

The Fire Method: Teacher as Fire Starter and Fire Tender

William Hoversten-Davis

UCLA: Extension: EDUC X 425.01

August 31, 2025

The Fire Method: Teacher as fire starter and fire tender

Reflecting on my schooling over the years, I recall teachers who fostered either devastating or magnificent learning experiences. The greatest difference between them was the amount of respect they accorded their students. In attempting to avoid their failings and emulate their successes, I've delineated a teaching method I call the "Fire Method."

In this method, the teacher is an essential component, providing enlightenment and inspiration. They have an active, crucial role in the efficacy of the students' learning experience, both respecting the students and garnering their respect.

The teacher is the fire starter, introducing concepts and activities and leading the class to better understanding of the target language. The teacher fulfills another function, however - that of fire tender whose enthusiasm fuels the students' motivation.

Furthermore, even the most otherwise brilliant teaching technique can be enhanced, I believe, when the students view the teacher as worthy of respect and trust. This bonding serves as an overlay to make any technique more efficacious.

In the Fire Method the teacher sees their students as colleagues, in the same vein as the Enlightenment "Natural Law" ideal that all are created equal. (Heady stuff, to be sure!)

The tone is uplifting, the appreciation frequent and hearty. A teacher can only guess at what dark secrets or shame may tug at their students. A teacher can be a guiding light and a warming flame that truly makes a difference in a student and in their life as they venture into the world.

In formulating this method I drew on my own teaching experience over the past year, which has seen students eagerly hurrying into the classroom to get good seats - and spreading good word of mouth. The men and women in this class are all former prisoners or gang members who are turning their lives around. Many of the teaching ideas I listed below have been tested successfully in this class.

I would also like to credit the sources of several other ideas. Desuggestopedia, for one, outlined the role of the teacher: "The teacher is the authority in the classroom. In order for the method to be successful, the students must trust and respect her."¹

More ideas, referenced below, come from Multiple Intelligences, Desuggestopedia, and the Audio-Lingual Method.

Other ideas may be incorporated as well into a lesson plan. But the core concept remains the same - the teacher's flame lights the way.

1. Role of the teacher: The teacher is the fire starter and fire tender, who initiates the exercises and keeps the students engaged. What's more, she or he models an attitude of positivity - which often becomes contagious. Thus students "catch fire," both in terms of conceptual "aha" moments and in terms of enthusiasm.

2. Mutual respect: The collegial respect the teacher shows for the students is reflected in their respect for the teacher and for each other. Granted, implementation of this idea may be difficult for teachers whose habit of lecturing "down" to their students has ossified.

3. Simple rules of behavior: Classroom management is facilitated by clearly stated and posted expectations of behavior. These rules call not only for, say, refraining from food and drink in the classroom, but for maintaining a supportive attitude. It is up to the teacher to gently but clearly make sure students meet these expectations - not with reproach but simply by appealing to their need to abide by the rules.

4. Familiar format: The itinerary for a class retains a consistent structure, e.g., having an opening warmup exercise, certain regular activities, and a familiar conclusion every time. Students can feel more at ease when new, creative and unusual content and activities are balanced by something familiar.

5. Short Segments: Any number of students in a given classroom may have recognized or unrecognized special needs around attention deficit challenges. Taking smaller "bites" of the material - and then returning to it later - may help keep more students engaged.

6. Inspirational quotations: Short quotations from exemplars can be used to illustrate the target words from the lesson. First, this broadens the view from the classroom to include positive influences in the wide world - and throughout history. Adding a brief biography and discussion can also help create a strong impression. For example, this quotation by Oprah Winfrey offered several examples of parts of speech and parts of a sentence: "We often block our own blessings because we don't feel inherently good enough or smart enough or pretty enough or worthy enough ... You're worthy because you are born and because you are here. Your being here, your being alive makes worthiness your birthright. You alone are enough."²

7. Examples from literature: This segment expands on the treatment of quotations to include sections from larger works, placed in context. The possible types of literature are wide, encompassing poetry, novels, song lyrics, speeches, essays, and more. But the effect is the same: examining works that not only contain target words but may have a positive impact. My inspiration for this idea was a "Teaching English through literature" class I completed through the British Council.³

8. Physical elements: Students can become more alert when there are physical components to the instruction, e.g., standing, stretching, and walking in the context of

the lesson. For example, students might hold a sheet with a word written on it - and be asked to walk around and find another student whose word is related to theirs. Once they have paired up, the teacher may ask them to explain what connects their words. The act of walking around adds variety and alertness to the class.

9. Sensory stimuli: Multiple intelligences should be employed via realia, writing, acting out, music, auditory, tactile, and even (if possible) the sense of smell. The inclusion of these intelligences can help cement the students' understanding.⁴

10. Spoken drills: Question and answer, substitution, and transformation drills are used in a supportive way - with spellings of words and phrases posted visibly as a deemphasized but internalized component.⁵

11. Active participation: Students are encouraged individually, as pairs, or as an entire class to participate in the learning activities. Participation can include questions and answers, and auditory, written, and physical involvement. The teacher should assist students gently in stretching their horizons and "getting out of their comfort zone."

12. Assessment: The teacher assesses students' progress by various means - visually by noting attentiveness, hands raised, heads nodding, audible verbal, audible non-verbal, and participation. In turn and talk exercises, the teacher can ask students what their partner said.

13. Reflection: This regular activity affords students a chance to unite in a brief moment of calm. Students are asked to sit quietly with eyes closed for as little as 30 seconds of peace. They may meditate, pray silently, or just "hold good thoughts." It can be an effective way to center them.

14. Asking for feedback: Here's an area where teachers must remain open to criticism from students, and take it to heart. It is incumbent on the teacher to ask directly for feedback, and be humble and open enough to hear and acknowledge it. Depending on the age, perception, and state of mind of the students, their advice could be of little value. But the sincere reception of the teacher to this critique can go a long way towards building real trust - which could prove invaluable in the future.

15. Appreciation: The teacher encourages students and acknowledges their contributions. Students who volunteer to come forward to show their work or address the class are applauded. When the entire class completes an exercise, the teacher may say, "Congratulations. Give yourselves a hand."

References

- 1 Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Oxford University Press. (p. 78)
- 2 "Oprah Winfrey Quote" retrieved from <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/876683>
- 3 "Teaching English through literature," retrieved from <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/training/courses/teaching-english-through-literature>
- 4 (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, pp. 191-195)
- 5 (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, p. 35)