



BEGINNINGS

Some new ways of beginning the school year or the lesson or just a new mood

By Mario Rinvoluceri

I wonder how good you are at coping with transitions. Let's take a couple of transitions that teachers make more than 200 times a year: going from home to the workplace and going from the workplace back home. Are you better at going to school in the morning or are you better at coming back home in the evening? Which of the two transitions do you manage most easily, efficiently and painlessly? I have met people who find switching into 'school thinking' in the morning really difficult, while there are others who bring school home with them in the evening and cannot switch back easily into their home way of reacting, of thinking, of being.

If some of us find transitions hard, what about the students? In a typical Secondary School, they change both subject-matter **and** teacher every 50 minutes or so. Their whole day is a series of arbitrary transitions dictated by the timetable. How may some of them feel as they approach your classroom door? This will depend on some of the factors below and many more:

- how things are for them at home
- how their friendships are going
- what the weather is like today
- what lesson they have just come out of - Physical Education can leave people in a different mental and physical state from maths
- physical factors like headaches
- how they feel about learning foreign languages
- whether and how well they have done the homework you set
- how they feel about you in general
- how they feel about you at this particular moment.

All the factors mentioned above are fairly obvious and yet have you ever used a coursebook that provided you with transitional exercises, 'buffer' or 'breathing space' exercises to ease people into your class, to ease them through the very odd business of switching from using mother tongue to using the target language?

The rest of this article proposes a number of such activities that allow your students time to find their way back into your subject: language.

Four minutes recap time

When the students come in, ask them to put their bags and books down on the desks and to spend four minutes moving round the room and bringing back to mind what they remember about their last class with you. Encourage them to speak in the target language but accept mother tongue as well.

I learnt this technique from a teacher of English who worked in a Secondary School in Villefranche-sur-Soane, France. He told me that the milling and moving round period at the start of his class made for better focus and concentration later on in his lesson. He felt the four minutes were well spent.

Writing what is on your mind

Once the students have come in, ask those who feel like it to come to the blackboard and each write one thing that is on their mind, in their mother tongue.

Once there are 10 -12 sentences up on the board get the whole class to help you to put the sentences into the target language.

This idea, used by Tessa Woodward with her classes in Switzerland, allows the students to make a gradual shift across from thinking in mother tongue to trying to get their thoughts going in the target language.

Sitting down when you hear your own adjective

Once everybody has got to their place, ask the whole class to stand up. Tell them that you are going to shout out some adjectives and that they are to sit down once you say an adjective that describes how they feel. Here is a list you might use with an Upper-Intermediate class:

calm	interested	afraid
wide awake	expectant	happy
excited	annoyed	disgusted
heavy	anxious	optimistic
headachey	delighted	tense
restive	ready to work	fidgety
lazy	empty-headed	ratty
active	talkative	jaded
dreamy	relaxed	sleepy
contented	silent	radiant
peevied	bored	sexy



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You may find that there are some students you simply cannot find the right adjective for with the result that they stay standing. Ask their classmates to help you find adjectives till you can get them to sit down!

This short, neat exercise has many variations. Here are two:

- With near Beginner students you can use it to revise their comprehension of telling the time in the target language. Have all the students stand up. Now tell them they are to sit down when you mention the time nearest to which they went to bed the night before. (Monday is the best day for doing this exercise!) Simply tell the time from 9 pm to 3 am in fifteen-minute blocks like this:
9 o'clock, a quarter past 9, half past 9, a quarter to 10 etc. (Bedtimes will vary with the society you are in.)
- With low-level students you can work on understanding the colours in English. Ask them to sit down when you mention the dominant colour / colours in their bedrooms. Say the colours in pairs: white and grey, black and red, yellow and pink etc.

Enlivening the roll call

In some schools you have to check the names of the students present that day. Why not use the roll call time to revise vocabulary? Ask each student to shout out their name and a word in the target language that they really like. It may seem amazing but most students have words they like in the target language either because of the sound, the shape of the word on the page or some association or connotation. Ask each student to briefly explain why they like their word.

You can enrich the roll call with all sorts of language revision. If you want to revise ordinal numbers, ask each student to give their name and the date of their birthday e.g: Barbara, the twenty-second of March.

Silent beginnings

Bring the students together in a standing circle. You can do this even if there are desks and chairs in the way. Ask each student to mime the way they are feeling right now. Ask them to mime the feeling with a gesture. As each student mimes, the whole group mirrors their mime, their posture, their gesture.

For 3 – 5 minutes the students concentrate on each other silently, taking in each person's mood by imitating it with their own bodies. The power of this activity lies in the absence of language and the acknowledgement of others.

Find out something new about someone

Ask the students to leave their seats and work with someone they do not normally sit near. Tell them to find out two new things about their partner and to do this silently, with mime. After two minutes' miming ask the partners to check out the two things they think they have found out.

This kind of physical beginning to a class is very relaxing for students who like to learn by moving and by doing, who live strongly in their 'kinaesthetic' selves.

The weather forecast as a mood metaphor

In most Intermediate coursebooks you will find a unit that teaches some of the vocabulary of the weather forecast. A couple of weeks after teaching this kind of unit, start your lesson by asking a number of students in the class to describe their inner weather, their mood of the moment and their mood forecast for the rest of the day, using meteorological language. Give them an example: This morning the sky is grey and there is a light mist. Later the wind will clear the mist and there will be showers and sunny periods. This evening there maybe thunder. Obviously, if you have a class of 30 or 40 there will not be time to hear everybody's forecast.

A writing beginning

Ask each student to pair off with someone across the room from them. These pairings are merely signalled – no-one actually leaves their place. Ask each student to write a three-sentence message to their partner about whatever they want. Ask them to make each sentence exactly eight words long (a contraction counts as one word).

They then exchange notes and each student replies in two sentences, each exactly five words long.

Go round checking that they stick to the rules.

For students who are highly intrapersonally intelligent and who have strong introspective needs this is gem of an activity, as it allows them to stay within their own world for the first few minutes of your lesson. They do not immediately have to launch into the fray of talking to others. Writing to another person is halfway between talking to them and talking to yourself.

Why the restriction on the number of words? This is a simple Silent Way idea that forces the students to really pay attention to what they are writing and how they are expressing it. They often have to edit their sentences to get them the right length.



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Looking ahead through the book

Ask the students to open the text book two units beyond where you have got to. Ask them to look through the unit quickly noting down anything that strikes them as **good**, **bad** or **intriguing**.

Ask them to do this work individually or in pairs.

After four minutes call the class together and take notes on what features they have decided are **good**, **bad** or **intriguing**. Make clear to them that you really want to know their feelings and judgements.

When you come to teach the unit in question you may want to base your lesson plan on their feedback. It will certainly make sense to refer back to their feelings when you deal with the material in class.

This way of humanising the textbook comes from the work of Hans Eberhardt Piepho, a major figure in EFL teaching in Germany.

Some of my readers may feel that the above activities lack substance. They are short and quick by design as their purpose is to introduce and mood-change but not to provide the bulk of the lesson. To my mind the important thing about them is that they implicitly tell the student that

the teacher using them acknowledges and respects the student's mood and wants to know about it. The exercises signal to the students that this teacher is aware of their emotional life and wants to treat them as full human beings, not just consumers of foreign sounds, shapes and structures.

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Mario Rinvoluceri has worked for Pilgrims Language Courses, Canterbury on and off since 1974, its founding year. He is the editor of Humanising Language Teaching www.hltmag.co.uk His last three books are *Ways of Doing with Davis and Garside*, 1999 (Cambridge University Press), *Letters with Burbidge, Gray and Levy*, 1996 (Oxford University Press), and *More Grammar Games with Paul Davis*, 1995 (Cambridge University Press). His first CD Rom, *Mindgame*, came out in 2000.