

Success Strategies in the Primary ELT Classroom: 10 Powerful Ways to Step Up Your Students' Learning Outcomes

Issue 1:

It's frustrating that younger learners often have problems remembering longer chunks of language or sentences. How can I help them?

Strategy 1: Backward chaining

How it works:

- Say the last word and get students to repeat.
- Say the last two words. Get students to repeat.
- Say the last three words etc. ...

Advantages:

- A powerful technique to remember longer sentences / chunks of words.
- Very useful in getting students to memorise tricky bits of dialogues.
- Trains students' memory skills and increases their confidence.

Issue 2:

It's frustrating that students forget new vocabulary so fast - faster than they can learn it. Any suggestions?

Strategy 2: Multi-sensory vocabulary teaching

How it works:

- Present a picture card, say the word and make a gesture for that word. Students repeat. Carry on with all the words - keep to the same order for some time.
- Say a word - students make its gesture.
- Students listen to the words with their eyes closed.
- Use 'auditory sub-modalities' - students listen with their eyes closed and repeat the words (exactly as they hear them).
- Use flashcards to introduce the spelling of the words.
- Lip-reading: mouth a word, students guess it.
- Visual anchoring (e.g. through numbers).

Advantages:

- Students will remember the words longer and better (synaesthesia effect).
- Helps students focus on the words, and pay attention.
- Flashing words helps to avoid pronunciation problems (interferences between written word and pronunciation).

Issue 3:

How can I stop my students from 'switching off' while one of their classmates e.g. reads out a piece of text, or says something? I think it's important that they learn to listen to one another - but how?

Strategy 3: 'I bet you won't...'

How it works:

- Before starting an activity, challenge your students to remember details of what others say during the activity.
- Say e.g. 'After the activity, I'm going to ask you questions about what your classmates have said. I bet you won't be able to answer more than 3 out of 6 questions!'
- Take notes of details in what students say / read out, and ask questions about them.

Advantages:

- This is a good challenge; it gets students to listen in a focused way and remember details of what their classmates have said.
- It's a fun activity.
- Can easily be varied.

Issue 4:

When my students act out dialogues, they often sound unnatural. What can I do?

Strategy 4: Private voice / inner voice

How it works:

- Read a dialogue out to the class (or play the audio).
- Stop after every sentence. Get students to echo (to themselves) what they have heard.
- Get them to work on the dialogue using their 'inner workbench' (A. Underhill) - e.g. using different voices to rehearse the dialogue internally.
- Don't get them to read out dialogues aloud!

Advantages:

- Students can familiarise themselves with the language of a dialogue before having to act it out.
- Helps them to find their own L2 voice.
- Gives them confidence - I can do it!

Issue 5:

Error correction is important, but it can be tricky. I don't want to discourage my students... how can I correct errors in a supportive way?

Strategy 5: Error correction: the fun way

How it works:

- When students make an error (e.g. the famous 3rd person s), write an s on a coloured piece of paper and stick it on the wall. Point to the paper on the wall whenever a student makes the mistake.

- After some time, take the paper off the wall, put a blank piece of paper (same colour as before) on the same bit of the wall. The next time a student makes the same mistake, point at the paper, smile and wait.
- After some time, take the piece of paper off the wall. The next time a student makes the same mistake, point at the wall, smile and wait.

Advantages:

- It's a non-threatening, supportive and student-friendly way of helping learners to avoid errors that keep recurring.
- Meta-message: You're OK, and there was a little error in your language!

Issue 6:

For some of my kids, reading and understanding is a huge challenge. They read, but they don't get what they're reading. What can I do?

Strategy 6: Visualising text

How it works:

- Have a student read a sentence or a short paragraph.
- Ask them to stop and tell you what they see in their mind, sentence by sentence.
- Ask them to give you more details about the scene. It can be a simple image, of a person, an object, anything that this sentence has put into their mind.
- Tell them there is no pressure because there is no wrong answer. It's just what's in their mind.
- Facilitate the process of making meaning by guiding students in fine-tuning their images.

Advantages:

- The problem with learning to read is often that students have difficulty making meaning out of what they are reading. They can read the sentences out aloud, but don't understand what the story is about, and this is where the technique helps.
- Helps students become aware of what's going on in their mind (meta-cognition).

Issue 7: How can I help my class internalise better the key features of a text type / genre I want them to learn to write?

Strategy 7: Dictogloss

How it works:

- Tell students you will give them a dictation, but they are not allowed to write while you are dictating; when you have finished, they can jot down words, chunks of language and parts of sentences.
- When they run out of ideas, they should work with a partner and try to reconstruct the text.

- Ask them to dictate the text back to you. Write the text (or a skeleton version of it) on the board. When students get stuck, elicit the correct word from them by ‘mouthing’ the word or giving them non-verbal hints.

Advantages:

- This technique helps students get a feel for the grammaticization of a text (or key parts of a text).
- It strengthens their self esteem - it’s them who create/re-create the text, while you act as a facilitator.
- It helps the students notice key features in a model text, so they find writing easier and more enjoyable.

Issue 8:

Grammar exercises generally go in one ear and out the other. Is there any way to make the language in them more memorable?

Strategy 8: Gradual deletion

How it works:

- Get students to dictate some sentences from a grammar exercise so you can write them on the board.
- Delete one word from each sentence at a time and get students to say the whole sentence.
- Carry on like this until all the words have been deleted.

Advantages:

- Helps students to notice grammar, and remember structures.
- A good memory-training activity.
- Helps students pay attention.

Issue 9:

Any suggestions as to how I can help my students to remember song lyrics more efficiently?

Strategy 9: Skeleton text technique

How it works:

- Play the song.
- Write the lyrics on the board - first letter of each word only.
- Get students to ‘read’ the lyrics with you.
- Ask them to ‘read’ them in pairs.
- Do a gradual deletion - one letter per line each time. Get students to ‘read’ the lyrics as if all the letters were still there.

Advantages:

- A good visual anchoring technique - helps students to remember a piece of text more efficiently.
- A good memory-training activity.
- Helps students to pay attention.

Issue 10:

How can I get my students to start speaking as themselves - I mean say things because THEY want to say them, not because I want them to or the course-book does?
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Strategy 10: Say what YOU want**How it works:**

- Invite students to think of things they want to share with you. Tell them that it's OK to make mistakes and that you will help with the occasional word they don't know.
- Be a good active listener and respond to what they say, not how they say it.
- Facilitate students' communication:
 - Use questions, prompts, empathetic strategies
 - Show interest, react to the content

Advantages:

- Students get feedback on their ability to communicate in their L2
- Helps strengthen their self image
- Creates a fun and personal classroom atmosphere
- L2 becomes a reality in your classroom