



Tips for Teachers

The Value of Maps in the ESL Classroom

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ESL teachers often feel the need for a strong dose of variety in their classes, and find themselves searching for language activities that are substantially different from what their students are used to. I have found that activities using maps have a distinct and appealing quality that students respond to very well. In addition to providing variety, map activities benefit students by making them more aware of their surroundings and by providing practice in several useful language skills, such as scanning, giving and receiving directions, and conversation. In most English-speaking countries, enough copies of a regional or national map for an entire class can be obtained inexpensively or at no cost through government tourism promotion agencies.

Many ESL students who are not studying in their homeland actually know very little about the region they find themselves in. Map activities that acquaint them with their surroundings not only provide valuable cultural information, but may also benefit students by enhancing their attitudes toward their new or temporary home. Practical map-using skills can also be learned and practiced very easily, which will benefit any students who will ever need or want to travel.

This article assumes that teachers will be most interested in using maps of the place where they and their students live and that those maps will be easiest to obtain, but maps of other places can also be valuable and can be checked out from libraries. Maps can illuminate the setting of a novel that will be read by the class or introduce other class topics. And imagine the pleasure of a student who comes to class and finds that a map of his or her native country has been made a part of the lesson that day, and that he or she is the in-class expert for that portion of the lesson.

Maps can provide valuable practice in ESL reading, listening, speaking, and conversation lessons, and I am confident that they could be useful in other types of classes as well. There is ample room for creativity in inventing map games and

activities. Three of the map activities that my students have enjoyed the most are the following:

Map Scanning Game: This game provides a very different sort of scanning practice for reading students. The teacher prepares a list of place names from the map beforehand, and writes them one at a time on the chalkboard. Each time the name of a place is written, the students race to earn a point by finding the place on their copies of the map. This game works well both in teams and in individual competition. Struggling students often find this game especially appealing because it does not require any complex language use and they can compete well with the more advanced students. Between rounds, the teacher can make the game more interesting and informative with explanations of the meanings of map symbols and colors or introductions to the places to be searched for.

Giving and Receiving Directions: In this activity, the students begin by finding the location of their school (or any other notable point) on the map. One student, who has been assigned a destination by the teacher, gives directions to the other students, such as “Go south on Interstate 15 until you come to Highway 6. Then turn left, and continue on Highway 6 until you come to the city called Price,” and so on. The student giving directions cannot give any visual clues as to the location of the destination. The student’s score is the number of other students who “arrive” at the right destination (without having been told its name). The teacher should introduce the needed vocabulary, phrases, and map symbols before the game begins, and should also be the first one to give directions, in order to provide an example of how it is done.

Trip Planning: In this activity, groups of two or three students plan an imaginary trip using the map. The teacher may want to give guidelines, such as how many days the trip will last or what general area each group will visit, and the students decide the rest. When all the groups have planned their trip, they present their plans to the class one by one, explaining their choices of how to travel and what to see and do. The teacher may want to go around the room and suggest points of interest to the students while they are planning.

One reason why students enjoy map games and activities is that they are rooted in something very real: their surroundings and their world. And it is evident to me that students see the value of the maps, because invariably, whenever I collect them again at the end of class, some of the students ask, “Where can I get my own copy?”