Friday afternoon, normally a quiet day at our school. I get a call from Adrian, the human resources manager at a company where we teach English.

Adrian tells me that some students have asked for a teacher change. Lessons are disorganised, boring and with no clear objectives. "Apparently, the teacher walks into class and starts talking about any random subject," he says.

I know this teacher well. We have been working with him for three years and I feel that a few minor adjustments will set his class back on track. I ask him to come over for a chat. Our meeting goes by quickly. The teacher confirms he does have objectives for each class but admits he never tells students what they are. I also discover that he tends to do long activities that take up most of the period. No wonder his students are confused and bored!

Split Lessons into Three

One of the better strategies for your lessons to come across as organized is to teach the way Shakespear wrote. Split your class into three acts to maintain students' attention. Who wants to go through a reading comprehension activity that lasts for one hour or spend the wholes class discussing the weather?

Act one: statement of purpose

The first part of your lesson can include many activities—homework correction, school announcements, warm-up drills, quick revisions, introducing new students, talking about the weekend—but there's something it can't do without: a declaration of your objective for the day. Therefore, always start your lesson with a statement of purpose.

Statement of purpose

Your statement of purpose will define how the rest of the lesson

develops. “This morning we’ll talk about the language of business meetings”, “As it’s my first class today we’ll spend some time chatting so I can ascertain you level and you can get used to my accent” or even “I have a plan for today but it’s a surprise so you’ll have to wait and see”.

Why do we need a statement of purpose? For one, it lets student know that you actually have a strategy for the day. This is no menial matter. As a school director, one of the more common complaints I get from students is that teachers don’t prepare their lessons well enough. “Our teacher comes in with a bunch of copies and starts doing exercises without any order. I think she needs to plan her lessons better.”

Of course, good teachers always have plans for every class, but they sometimes forget to tell students. Therefore, always explain your purpose. If you don’t, students will think there’s none.

Secondly, statements of purpose give students a mental map of what will happen. If they get lost they can always return to the subject of the day—as long as they know what it is!

Lastly, statements of purpose limit the scope of your lesson. Your aim today is to teach and drill ten new expressions for business meetings. If someone wants to throw you off track with a “When do you use *may* instead of *can?*” type question you can (or may) now answer “It’s an interesting point. However, as I told you ten minutes ago I want to concentrate on business meetings.” Say that when you haven’t stated a purpose and you’ll sound as if you’re trying to skip giving an answer!

Act two: something practical and something new

We’re at the heart of the lesson and there appear myriad possibilities. Show a video, try exercises, explain grammar, play a game. It’s your choice. However, no class is complete without something practical and something new.

Something practical

Students need to do *things* in class. By this I mean activities that set them in motion and force them to move their muscles, such as speaking, playing, writing, singing, drawing or walking. Physical activity releases tension, increases blood flow and allows for better concentration later on, when you need their attention for something new. Also, do not disregard kinesthetic memory, whereby people associate movement and content. Simplifying theory a bit, muscles have their own memory, so why not use that to our benefit?

Practical activities work well with revision, conversation, writing, games or drilling. Therefore, the *something practical* part of your lesson could include a debate, playing Pictionary, writing down examples, enacting dialogues, drafting emails, making a presentation, preparing a job description or role playing a negotiation.

Something new

This will probably be the core of your lesson. It may consist in teaching ten expressions for business meetings, introducing the present perfect tense or explaining the difference between *can* and *may*. Whatever you do, every lesson has to include something new. We are teachers, aren't we?

Sample plans

You don't need complex lesson plans to divide your class into three acts. Let's see a couple we have used in the past.

Sixty-minute class with five intermediate students on (why not?) *can* and *may*.

Act One, 10 minutes

- State today's purpose, which is to explain the difference between can and may.
- Revise homework.

Act Two, 35 minutes

- Show a video where students have to pay attention to the use of can and may.
- Explain the difference between both modal verbs and have students write them.
- Give them a cloze exercise.
- Play a word game with flashcards.

Act Three, 15 minutes

- Ask students to explain the difference between can and may to each other.
- Correct any misconception, repeat the explanation and tell them what they've learnt today.
- Set homework.

Teachers teach! Therefore, do not fall short of this and make sure your students leave your class saying "Today I learnt this" instead of murmuring "Today? We practiced this and that but I can't tell you exactly what it is I learnt".

What happens at this part of the lesson almost always links to your statement of purpose (you promised those ten new expressions) so there's something I always do at this point—I tell students to write out what we are learning. A list of expressions on the board or in their textbooks is not enough. A read-aloud definition of the differences between *can* and *may* is not enough. They must write it all in their notebooks to help their memory, to allow them to revise and, last but not least, to identify exactly what it is they learnt today.

Act three: round it off

Now it's time to solve the conflict you stated at the beginning. What? You don't think you created a conflict? Well, you did tell the class you were going to teach them ten new expressions for business meetings. However, they understood "O my! There are ten expressions I don't know. How on earth could I go through a meeting without them?"

Ninety-minute class with four advanced students. The objective? Learn ten new expressions for business meetings.

Act one, 20 minutes

- Summarise last week's class.
- Revise last week's homework.
- Ask students about any future meeting in English.
- State today's purpose, which is to learn ten expressions for business meetings.

Act two, 60 minutes

- Explain the meaning of the ten expressions they'll have to learn today. Ask them to write them in their notebooks.
- Have them draft a dialogue with at least five of the ten expressions. Ask them to act it out.
- Role play a business meeting, keep a log on how often they use the new expressions and record the meeting on your phone.
- Play the recording and stop to explain major mistakes and to comment on the use of the new expressions.

Act Three, 10 minutes

- Have students provide short oral examples with the new expressions.
- Ask for questions and explain what they learnt today.

Hence, the most elegant way to close a lesson is to say "As I told you earlier, we have learnt ten expressions you can use in meetings. Any question? No? Let's set homework then."

Now that they know what they learnt they will be satisfied for a job well done and you'll feel satisfied too. What's better than a nicely finished, well rounded lesson?

ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS

Want to improve your English? Learn at your office with English for Business. Contact us at www.englishforbusiness.es or at 902 108 127.