

The Four Biggest Mistakes Made by Novice ESL Tutors

1. Huh?

Problem: The student can't figure out what the teacher is talking about. Therefore they can't learn.

New tutors sometimes fail to provide "comprehensible input." That is they start talking, but students don't have any reference points or ways to figure out what the teacher is saying.

Solution: In order to learn and remember, students have to be able to make a connection. Props, pictures and careful preparation help students make a connection.

Example: I once heard a new tutor stand up in front of her class and say to her absolute beginning level students *"This month we will celebrate Halloween. Halloween comes from two words, hallow and e'en which is a contraction of evening. So it means hallowed evening. On that night we let our hair down. I dress up as a witch. Be careful your kids don't get a sugar rush from eating too much candy."*

Obviously she was just a bit nervous and had forgotten who she was talking to. The students politely listened and understood not one single sentence.

If she had brought in some pictures and/or a pumpkin or Halloween decorations, students would at least have known what she was talking about and the props would have helped her to keep on track. Also, by preparing in this way, she might have figured out WHAT she wanted to teach. For example, with beginning students, you might just focus on the basic concept and date and a few simple vocabulary words: *Halloween, trick or treat, costume, witch, pumpkin.*

2. Did we learn that?

Problem: The student doesn't remember what you have taught.

Usually this is because the teacher hasn't paid enough attention to creating opportunities for students to practice new material. As ESL students learn new vocabulary and structures, they typically go through 4 processes:

Exposure: becoming aware of the new words, concepts or structures
Awareness
Memory System

Solution: Initial practice needs to take place at several levels. After material has been introduced students need an opportunity to try things out in a very safe and supported way. Then they need opportunities to practice with a little more independence. In addition, they need to be able to clearly understand how they can use what they have learned in their everyday conversations. They need to understand how they can transfer what they have learned to new situations. Later they will need to review it. You will need to plan for this practice in each of your lessons.

Example: The teacher is introducing comparatives—i.e., small, smaller, smallest. She introduces the concept with some clever pictures. Students repeat sentences after her. Then she moves on to the next topic: telling time. The following week, she is surprised when her students can't use comparatives.

There are, obviously, hundreds of different ways to provide sufficient practice in a lesson so that you can feel confident that students have really gotten it. Here is one example of a teacher using repeated levels of reinforcing practice. Each one of these activities would probably only take about five minutes, but each needs at least a little preparation in advance.

First Session: EXPOSURE

Introduce Material and Help Students Prepare to Remember

1. **Introduce the topic.** Use clever pictures, objects, a little dialogue or whatever else you can think of that is understandable and vivid.
2. **Teacher-Led Practice:** The first time people practice, they need to be supported. The best way is to start with an activity where it is almost impossible to fail. For example, have students repeat sentences after you or use TPR. This builds confidence as students are getting used to a new structure.
3. **Structured Practice:** Have students ask and answer questions about various objects: *Is this the smallest pencil? Which book is the smallest?* Usually, the teacher will start by modeling a sentence, then turn it over to the students so that they are asking each other the questions as well as giving the answers. Sometimes this can be done in pairs as well as with the whole group.
4. **Give Students a Storage System:** Make sure that students have a way to store and retrieve the new things they want to learn. For example, have them make flashcards, a personal dictionary, or give them a grammar chart to take home.

Second Session: Practice and Memorize

5. **Quick Review:** Do a quick drill and review to activate student's memories and to find out how much they do in fact remember.
6. **Reinforce or expand the topic.** For example, with comparatives, you may choose to write some words on the board and underline the endings. Add another

- word: *big, tall, thin, wet, old* etc. Model how *big* becomes *bigger* and *biggest*. Underline the endings. Ask students to come up and transform more words.
7. **Practice with Reading and Writing:** Have them write the lists in their notebooks or hand out a worksheet. (Not only is it useful to see the written form, but reading and writing aid memory and pronunciation as well.)
 8. **Active, student-generated practice:** Have them get into groups of three and choose a word to act out: for example one person will be *tall*, the next *taller* and the third *tallest*. (depending on their level, you might wish to assign the word.) Have them act it out in front of the group. Ask the group to guess what word they are acting out and which person is which. Encourage people to speak in full sentences: *Maria is tall. Dolores is taller. José is the tallest*. An activity like this is fun and lively and helps students to remember.
 9. **Practice to aid application and transfer:** Discuss ways they might use this in their ordinary lives: at a store they might ask for the cheapest, or a size that is larger. When chatting about the weather they might say, I'm glad it's finally a little colder. This can be a free brainstorming session, or if they are beginners you might pose a situation and get them to come up with the sentences. This kind of activity really helps students to USE what they have learned.. You might ask them to report back to you next lesson at least one situation where they heard or used a comparative outside of class.
 10. **Include review practice in the next lesson:** In the next lesson the teacher introduces telling time. She starts by having students tell her which hand is smallest. Later she asks them which time is latest, etc.

3. Blah, blah, blah...

Problem: The teacher dominates the classroom and does most of the talking. Students tune out or disengage. Even when they do pay attention, because they have had no opportunity to try speaking themselves, they quickly forget what they have “learned.”

Solution: You have to step aside and let the students do the talking. Naturally many students are shy and don't want to risk making a mistake, so you may have to work to come up with ways to encourage students to get talking.

Example: Here are some ways that some teachers have used to get students talking:

4. Are you sure we learned that?

Problem: Students don't remember what you have taught them.

Solution: There are several possible reasons why this might happen, but by far the most common is that there has not been enough review.

We cannot emphasize this enough:

Review, review, review.
Practice, practice, practice.
Practice makes perfect.
Use it or lose it.

The only way for students to become fluent in English is to practice using it. You can help make them confident enough to do so by providing many opportunities to review what you have taught. This is also critical when students' attendance is erratic. With regular review, the class can make progress.

Example: Here are some ways that some teachers have used successfully: