

## 50 “Best Practices” For Language Teachers



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“It’s a funny thing. The more I practice, the luckier I get.”  
- Arnold Palmer

Through practice and experience teachers get better. They get “luckier” in that the results of their classes are much better than those less experienced. Their classes are more productive and “learning full”. But teachers can speed up the experience factor by implementing “best practices”, the things that experienced teachers have come to do naturally.

Here are my 50 suggestions for being the best teacher one can be. Suggested further readings for some. You might not be able to do them all and that’s fine. Choose a few and focus on them, implementing them. It will make a big difference in the transactional playfield that we call a classroom.

**1. Get to know your students!** Make it personal, connect the curriculum to their lives. Make sure to do a needs analysis at the start of a course, even if ever so informal. [More .....](#)

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**2. Engage the "ego".** Promote pride. Give ALL students success. Give a sense of achievement and allow students to see “the invisible”, their learning. [More ....](#)

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**3. Keep it simple!** Seems obvious but too often our lessons are labyrinths and mazes which have unnecessary complexity. For students to learn language, they need clear, simple activities that achieve a measurable result.

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**4. Practice don't preach.** Show and model. You, reading a book during break teaches "reading" more than any lesson. When explaining what students will do, show, don't tell. Go through the activity, demonstrating it overtly and slowly.

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**5. Share yourself.** Teaching is personal. If you don't share some of your life, they won't. **CARE** and also, why should they share their lives . You don't need to share everything about yourself but a little, show who you are beyond, “the teacher”.

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**6. Make students think!** It doesn't have to be Jeopardy but get them learning other things besides language. Students learn language best not "head on" but when it is part of something larger, while learning other things. Don't think you can't do CBI (content based instruction) and still achieve your language learning objectives.

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**7. Give students responsibility.** Good teachers have students doing most of the prep and work. This can range from formally giving students duties in the class (switch these roles often) or just allowing students to organize how they will learn in and of themselves.

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**8. Go slow.** "Slow teaching" will be the new "in" thing in the future, believe it or not! Why? It works! Education is no longer about content but about digestion. Isn't it incredible and incredulous how students go through 3, 4, 5 textbooks but don't know much English? I did the same with 13 years of French, a new textbook each year but at the end knew almost nothing. Why? We went to fast. [More .....](#)

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**9. Provide structure.** Students need to know what you will do during each part of the lesson. Systems are good! You don't have to stick to it but having an agenda both you and students can follow is crucial.

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**10. Use hooks!** Engage students at the beginning of lessons. Great teachers teach inductively. Whole to the parts. Catch students' attention right at the beginning, prompt schema and it will make the rest of the lesson a piece of cake. [More .....](#)

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**11. Have an open door policy.** Teach openly and share openly with colleagues. We are all learning and developing. Have a "buddy teacher" and visit each others classes regularly or even swap classes from time to time. Shake things and open things up!

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**12. Use the whole classroom.** It is your home, use all parts. Get students out of their seats using the space, the board. Allow the students at the back of the room to hear you loud and clear by delivering part of your lesson there. You might even have a second teachers' desk at the back of the class.

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**13. Pow wow.** Make it a point to have a conference with each student. They need that one on one. It is the personal touch that is everlasting. Students remember how you treated them, long after they've forgotten what you taught them. [More ....](#)

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**14. Color things up.** Use pictures/photos! Context is everything and video/photos provide it in spades. Keep a photo library handy, they are invaluable for discussion activities. [More ....](#)

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**15. Promote community.** You are a family and support each other. Nurture that with a name, an identity. Build a team through team work exercises. As a teacher, learn with the students and do what the students do. Decentralize and delimit the normal power relationships in so many traditional classrooms. Get the class learning together as one. [More ....](#)

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**16. Use student names** as much as possible when talking to them. Names light up the brain and foster learning. It's true! Keep a class seating plan where you can refer to student names handy during the first few weeks. It will help you remember. Students really appreciate it when you show you know their name.

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**17. Teaching is acting.** Don't be yourself but be whoever it takes to get students motivated and learning. Truly. Don't believe the advice constantly stated in Teacher Colleges the world over, "Be Yourself". There is a grain of truth in it but it won't be very helpful if taken to heart.

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**18. Give students control.** Let them be the teacher! For example, why shouldn't students lead the class in TPR exercises? Why not make your classroom more like a sandbox than an assembly line? Why not negotiate class rules together?

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**19. Don't be afraid to "talk teaching" in the staff room.** Share what you are doing with other teachers. This will transfer into the classroom. Build supportive relationships in the school or find a school where you can. This is essential. A school is a learning community for both students and teachers.

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**20. Record student achievement/work.** Make portfolios, keep records and examples, display their work. You have to know A to get to Z. Make checklists of what language functions students can do. Share and communicate this with staff and parents.

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**21. Get "off the beaten path".** Take detours. Look for teachable moments. Connect the content to reality at every opportunity. It is all about learning and not finishing your lesson plan. What you cover is not important, it is what the students discover. [More ....](#)

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**22. Teach students, not the subject!** Learn more about differentiation and treat each student as "special". Study up on how special educators approach learning. Sticking to one "method" is madness and remember to teach to the lowest in the class. It is these students who need our help the most. [More ....](#)

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**23. Be holistic.** Teach language - don't teach "writing" or "reading" etc... The whole English language is the true curriculum. You can't teach one thing separate from all else. Despite how we cut it up, there are no "parts" to language.

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**24. Provide choice.** All students, young or old, appreciate and perform better when provided a choice. We all have our own strengths and students need to be allowed to find their own way to achieve our language objectives. It's the objective that counts and give students options, different ways to achieve it.

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**25. Have a philosophy.** You need a "why" to bear the inevitable, almost any "how" of a classroom. Read books, talk to others, write out a journal. Great teachers are reflective about their job. [More .....](#)

**26. Think global, teach local.** Use local topics and subjects in your teaching. Culture is an important tool to use and provide strong context by which language can be understood and acquired. Use a local weather map for example, when doing a lesson on the weather, not the standard UK one that textbooks provide. [More .....](#)

**27. Have an audience.** Language is always something we produce to communicate to another. It is an exchange. As such, students should produce language for an audience and a purpose. [More .....](#)

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**28. Communicate with stakeholders.** There are not just students in your classroom. Each student represents so many others who have a vested interest in their success; parents, siblings, relatives, support workers, administration, friends etc .... Learn who they are and reach out to them at least once and let them know you are there if they need to talk.

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**29. Use props.** Realia and props are vital in our classrooms. They are a bridge to “reality” and enliven any lesson. For example, puppets truly can bring down a students’ affective filter and get them more engaged and able to speak. Use props and make your lesson an event to remember. [More ....](#)

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**30. Be Fair.** So, so, so important. Students will forever hold it against you if you play favorites or are seen to be teaching only some students. Keep your “fair detector” and filter always operating – every moment of the classroom day.

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**31. Get Active.** One of the worst things about learning is “sitting”. Yes, I kid you not. It turns off the brain and will kill so many lessons. Get students up and out of their chairs from time to time. Plan this into every lesson, if appropriate, possible.

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**32. Use signals / signs.** Teachers need a large repertoire of signals. Things they do with hands, eyes, head, legs that quickly communicate to students expected behaviors. Use them often and have a great repertoire of them in your backpocket. A picture is worth a thousand words but body language is beyond words!

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**33. Have a plan B.** Yes, things will always go arye. Computers don’t work, photocopies get lost, students forget their textbooks. The best back up plan is having a “toolkit” that you can instantly reference. Short, simple activities that you can start in an instance. Keep them in a handy folder for reference or better yet, upstairs in your ever accessible brain.

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**34. Review.** Always review what you learned in a lesson. Ask the students to tell you what they learned today and help them to see that indeed, your lesson, their time, did have a purpose. Just takes a couple of minutes at the end of the lesson but it is invaluable. [More ....](#) & [More .....](#)

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**35. Realize you are replaceable.** It’s a hard thing to come to terms with but you are replaceable! Don’t think you have to be in the classroom 365 days a year or your students won’t be learning. Supply/Substitute teachers are a great change for a classroom – just prepare for them, a folder that clearly shares vital things about the class. [More ....](#)

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**36. Reflect.** You don’t have to keep a teaching journal or blog. Rather, just take

some time to think about how a lesson went and what you could do differently. Make this a conscious process for yourself while having coffee or just at the end of your day. This too is professional development! [More .....](#)

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**37. Pause.** Students need time to process a second language. Pause when asking questions or presenting information. Don't slow your speech! Just stop a little longer between sentences. And remember to confirm student understanding of important things by having them repeat it back to you in their own words – don't just accept a nod or show of hands. [More ....](#)

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**38. Don't sweat the small stuff.** Learn to let go of things. Each day is a new day, a fresh start. Don't let all the small troubles build up and effect the next day. It's a skill you have to develop in order to survive and keep your teaching fresh.

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**39. Be Flexible.** Teaching is “transactional”, a complex and constantly evolving series of ever shifting events and decisions. You have to adapt and be ready for any and everything. Learn to be able to “go with the flow” and not have everything be set in a straight line. It's the nature of the business.

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**40. Understand your ups and downs.** Get to know when you are run down and need a break. Have a life outside of school. Take care of yourself outside the classroom, so you'll be more useful and productive for your students inside the classroom. Keep intune with your own inner self. Also find a shoulder to lean on. [More ....](#)

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**41. Give and Take.** Teachers are best when they aren't authoritarian but rather channel students' demands instead of controlling them. Negotiate what happens in the classroom with students. Be approachable but also have your own limits. Students will respect that.

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**42. Go Authentic.** Use as much authentic material as possible. Besides students being motivated by this “real” stuff, they will be getting language input that is “from the horses mouth” and you'll be promoting their own ability to tolerate the ambiguity of language. [More ....](#)

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**43. Input first.** Focus on providing your students with a lot of strong comprehensible (at the right level) input. This is the foundation on which language development rests. Don't push production, speaking and writing, too quickly. Reading and Watching (video with substiles) are valuable sources of

input for your students. Don't YOU the teacher be the only source of input – you aren't a walking tape recorder! [More ....](#)

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**44. Get to know the real powerbrokers.** It isn't only the head teacher or the principal that wields great power in a school. Get to know personally and well the more important people there – like the janitor and the librarian. This relationship will prove to be so helpful and invaluable for you – trust me! [More ....](#)

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**45. Use the black/white board better.** This is still the “common ground” of any class and you need to use it effectively to support student learning. [More ....](#)

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**46. Decorate the classroom.** Yes, make the classroom “liveable” and your own. Also that of the students, highlighting their work, their learning. [More ...](#)

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**47. Promote student autonomy.** The goal of all educators is to have the students actively learning even when the teacher is not there. Self directed learning is the end game for us all and we should be promoting this through our curriculum design and lesson planning. Find ways to get students to be more independent in their studies/learning. [More .....](#)

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**48. Brush up on your content knowledge.** As a language teacher, you teach a skill and not a subject, however, knowing more about language and its salient features can help you in the classroom. Brush up on your knowledge of grammar, child development, special education, instructional design or so much else ....

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**49. Be a language learner.** See things from the side of your students and their shoes. Constantly try to do that. Learn the language of your students and show that you appreciate and value their own language. It will make a difference!

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**50. Have style.** Each teacher must find their own "way" and "manner". It takes time but discover and nurture this and make it your “strength” and core from which you twist and teach around. What's your belief system? How do you believe students learn language? [More .....](#)

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*Here are a few other posts related to “being a great teacher”.*



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