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NEW TEACHER: FIRST LESSON SUCCESS.

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ANTICIPATION

You fidget nervously, mind-racing, heart-pounding, waiting for your laptop to ring with a highly anticipated and very important call. Any moment now - the penultimate minute ticks over.

What will they think of me? Have I prepared enough? What if I forget everything I have ever been taught?

You make yet another test call to check your brand-new integrated headset and mic one last time (again) and regret (again) that you didn't ask someone to help you figure out how to connect it all together wirelessly. You double-check the headset volume and turn it up yet another notch to make sure you don't somehow miss the call, which you won't because you've tethered yourself to your laptop via the never-long-enough but atleast-it-works headset cable. The glass of water, notebook and pen that you repeatedly remembered and then forgot – sit redundant out of your reach, as does everything beyond an arm's length.

Suddenly, and rather shamefully, the thought crosses your mind that a last-minute and definitely-not-your-fault technical problem could terminate the lesson prematurely. You could then relax, reschedule and prepare more thoroughly for next time – of course you would. Next time, you would be so much better.

Your fingers drum faster and faster on the dining-room table foreshadowing the inevitable but still alarming cacophony that is the Skype ringtone joyfully announcing itself through your headphones, making you visibly jump because you had set your headset volume to be extraordinarily loud.

You take a deep breath, try to recall some vague metaphor about being graceful like a swan, and attempt to regain some degree of composure whilst twitching your shoulders to count the rhythm of two full ringing cycles, before finally plucking up the courage to click on the bright-green video square and answer the incoming call.

And there on your screen, staring at you wide-eyed, wearing an expression that says both apprehension and excitement, and crowned just like you with a trendy headset and mic (but which look far too large for them), is the face of a young child.

In one-to-one tuition, where mutual expectations of the education service quality are justifiably elevated, it is essential for both student and teacher to experience a positive first lesson together – one that not only demonstrably confirms the teacher’s fundamental grasp of the student’s educational needs and their teaching competencies to address them, but also one which clearly establishes the tone, standard, and plan for the subsequent lessons – assuming there will be some.

For the student, especially if young and impressionable, poor educational experiences can sour their enthusiasm for learning. For the teacher, they can sour their enthusiasm for pursuing their dream of building a freelance teaching career, especially when cancelled lessons mean not only cancelled income but also a setback on the difficult journey to build their client-base and professional reputation.

Consequently, the stakes for the self-employed teacher to deliver an all-round great first lesson are high and it’s therefore of no surprise that you’re feeling nervous.

Suddenly, a nervous smile briefly flickers across the child’s face and in that same instant it’s simply everything you need to make you smile and relax too because, after all, you are their new teacher, and they are your new student, and your self-doubt dissipates because you know how much you love teaching and you know that this first lesson is going to be superb because you have prepared enough and you know you’ve got this.

REFLECTION

Should you ever find yourself sat in an aircraft cockpit and the pilot casually offers you the opportunity to have a go at flying the thing, then there's a very empowering and yet succinct dialogue exchanged between the pilot and passenger to acknowledge the deliberate transfer of the aircraft's control:

Pilot: You have control.

Passenger: I have control.

And that's it! You're now in charge of flying the aircraft.

The phrase "I have control" also readily lends itself to aspiring teachers because it's the crux upon which the successful outcome of every first lesson also rests. Take control of the first lesson – the planning, the preparation, and the delivery – and the nervous energy you have been slowly accumulating will very quickly abate.

But let's also clarify that "I have control" absolutely does not mean tying yourself to the tiller of a very rigid lesson plan and fighting to hold a dead-straight course in pursuit of the set learning objectives no matter what eventualities unfold, or worse, unravel around you.

"I have control" is not delivering your lesson exactly as you planned and prepared it and being oblivious to the verbal and non-verbal cues continuously broadcasting from your new student.

On the contrary, it means flexibility, it means observing and processing every explicit and implicit feedback from your student and applying any necessary course corrections that will enable both of you to fully engage with the content and experience a positive first lesson together.

It's all about these ...

DISCOVERY

It's all about the student. Of course, you must introduce yourself and share a little relatable information that may interest them, but only briefly. Your goal is to learn as much as you can about them so that you can understand how they learn best, what their interests and aspirations are (from which you can create more interesting vehicles and contexts for your lessons), their educational strengths, weaknesses and needs, and how you are going to address those.

Keep an open mind so if they ask a question or start to talk about something that initially seems to be a little off topic, just go with it and see where it leads. Whether you're teaching English as a foreign language, mathematics, or history, if the student is talking freely and participating in the lesson then appreciate that's a big achievement and perhaps, they might also know something you don't – listen and learn from your student! If it turns out to be completely irrelevant to the lesson and perhaps even a defensive distraction technique, then politely thank them, mentally note this behaviour for next time, and then gently steer the lesson back on course.

CONFIDENCE

It's all about confidence. If the student lacks confidence, then they may focus much of their energy towards defensive behaviours such as wishing the lesson time away or avoiding any activity that they feel to be risky (such as choosing not to ask questions when they don't understand).

Take your time to cultivate an environment that will nurture the student's confidence. Remember to smile and don't be too serious: assessments can be rephrased as quizzes or games in which 'we' both participate instead of only 'you'. Grow their confidence, participation and motivation for learning through continuous support, assurance and encouragement.

Model the challenges you ask them to do: if you're teaching them to write a persuasive text or a literary analysis of a classic novel, then do it yourself first and start growing a portfolio of your own examples for future reference.

FLEXIBILITY

It's all about having a flexible lesson plan. One significant reason the first lesson with a new student is more challenging is because you are getting to know them, assessing their abilities and deciding the next appropriate activity according to the range of difficulties and diversities you have prepared, and all in real time.

My suggestion is to have sufficient content to hand for low, middle and high abilities and enough diversity of content for the different types of learners and their ages. But also remember that so much valuable and mutual learning can be readily achieved in the very first lesson by simply asking who, what, why, where and how questions and then carefully listening to each answer for clues as to where to steer the dialogue and which question to ask next.

The crux here is to keep a simple mind map note of the key responses and various threads so that you can tie up the loose ends and relate them back to the learning objective in your lesson conclusion. Start with a notebook until you can do this without.

Personally, I love those moments of circularity and clarity when you can join up all the abstract dots between seemingly unrelated content and interweave them with recall from previous lessons in order to construct a notion or reinforce a learning objective.

HONESTY

You don't have to know everything (because no one does) and you don't have to be perfect (because no one is). Of course, as the teacher you should have an excellent grasp of the fundamental matter of your chosen teaching subjects, but your role is equally to educate the student as to how they can learn how to learn for themselves.

If you don't know something (and you definitely won't), then be honest (as you would expect the student to be) and use it as a valuable teaching opportunity to find out the answer together. It is likely that an unplanned investigation will lead you down a new and unexpected path from which you will both gain some new insights, knowledge and wisdom – not only about the answer itself, but also about the process that got you to the answer.

DISCRETION

There's nothing worse that can happen to a student who is willingly answering a question to the best of their abilities than to be constantly interrupted, corrected and reminded of all of their areas for improvement by an eager-beaver teacher. This approach is definitely not going to nurture the student's confidence.

When assessing a student's abilities, only overtly identify and assess one specific aspect at a time and assess and record the remaining aspects discretely. For example, in a spoken exercise you can inform the student that you will: listen without interrupting, assess and record, and then feed back to them about their range of spoken lexical resource. You may also inform them that you will be listening carefully to their pronunciation, fluency and coherence, and grammatical range and accuracy but will focus on these in a future lesson.

On hearing this, although the student will be mindful of all the aspects under observation, they will be more likely to speak freely, safe in the knowledge that they won't be interrupted and lose their fluency and coherence.

ENERGY

It's all about energy. Okay, you may not always get out as much as you put in, but if you don't approach each lesson with energy and enthusiasm, then you shouldn't expect to achieve a positive educational outcome. Which also means that it's also all about wanting to and not having to. Of course, there will be times when you question your motivation for teaching and if you're feeling uninspired and flat, then you will not be able to inspire the students before you have re-inspired yourself.

When this happens, which it inevitably will, go back to the very basics and principles of teaching, examine your own values, remind yourself of why you're doing this (and no, it's not for the money, that's a beneficial outcome and not the primary purpose) and make your next lesson fun and simple to give you the opportunity to recharge.

KISS

Finally, and I'm sure you already have already accumulated a small library of these, there are ample mnemonics to help both the teacher and student focus when a lesson starts to get a little tricky or fuzzy, such as when trying to decide the actual problem to solve in a multi-stage mathematics question that has been wrapped within layers of extraneous information.

In addition to Keep It Simple Silly, these are 3 of my other favourites:

- The 5 P's: Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance (Mr. Streets, Hitchin Boy's School –Geography, ~1989).
- RTQ/ATQ: Read/Answer The Question (Dr Cowsley, Hitchin Boy's School – Mathematics, ~1991).
- The 3 P's: If you want to be good, you have to practice, practice, practice (Ray Bradbury).

CONCLUSION

Whether you are the student or the teacher, it's only natural to feel nervous before the first lesson. However, with careful planning and preparation and always being mindful of a flexible approach that places the student firmly at the centre of the lesson, the teacher can quickly create a supportive environment and establish a rapport that fully engages the student with the learning. The result is a positive first lesson experience for everyone.

Keep “You have control” in mind and the teacher becomes the swan that overtly and gracefully glides across the water with ease whilst under the surface they discretely and continuously assess the direction to steer and gently apply the necessary course corrections.

There's a saying about the second best time to plant a tree, and this is my own motivation for teaching: I may not be able to change the world today but I can change who I am and I choose to plant trees today to make the world a better place for tomorrow.

For examples of taught lessons and first lesson objectives for TEFL students you can check out my website here: <https://from-anxiety-to.com>.
