



## 9 Ways New ELT Teachers Can Succeed

by [Laura Dzieciolowski](#)

Much like language production itself, teaching is a complex cognitive process that requires mastery of both practice and theory. All teachers experience some failures throughout their career and reevaluate to learn better methods. This is a natural part of the process, and, just like everything else in life, the learning never stops. I present to you the teaching hacks that I would tell myself if I could go back in time to the beginning of my career and speak to early 20s Laura, trembling in front of her teaching practicum students.

### 1. Value Your Time off Work

Having a social life and interests outside of work allows you to be healthy and happy, which in turn enables you to approach your work with a better mindset. You do not need to make yourself available to your boss, coworkers, and students 24/7 to be a great teacher. If you are not someone who is able to ignore work emails during evenings and weekends, consider having a separate email for work where you can pause your inbox. Gmail users can download Google's free extension [Boomerang](#) to accomplish this.

Also, remember to consider your time off when you decide what contact information to share with your students. For example, if you share a messaging app contact, you could very well end up receiving messages at all hours of the night or during your vacations. Valuing and protecting your free time is an important part of setting boundaries for your work-life balance, which is an important part of self-care.

### 2. Spend Less Time Lesson Planning

New teachers will often craft the most perfect and meticulous lesson plans for each class to feel safe and prepared. Often, these teachers stay in the office later than any of their coworkers. There is nothing wrong with being prepared, but there is a point where the amount of time invested in adding nitpicky details to a lesson plan stops correlating to a better lesson. Learn what that amount of time is because you will burn out if you spend hours and hours lesson planning every day.

### 3. Talk to Senior Coworkers

One of the most productive ways to save time lesson planning is to talk to your coworkers. Why reinvent the wheel? Make friends with senior and experienced coworkers and ask to share materials and insights on what lessons have worked before for students in this context.

Most people will be happy to help you and pass on their experience and knowledge. Your coworkers are the only ones who understand exactly what it is like to teach and work in your context.

#### **4. Use Textbooks Mindfully**

Textbooks are meant to be a resource to help the teacher facilitate learning and practice in class, not determine the semester curriculum. Because there is no one standardized textbook that can be adapted to every teaching context and proficiency level, it is the teacher's job to evaluate which content from the book best suits the class's needs and adapt it as necessary. A few important adaptations you should consider:

- Personalize examples to students' home languages and interests.
- Omit irrelevant exercises.
- Supplement important lessons that were not fully grasped from the exercises provided with other sources.

#### **5. Research What Your Students Need**

To best help students achieve their professional goals, a teacher needs to understand what students want to accomplish after the class and what skills they need to do so. Here are a few ways to figure this out:

- Talk to your senior coworkers about what students in the past have needed, and to students about their goals.
- Give your students a needs analysis survey at the beginning of class.
- Check the job adverts or university requirements for studying abroad that your students are interested in.

Use the information you find to inform your teaching. If your students need to improve their speaking, scaffold them into having discussions and give them lots of time to speak in class. If the reality is that your students need to have a certain TOEIC, TOEFL, Cambridge or IELTS score to achieve their professional goals, set aside time in class to practice test-taking exercises. Focus on the most important skills that your students need to acquire to achieve their academic and professional goals.

#### **6. Create a Student-Centered Classroom**

Effective teachers know that communicating in another language is not simply amassing a collection of information, but rather developing a complex cognitive skill that requires a lot of practice. You can ensure that you are providing your students enough space to practice production by analyzing your lecturing time.

One way to reflect is to record your teaching. A general guideline accepted by the language teaching community is that a teacher's talking time should not exceed 30% of a lesson. Of course, the appropriate amount of time a teacher should talk depends on the objectives of a lesson and where it fits into the overall course (Nunan, 1991). In general, though, if you find yourself lecturing more than 30% of the time in most of your classes, it is probably time to

start incorporating more student-led tasks, pair and group work, discussions, and hands-on activities.

## 7. Be Understanding

Remember how hard it is to learn another language. To create new cognitive frameworks, the brain requires vast amounts of input and consistent practice over a long period of time. To expect that students will never make a mistake related to a new language lesson after reviewing it once in class is unrealistic and uninformed. Internalizing new lessons requires multiple reviews and a great deal of production practice.

To develop a solid foundation of understanding from which to draw patience, it is a generally accepted recommendation among the language learning community that a teacher should partake in the experience of learning another language themselves to at least a high intermediate level. Many job offers even make this a requirement. Whether or not it is required for your position, consider taking up the learning of a second language if you have not already; being intimately familiar with the language learning process—through personal experience—will help you better understand and empathize with your students, which will make you a better teacher.

## 8. Be Open-Minded

A beautiful part of being a language teacher is the multiculturalism and cultural diffusion that are inevitable in the profession. There are two great rules of thumb to collaborate tactfully with people from other cultures. The first is to never try to define other people's culture to them. Let people tell you what their culture (and identity) is and what it means to them.

The second is to avoid ethnocentrism: the belief that your own group or culture is superior to all others. Our responsibility as teachers is to help our students achieve their professional and academic goals. It is a good idea for us to reflect on whether we are keeping our national, political, and religious affiliations in check: Our students may not need or want to convert to our groups and ideologies to achieve their goals and be successful in their lives. Instead, we can teach our students agency by showing them how to respect differences between cultures and how to succeed as global citizens.

## 9. Get Involved With Conferences and Publications

Conducting research and presenting at conferences can seem intimidating and inaccessible to all but well-known publishers of the field with pages of quantitative data. The truth is that sharing a successful lesson plan with a handout or giving tips on a specific teaching context that you have experience with is also research (see: [this article](#)).

Start slow and build up. Copresent a poster session with a coworker at a local conference and work up to presenting alone. Many conferences have 101 workshop sessions meant to share tips with new teachers. Make sure to learn how to get research funding when possible from your employer to cover transportation, lodging, and conference fees. There are also plenty of publishing opportunities that do not require original research, such as the newsletters for regional associations for language teachers; TESOL's [TESOL Connections](#); TESOL's [interest section newsletters](#); or the quarterly journal [English Teaching Forum](#), published by the U.S. Department of State. Publishing articles and participating in conferences helps new and

experienced teachers alike develop professionally, become better teachers, and improve the teaching community.

The choice to be a teacher carries considerable moral responsibility: to help others develop the skills and knowledge they need to better themselves and the communities in which they live (Osguthorpe & Sanger, 2013). With the right mindset, it can be a noble and rewarding profession well worth its learning curve. Although experiencing some setbacks is inevitable while becoming a seasoned English language educator, by following these tips, you will be able to have smoother sailing throughout your career.

## References

- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for Teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Osguthorpe, R., & Sanger, M. (2013). The moral nature of teacher candidate beliefs about the purposes of schooling and their reasons for choosing teaching as a career. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 88(2), 180–197. [10.1080/0161956X.2013.775871](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.775871)

---

*Laura Dzieciolowski is a global teaching fellow at Tokyo International University in Japan. She graduated with an MA in second language studies with a double specialization in language teaching and program evaluation from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She has been teaching at Tokyo International University for 4 years and has also taught in Hawai'i, Spain, and Kuwait.*