

# Reflections and Practical Tips on Teaching Students with Little Experience of English

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Having been a teacher for over many years, and specifically teaching students that are new to Norway for over 20, I have witnessed the challenges that English teachers face when working with students that have little or no experience of the subject. The purpose of this article is to share some reflections on working with such students when meeting them for the first time. I share some tried and tested practical tips that I actively use successfully in class, and I hope they will work in your classes as well. These tips are aimed at those students in the introduksjon/kombinasjons-

program, and those integrated into Vg1 English classes. It is especially at Vg1 level that teachers struggle to get students with little or no experience of the subject to a pass grade in the time they have to do it. The ideas below can be adapted to suit other subjects too. I use sub-headings as reminders of what I find most important to remember. *Top Tips* is advice given by students on what they need more of. A few quotes are included to give some insight into how students new to Norway experience being in Norwegian classrooms.

*«To be in a Norwegian school is very tough.*

*It is hard to understand the way of thinking.*

*Being active in class is hard because of the language»*

*(Vg2 student, student reflective essay 2019)*

### Build Solid Relationships to Gain Trust

The quote above is an example of how language can be a barrier for many students. They are so often seen through the lens of the Norwegian language, making their academic ability difficult to come to the fore. By spending more time than usual at the start of the year getting to know students, showing a real interest in who they are, and where they come from leads to their success. Teachers need to be culturally aware of the backgrounds of students, finding out about their culture, the languages they speak, and their educational background. It is also important to help students connect with each other. Such relationship-building is often seen as the “kontaktlærers” task, but all teachers have a responsibility when it comes to making students feel part of school.

As a rule before meeting students it is important to find out the number of different languages they speak. On the first day of class writing the word **WELCOME** on the board in all of the languages of the students gives them an instant feeling of being part of the group and how their home-language is valued. This is not always easy to find out so the students can write on the board themselves. Another valuable tool when meeting students for the first time is to give them a letter with information about the teacher, the English course, and what is expected in class. This is a nice way to break the ice and their reply gives a backstory to their experience of English. Once the letters are read, students write a reply with

their expectations, and are encouraged to write about their strengths and weaknesses. This information given helps teachers to differentiate work on an individual level. The task is also a great way for students to let teachers know privately if they have any learning differences like dyslexia, or don't like reading out loud for example. These letters can also be used for one-to-one conversations at a later point to discuss their English background. They also give a first impression of what level their English is since they are written by hand.

#### TOP TIP:

**Sit students with the same home-language beside each other**

*When I started Norwegian school I was quite lucky because in my class I had a girl who spoke my language and knew more Norwegian than me.*

*When I didn't understand things I asked her for help and she helped me in my native language.*

*(Vg3 student, Interview 2020)*

The quote above ties directly to the curriculum for English which states: *Elevene skal få erfare at det å kunne flere språk er en ressurs i skolen og i samfunnet,* (Core curriculum – Values and Principles for Primary and Secondary Education,

ENG01 04, LK 2020). It is an example of how to harness the strengths of students who share the same language. If teachers have language-passive students in class, which often happens, allow them to write in their home-languages first. They should sit beside a fellow class-mate with the same home-language so they can work together through conversation, reading and writing. This helps students become more active and produce some work.

#### TOP TIP:

**Start the class with a window of free-time**

At the start of class, giving students 10 minutes of “free-time” is a nice transition from the previous class. This can be structured time where students do subject/homework, read a book, or they can just chat with a partner. This gives the teacher the chance to check-in with those students that need some time to have things explained. The chat function on computers is a good way to have discreet contact with the students that need more support/explanations, as they reach out via chat themselves.

### Tools to Track Experience and Motivate Students

One of the challenges teachers face when teaching students with little experience of English is the gap between the new to Norway students and Norwegians in Vg1 English classes. It is not uncommon to

have students that have never had English together with students that have studied in English at university level in the same class. The dilemma for teachers is mainly for students with next to no English from before to get them to a pass level in Vg1.

The following tools below are useful when trying to find out more about students and their experience. They are meant to be used actively throughout the year so as to keep up on the progress students make. They can be used to have one-to-one subject meetings with students to keep a closer track of how they are getting on, or as ways to remind students of the goals they set and how they should try to stick to them. It is a good idea to print out the templates and put them into folders for each student so teachers can refer to them when having subject conversations.

### Language Maps

*Language Maps* are visual representations of how many languages students speak and how much they speak them on a daily basis (see Figure 1). Students are given coloured-card to make circles. They write down percentages of how much they think they use their languages in a day, and in what context. It could be oral, reading or writing. These maps are then used at a later point in the form of an informal conversation, a presentation, or just to show how multilingual students are in one class. Hanging up on the wall is important to do as students get to see the languages they all speak.

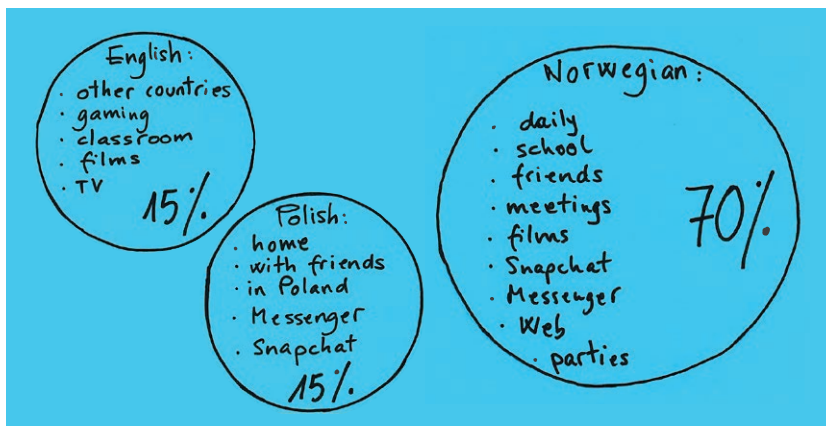


Figure 1: Example of Language Maps

### My English Portfolios

*My English Portfolio* is a personal record for students to share how much experience of English they have had previously (see Figure 2). By answering straight forward questions teachers get an insight into how much of the subject the students bring to the classroom. It is a starting point, but a good tool for finding age-appropriate material as it shows the level of work they have had previously.

To implement the portfolios students answer questions, preferably in English, but they can also write in their home-languages too. If they choose to write in their home-language, they can use translation programs. Alternatively they can pair up with a fellow student that speaks the same language to work together to answer the questions. This can be done by one student speaking and the other one writing down the answers. The main idea

How many years of English did you have in school before coming to Norway?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you remember from those classes?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you like doing most in English class?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you not like doing in English class?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you find easy?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you find difficult?

\_\_\_\_\_

Name a book you enjoyed reading.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name a film you would tell a friend to watch.

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your goal for this school year?

\_\_\_\_\_

How do you plan to reach your goal?

\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2: Example of My English Portfolio | Canva

is to get information on how much English the students have had previously.

### Circle Drawings

A *Circle Drawing* is a useful way to help students see the value of setting goals and empowers them to draw connections for success (see Figure 3). Often students think they can just reach their goals automatically by being a student at school. Circle drawings get the message across that students have to make an effort themselves to reach their goals. This tool can be used for a variety of topics, such as setting goals for one subject, what they want to study in the future, or finding a part-time job.

To use the drawings students are given their template for them to fill in, (copy up to A3 paper). They choose a topic they want to focus on. They write down bullet points of where they are now and where they want to be. The most important part of this exercise is the bridge linking both circles, as that is the key to how they can conceptualize reaching their goals. They have to reflect over what they need to do to get to where they want to be and write it on the bridge. Making students reflect helps motivate them, shows them what they need to do to reach their goals.

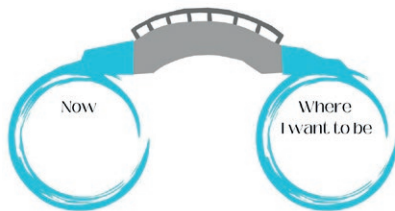


Figure 3: Example of Circle Drawing | Canva

School year \_\_\_\_\_ First Semester

Month	Topic	Student Action	Teacher Support
August			
September			
October			
November			
December			

Figure 4: Example of My Motivation Planner | Canva

### My Motivation Planner

*My Motivation Planner* helps students structure their time (see Figure 4). Often they can become overwhelmed with everything they have at school, and/or on a personal basis. To use the planner it is important to use it in conjunction with their *Circle Drawings*. They fill in their planner with realistic goals which help them take control of their decisions and something they can check back on to see if they are sticking to their plans. By connecting the *Circle Drawings* to *My Motivation Planner* students are actively taking part in their decisions, and can be held accountable for perhaps not sticking to them.

An example on how to use the planner is as follows: The topic for **August** could be Study a little every day. **Student Action** could be that the student has to study for the agreed amount of time, and keep

a study log. **Teacher Support** could be that the teacher checks-in regularly with the student to ask how they are getting on and if they need any support. Students don't need to have a new topic every month, the main part is the follow-up by the teacher to keep the student on track, and reflects back to building relationships.

**TOP TIP!**  
Give more pointers  
before tests

*More help from teachers when  
it comes to tests and homework.  
Many teachers compare us to  
Norwegians and forget that  
we need more help and  
understanding*

*(Vg2 student quote 2021)*



**TOP TIP:**  
**Reach out to those students  
 not asking for help**

*Teachers need to reach out  
 to students without waiting  
 to be asked for help*

*(Vg3 student quote 2020)*

**Differentiate your evaluation  
 - begin from where the students  
 are in experience**

One of the dilemmas teachers have in the English classroom, especially in Vg1, is that they have to make sure students with little or no experience of English pass the subject. In reality this is not so easy as these students are meant to be evaluated against a level they should be at after 10 years of English. Teachers are bound by a grade system as if students have started from the same place. Making it a challenge to pass students whilst remaining professional.

A way of dealing with this dilemma is to differentiate the framework of evaluation. Using *Bloom's Taxonomy* (Benjamin Bloom, 1956), is a great alternative to evaluate students to find their strengths (see Figure 5). Bloom in essence presents a framework that teachers can adapt for every student, allowing for differentiation. Instead of focusing on traditional grading systems like structure, grammar, spelling, Bloom's



Figure 5: Bloom's Taxonomy Verbs - By Nick Grantham - Creative Commons

breakdown, (below), can be used to find other abilities students have. An example is if a student creates a poster about a topic they have worked on. By using *Bloom's Taxonomy*, and choosing relevant criteria proves useful when setting a grade. Teachers can still use the traditional criteria for evaluation, but including Bloom's criteria can help students achieve a pass. **Don't feel the need to grade everything, but try to evaluate everything**, which means looking for anything that can help students reach a pass level.

**A final word**

Nowadays students with little experience of English in classrooms around Norway are becoming **the norm and not the exception**. *Utdanningsdirektoratet's Core Curriculum*, (LK 2020), gives clear guide-

lines as to the obligations teachers have as professionals to help students to graduate from school. This however is easier said than done, resulting in students sometimes not graduating from school. Students come to school with high expectations, hopes and dreams. For some new to Norway students, these hopes and dreams may never be reached due to not mastering subjects because of language and time. It is key to see students as individuals, and not as one group, with not being Norwegian as the common denominator. I cannot stress enough how getting to know students at the start of the year should be the main priority. Once this is in place students blossom and perform at a much higher level.