.

### Creating a line of reasoning

Teach students how to construct a good argument that will persuade and convince. A good way of doing this is to show them how each paragraph usually has a topic sentence which carries the main idea, supported by reasons and examples.

### Benefits of teaching communication skills.

- Students who communicate well are likely to produce better quality work because they are both able to explain things clearly and to ask for help when they need it.
- As employees, they are likely to work in teams more effectively and to be better able to step up and take on a leadership role.
- Communication skills also help us to develop better relationships with friends and family, as well as colleagues.
- Most analysts agree that the world of work is changing fast, and could be almost unrecognisable by the time our students reach their thirties. Traditional jobs which involve single physical skills, such as truck driver, are likely to disappear, and the jobs which replace them will require interpersonal skills, at which humans, rather than artificial intelligence are best placed to succeed.
- The world is also becoming a smaller place, meaning that there will be more and more cross-cultural interaction. Those with excellent communication skills will be in the best place to do well in life.

### Top tips

- 1 With such a wide variety of ways of communicating available to them, we need to make sure that students are comfortable and confident with more formal genres, such as presentations or work emails, as well as the perhaps more familiar texting and messaging.
- 2 We need to teach them to be able to analyse different genres of communication and to be flexible in the language and register they use.
- 3 We need to make sure we also build in a focus on more social and emotional communication skills such as active listening and giving feedback.



# Planning, Organising and Prioritising Skills

## What are planning, organising and prioritising skills?

A recent study concluded that employees who are disorganised cost their employers around \$11,000 a year. No wonder that the ability to plan, prioritise and organise is so valuable for employers. And that's before we consider the stress caused to individuals by their inability to manage their time, or to find key pieces of information.

As teachers we can help students to become both more effective, and less stressed and anxious, by helping them develop the skills to manage their studies, work and life more efficiently. For example, planning what needs to be done, how long it is likely to take, when they are going to do it, prioritising tasks and breaking them down into manageable chunks to avoid overwhelm, and dealing with the issues of procrastination, distractions and interruptions.

## Some ways to bring planning, organising and prioritising skills into your classroom.

### Help your students to develop good systems and habits

Don't assume students automatically know how to file away papers. Model and teach good practices such as adding dates, colour coding and so on, as well as sometimes allowing time for this in class. Encourage them to be consistent and systematic so as to build up good habits.

### Teach your students to prioritise

As children your students rarely had to prioritise- someone told them what to do when. Now they need to juggle homework from different teachers, and decide how much time to allocate to revising each topic.

Teach them to prioritise things which are important, but not yet urgent, so they are not always doing things at the last minute, or being distracted by things which seem urgent but which aren't actually that important.

### Help them develop strategies to deal with distractions and procrastination

For example, you could teach them to use the pomodoro technique- set a timer to work for 25 minutes with no interruptions, then take a 5 minute break, then repeat three more times before then taking a longer break.

### Benefits of teaching planning, organising and prioritising skills.

- Not every student's parents will teach them these skills. Perhaps they are too busy, or perhaps they don't have these skills themselves.
- Some students will have particular struggles with these skills due to being on the autistic spectrum or having ADHD or similar.
- These are essential skills for the vast majority of workplaces, and for the more independent study needed at university or college.
- If you don't help your students to develop these skills, it will ultimately make your life harder, as they will lose things, fail to hand in work on time, not follow instructions and so on.

### Top tips

- 1 Most of us are subject to the so-called 'planning fallacy'- a human tendency to underestimate how long a task will take. Encourage students to build in extra 'cushion' time to allow for this tendency.
- 2 A good way to overcome procrastination is to make a point of doing the task you least want to do first- sometimes referred to as 'eat the frog'.
- 3 Being accountable to someone else (not just the teacher) can be a useful motivational tool. If we promise a peer we'll do something we're much more likely to do it, so as not to let them down. Try and use this tendency by creating study buddies etc.



# Decision making Skills

## What are decision making skills?

Adolescence is a time when students are expected to make more and more decisions for themselves. This can be challenging, not just because they may not be used to taking responsibility for their choices and actions, but because their brains are going through a huge amount of change. Up until the age of approximately 25, young adults will tend to be guided in their decisions by the emotional and reactive amygdala, rather than the more reflective and logical frontal cortex, and the links between the two parts of the brain are still forming. This is why adolescents are more likely to act on impulse, get into trouble, or take unwarranted risks.

As teachers we can help them to develop these connections in the brain by actively encouraging them to take more responsibility and offering plenty of opportunities to make decisions, developing the characteristics of good decision makers, and teaching them the process of making a good decision.

## Some ways to bring decision making skills into your classroom.

### Maximising opportunities to practise decision making

As well as lengthier speaking activities where students have to make a decision, consider how you could adapt the discussion questions found in most lessons. Rather than asking a simple question, make it into a decision making activity by asking them to choose 5 items, or rank ideas in order of importance and so on.

### Developing the characteristics of good decision makers

Teenage students naturally have limited life experience to draw on; we can help them envisage possible outcomes by using stories in the news, or from history or literature to encourage them to consider the consequences of various actions.

We know that they are likely to be more inclined to take impulsive decisions, so we can teach them the benefits of listening to others, researching information and generally gathering plenty of information before making a decision.

People also make better decisions when they understand their own values and priorities more, so activities where students learn more about what makes them 'tick' can also have a positive impact.



### Benefits of teaching decision-making skills.

- Students who are able to make decisions are more likely to take responsibility for their own learning- deciding when they are going to revise for example.
- Our students are at a time in life when they have to make some big decisions about which subjects to study, perhaps where to go to university, or what career they want. Good decision making skills are therefore vital.
- It has been estimated that teachers make 1500 decisions a day. As employees, our students are likely to also have to make many daily decisions, and we can start to prepare them for this.
- By helping them to develop better decision making skills, we can also support our students in making better life decisions about the people they spend their time with and the actions they take. This is especially important to counter-balance the adolescent tendency to take risks and act without thinking.



### Top tips

- 1 When making big decisions, encourage students to go beyond a list of pros and cons. This is a starting point, but not really that helpful, as some pros (or cons) may be far more important than others. Try weighting each point by giving a score out of 5 for a more accurate reflection.
- 2 Be aware of the impact of various cognitive biases. For example, we mostly tend to choose our present comfort over any future benefit, meaning that we should take that into account when deciding whether to, say, go out for a run.
- 3 To show students the value of thinking through a decision and researching, getting advice and so on, try a classroom activity called Heads and Guts. First you ask them to make a decision immediately, using their gut instincts. For example, which items would be best to have if stranded on a desert island. Then take them through a process of considering it more deeply. Ask them to compare the two decisions and see the benefit of going through a process.

# Leadership Skills

## What are leadership skills?

Leaders are often thought of as being powerful, charismatic, extrovert, even domineering. But is that the only way to be a leader? In fact, many great leaders have been quite shy and humble- yet still able to inspire people.

We need to recalibrate the way that leaders and leadership skills are seen. Good leaders are not necessarily born that way, and leadership skills are definitely something which can be taught.

Good leaders are able to take responsibility and have plenty of initiative can motivate and inspire, they understand and empathise with those in their team, which enables them to choose the best person for a task, and they lead by example, showing trustworthiness, integrity and respect for others.

They are also able to think strategically, flexibly and creatively, and are willing to take feedback on board, as well as give others appropriate and constructive feedback.

## Some ways to bring leadership skills into your classroom.

### Draw their attention to different ways of being a good leader

Give them examples of people who may not fit the traditional leader role, but who nevertheless have led, motivated and inspired others. Consider the qualities of a good leader together and encourage them to evaluate what qualities they already possess, and which they could develop- and how to do this.

### Give every student opportunities to lead

Very often the same students (the so-called natural leaders) will always lead in any group work. Make a point of changing the leaders, by nominating individuals, picking at random or rotating this role.

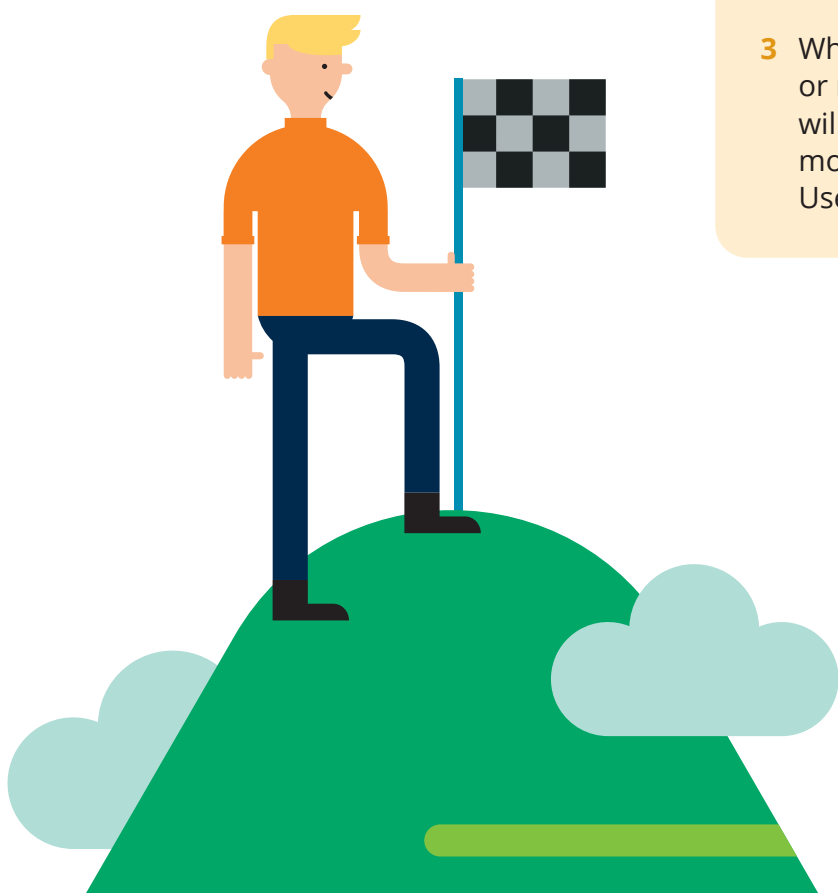
We can also give more opportunities for students to practise leadership by consciously stepping back from the role ourselves. Let them work out more for themselves, and resist the temptation to step in too quickly to rescue them.

### Benefits of teaching leadership skills.

- Realising that you have some of the skills needed to lead can create a boost in confidence, which is likely to ultimately lead to a higher standard of work at school and beyond.
- When students learn leadership skills such as empathy, and giving and receiving feedback effectively and tactfully, the class is likely to work more smoothly together.
- As you give students more freedom to lead each other and work together, there will be less pressure on you as a teacher to always lead every activity, freeing you up to carry out other roles, such as monitoring and giving feedback,
- Looking ahead, as organisations become less hierarchical, and 'flatter', there will be a greater need for everyone to possess some leadership skills.

### Top tips

- 1 Most students will not initially feel that they already have the qualities needed to be a good leader, but you can encourage them to see this as a process, and something they can develop over time. It is also not necessary to be good at absolutely everything.
- 2 Remember that many students are likely to have hidden strengths that are not necessarily evident in the language classroom. For example, they may have artistic or sporting skills. Try to provide these students with opportunities to teach others about their areas of expertise (in English), as a way of building confidence and self-respect.
- 3 Whether you see yourself as a leader or not, be assured that your students will. You have the opportunity to model to them what a leader can be. Use it wisely.



# Teamwork Skills

## What are teamwork skills?

Good teamwork is when different people can combine their varying skills and abilities in order to achieve a specific goal. Teamwork skills are those skills which enable you to work effectively with others. These will vary depending on the task, but might include:

collaborating, contributing, encouraging, helping, listening, negotiating, managing conflict, planning, problem solving and sharing ideas.

As with leadership skills, some of these qualities and abilities will come more naturally to some students, but all of them can be taught and encouraged to develop.

## Some ways to bring teamwork skills into your classroom.

### Encourage them to bond as a group

As well as the usual ice-breaker activities at the start of a new course, consider ways in which you can continue to deepen how much they know and trust each other. This can range from simple personalised speaking activities up to full team-based projects, where they need to rely on each other in order to succeed.

You can also encourage them to see themselves as a group by exploring features of the group as a whole. For example, a good activity is for the group to write a description of just why they're a great group to teach, to be given to a future teacher.

### Encourage students to consider the roles they usually play within groups

As part of any extended speaking activity you can encourage students to also evaluate how they participated within the group. What roles did they take, what could they have done differently, and how could the group have worked (even) more effectively together? You could also experiment with assigning an observer to make notes on the group process, and then feed back at the end (not necessarily mentioning anyone by name). This can be a useful role to give either the more dominant students, as they don't participate actively in the discussion, or the very shy students as they still speak when giving the feedback, but have the opportunity to plan what they are going to say.

### Benefits of teaching teamwork skills.

- Learning to work in a team can help students to build their confidence by discovering what they are capable of and learning from each other. By definition teamwork is much less teacher-led, so we are also allowing them to become more autonomous.
- Being responsible to other members of a team will also help develop grit and resilience, as they will need to commit to doing whatever is necessary not to let down other team members.
- Students will learn that sometimes it is necessary to put their own needs or preferred working styles to one side in order to achieve a shared goal.
- Employers often ask for examples of times when candidates have demonstrated good teamworking skills, and we can help students by providing them with these opportunities.

### Top tips

- 1 Be sensitive about requiring students to reveal things about themselves to each other. They are often concerned about being teased or judged. Allow options so that they can choose what to reveal to whom.
- 2 Help students to work effectively in teams by ensuring that they have the language they need to carry out key functions such as giving instructions, clarifying and checking understanding and negotiating.
- 3 Remember that it is completely normal, and almost inevitable that groups will go through some difficult phases. Dealing with this and sorting out any issues which arise can be a valuable learning opportunity.





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