Giving Effective Instructions

How to give clear and concise directions that your students understand:

—Below are three possible steps for giving instructions

1. Explain the task in short, comprehensible sentences
2. Demonstrate what you want
3. Use one or several comprehension checking questions (CCQs) to make sure your students have understood

Here's an example of confusing instructions, the simplified forms, and good CCQs.

Confusing: "Why don't you put your books away and just listen for a few minutes to this little conversation that has some nice examples of present perfect tense."

Simple: Get your students' attention, and then say: "Please close your books." (Demonstrate closing your book).

CCQ: "Are the books opened or closed?"
"Now listen to the clip" (Show the speaker and use a gesture for listen if necessary).

CCQ: "What are you going to do?" "Listen." "That's right!"

Tips for checking understanding

- Remember to ask questions (CCQ) to check they understand the instructions. "Do you understand" is not an acceptable question, as it simply asks but does not check.
- Asking students to explain back to you is far more effective and checks if they have understood
- Monitor to see if they are following instructions correctly.

Suggestions for making instructions effective

- Attract the students' attention.

- Make sure everyone is listening and not working on their own thing.

- Don't give out handouts or materials that may distract attention.

- Use simple language.

- Use language at a lower level than that being taught.

- Longer, more complex language wastes time, slows the students down, and is prone to misunderstanding.

- Be consistent.

- Use the same set of words for the same instruction (everybody, again, look, listen, repeat, say, turn to page…).

- With beginners, teach them the necessary language for following instructions.

- Use visual clues.

- Reinforce instructions with visual clues; realia (real objects brought into the classroom), mime, gesture and pictures.

- Write the instructions on the board (or use cue cards) if you want the students to do different things. Give one instruction at a time.

- Don't weigh the students down with numerous, lengthy instructions that will not be understood or will be forgotten by the time they get around to doing the task.

- Give a demonstration as an example. Usually, showing is more effective than telling.

Suggestions for creating a welcoming classroom environment

- Use gender inclusive language ("Alright everyone" "Hey friends" "Okay y'all")

- Have a few attention getters and make sure students are familiar with them

- Post expectations in both English and the students' native languages. This applies to any other important information you are posting in your classroom.

● Display student work on the classroom wall or create an online place to display student work.