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Typeset

QBS Learning.

Why I wrote this book

I have given seminars on teaching teenagers in a great many countries. At the start of these sessions, I normally ask teachers to engage in three rounds of reflection on their own work with teens. First, I ask them what they find rewarding about teaching teenagers. Typical answers colleagues have come up with include: the opportunities a teen classroom provides for them to respectfully influence young people's development; the fact that teens have general knowledge that teachers often don't (the latest trends in popular culture, for example); teenagers' familiarity with modern technology; their spontaneity and the fun it can be teaching them; and the opportunity to talk about 'real' issues with them and challenge them by discussing solutions to real-world problems.

Following on from that, I ask the participants to list the challenges they regularly come across in their teen classrooms, to compare their answers in pairs and to categorise them. The outcomes of this second round are often amazing. My rough guess is that 90 percent of all the categories of challenges that teachers mention is not about language learning *per se*, or what is usually regarded as language teaching methodology. Rather, it is about the specific challenges presented by the facts that teenagers are going through a phase in their lives characterised by not just a desire to be different from parents and teachers, but also by their search for identity, and the worries, fears and insecurities that come with that. How should teachers cope with these challenges?

In a final round, I ask colleagues to list their specific questions about language teaching methodology in the teenage classroom. I usually get quite a few questions on how to teach the four skills, but also on how to help the learners apply efficient learning strategies and what we can do to help them become responsible adults who have learned to make optimum value-based decisions for themselves in life.

These fascinating and wide-ranging discussions with colleagues over the years have shaped the outline of this book. It is about the methodology of teaching teens – and here we are focusing on the teaching of the four skills. But also it is first and foremost about issues that go beyond language and that have a significant influence on learners' willingness

to learn, and the qualities and outcomes of their learning process. In particular, we are looking at motivation, classroom and behaviour management and how we can help foster our learners' maturity. Each of these nine chapters starts with an introduction to the relevant topic and the significance of dealing with it in the teenage classroom.

A look at the literature available on teaching English to teenagers shows that first of all it is scarce, in fact almost non-existent. Secondly, I know of no book that focuses specifically on the issues that quite a few colleagues would seem to need support with. There are, however, some excellent books on what Laurence Steinberg calls the 'New Science of Adolescence'. They deal with educational and psychological issues in the teenage classroom and provide insights based on recent neurobiological research into what goes on in teens' inner world and how that impacts their behaviour and their thinking and feeling.

My own work on teaching teenagers has been significantly influenced over the years by the writing of educational philosopher Kieran Egan. Egan makes the point that a person's intellectual growth happens naturally, through the acquisition of certain intellectual qualities (he calls them 'developments') deeply rooted in our cultural history. In order for an individual's intellect to grow appropriately, the development of certain 'cognitive tools' is essential. The most challenging of these processes is what he calls 'romantic understanding' – a beautiful name, but often a very difficult phase in a young person's life. This is the time when they are overwhelmed with emotions and don't know how to deal with them – with all kinds of consequences for their behaviour and their inner world. In order to move on to 'philosophical development', what is required is the maturation of higher brain functions. It is important to note, however, that these developments are not age-determined; in other words, some young people move into their philosophical thinking frame as late as their twenties or thirties (if at all!).

Fortunately, recent research into teenage development confirms that the teenage years offer great opportunities for us as teachers to influence our learners positively. The tips in this book have been written based on the belief that the problems we so frequently come across in the teenage classroom are challenges that we can overcome and that the changes going on in the teenagers' inner world are opportunities for us

to help influence them and guide them towards becoming mature and responsible adults.

I have been involved in teaching teenagers since I started teaching some 40 years ago, first as a teacher in Austria, then as a materials writer, teacher trainer and classroom researcher. Most of the suggestions in this book I have developed and used in various classrooms myself. Others I have learned over the years from colleagues and made 'my own' by adapting them so they fit my own personal style best. I hope you will do the same with the activities in this book that you find useful and want to use in your own classes. I believe they will work best if you too make them your own. This will then help you deal with the more difficult teen developments in a way that feels familiar to you, which will in turn enable you to influence your learners' behaviour – and consequently the classroom dynamics – in the best possible ways.

For readers who would like to immerse themselves more deeply in the fascinating topic of teaching teenagers, I would like to recommend the following books. Not all of them deal with teaching teens directly, but they have had a great influence on my own development and they have informed my thinking and writing over the years.

Arnold, J. and Murphy, T. (Eds.) (2013) *Meaningful Action: Earl Stevick's influence on language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Egan, K. (1997) *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape our Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Egan, K. (2005) *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Faber, A. and Mazlish, E. (2006) *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen and Listen So Teens Will Talk*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Meddings, L. and Thornbury, S. (2009) *Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching*. Peaslake UK: Delta.

Puchta, H. and Schratz, M. (1999) *Teaching Teenagers: Model activity sequences for Humanistic Language Learning*. Pilgrims Longman Resource Books. Longman.

Steinberg, L. (2014) *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Stevick, E. (1996) *Memory, Meaning and Method: A View of Language Teaching*, Second edition. Newbury House Teacher Development series: Heinle & Heinle.

Streeck, J., Goodwin, C. and LeBaron, C. (Eds.) (2011) *Embodied Interaction. Language and Body in the Material World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thornbury, S. (2005) *How to Teach Speaking*. Harlow: Pearson Longman.

Zull, J. E. (2002) *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

A: Motivation

Teaching teens can be a huge challenge if they can't see how English will be of advantage to them in their future, nor indeed how the learning process itself can engage them and arouse their curiosity. The tips in this section are a balance of serious interactions and elements of surprise, fun and gamification. They will help you not only reach out to your learners through your own enthusiasm, but also create a warm and welcoming classroom atmosphere while you challenge and support them on their individual learning paths.

1 An energy booster to start the lesson

At the beginning of a class, teens can be sluggish. This activity usually raises their energy levels straight away.

I have frequently used this game as soon as the lesson starts, especially while I'm waiting for a latecomer; they can easily join in without disturbing the class.

- Ask the learners to stand up. Say you will ask them a question, and that those who know the answer can sit down. Although they can cheat by sitting down without knowing the answer, if you suspect that, you will ask them for the answer. If you're right, the game is over for them and they must take their chair to the front of the class and sit on it until a new game starts. If you're wrong, they are still in the game, of course.
- Ask the first question, usually about content from the previous lesson.
- In the first few rounds use some pretty challenging questions, so that not too many learners will get the opportunity to sit down straight away. Also, I don't usually ask a check question then. That raises the suspense and the level of fun for the learners.
- When learners sit down, look at them suspiciously. I do this in an exaggerated way and this usually creates quite a bit of laughter.
- Once everyone is seated, tell them to stand up again. Say that this time if they think they know the answer, they should tell their neighbour.
- Note which of the learners do this, then ask one of them for the answer. If that learner has got the answer right, they can sit down, as can any other learners who have got it right.
- As a follow-up, ask one of the learners still standing in the last round to take over from you and ask questions.
- In a very popular variation of the activity, ask questions about trivia instead of content.
- Yet another variation: one of the learners could ask the questions from the beginning of the activity. (This needs to be set up beforehand.)

Show your enthusiasm

2

We know that someone who yawns makes us yawn too. But it is less well known that the opposite effect can be used to boost our learners' motivation.

Not long ago, I met someone who attended the first English class I ever taught. 'Do you still like Leonard Cohen?' he asked. 'Yes, I do,' I replied, intrigued. 'Remember when you brought one of his LPs to class? I was 13. You were so enthusiastic when you explained this song to us. My mum always said that we learn for life, not for school – and that was the first time I understood what she meant.' I thanked him for the compliment and felt quite embarrassed. Because, to the best of my memory, my first few years of teaching were filled with trial and error (with an emphasis on error); not a lot to write home about! But I have always shared my enthusiasm for the subject with my learners. A lucky strike indeed – from the very beginning I got something right that research now shows is essential for motivating learners!

Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) say that, 'If teachers are engaged and passionate about their work and their languages, then learners are more likely to be too.' So:

- Show your passion for your subject. Use books, songs, images, realia and anecdotes to make your enthusiasm tangible. You can even exaggerate a bit. Nobody has ever complained about their teacher being too passionate!
- I occasionally say, 'Oh, I love this word,' when writing a new word on the board. Then I repeat it as if tasting something scrumptious and suggest what they can do with it. Of course some teens will say things like, 'But you love *every* word!' or imitate your enthusiasm, which usually leads to laughter.
- Sometimes, when I teach a concept new to them, I tend to say things like, 'This is an important moment. Understanding this is important for your future lives. Not many adults understand this.'

Mercer, S. and Dörnyei, Z. (2020) *Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.

3 Help learners see why learning English is important

As teachers we need to 'sell' our learners the idea that what we are teaching them will be of advantage to them.

One of the biggest problems for me as a young teacher in rural Austria was to help my learners find a satisfactory answer to the question, *Why am I supposed to learn English?* But these days, things have changed dramatically – many teenagers have contact with English outside their classroom through technology, social media and the web.

A good way of getting learners to reflect on their own motivations to learn English is a Consensogram. (For more on this, see the reference below.) Write up a series of statements or adapt these:

- If I succeed in learning English, I will have better opportunities to study and get a good job.
- People who have a good command of English are often admired.
- Once I'm at university, most of my reading will be in English.
- By learning English I might lose touch with my own culture and traditions.
- English is useful for playing online games.
- The better I can communicate in English, the more fun it'll be to interact with people from other countries and cultures.
- The time spent learning English takes time away from other important subjects.

Ask learners to express their opinion about each statement by giving three points (*I totally agree.*), two points (*This is kind of important for me.*) and one point (*I don't agree at all.*). Hand out coloured dots. Ask learners to stick them on a large piece of poster paper and create a rating scale in the form of a bar chart.

Ask your learners to work in pairs and discuss these questions: *What do you notice when you look at the data? What surprises you? What are your conclusions?*

Stobaugh, R. (2019) *50 Strategies to Boost Cognitive Engagement. Creative Thinking in the Classroom*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Make deals

4

If you offer a good deal to a class of teens – or to an individual learner – you are likely to impress them.

I guess it's with tongue in cheek that Nelsen and Lott (2012) say, 'Since teens can be so self-centred and expect the world to revolve around them, making deals can motivate them when all else fails.' But actually, whether it's teens' self-centredness or – as I suspect – that they feel surprised and respected when we offer them a deal, deals do work! Teens perceive deal-making as cool, something that normally happens between peers. But with a teacher? Wow!

A bad deal is something like, *We'll watch this film if you promise to prepare really well for the test.* We're giving them something now, and afterwards we have no leverage. And if the test results are disappointing, it's too late anyway.

So, offer time-sensitive deals: promise learners something if they do something by a certain time. *Last week you used your own language twenty-three times in my class. If you can get this down to a maximum of 12 by Thursday, we'll play X* (the game they really like) or *we'll watch a clip from Y* (the movie or series they really like). Or: *I'll do you a deal. We'll do a project about American rap music if you find another teacher who's willing to join us with their class.* You offer something motivating, and learners commit to taking action from the outset. By expecting them to persuade another teacher to join the project, you demonstrate your trust in them.

Sometimes it's good to write a deal down and have it signed by everyone. That makes the deal more 'official' and shows how seriously you take it (and your learners). Don't offer anything expensive; your offering a deal is often more important than what they actually get. Humour helps, too. For example, invite learners to lunch. On the day, put up a sign: '(Your name)'s restaurant'. Then have a picnic in the school grounds.

Nelsen, J. and Lott, L. (2012) *Positive Discipline for Teenagers 3rd edition*. Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale. Kindle Edition.

5 Turn the classroom into a special place

Your learners spend a lot of time in the classroom. Make sure it offers a positive learning environment that they like coming into.

Success in the language class depends mainly on what goes on '… inside and between the people in the classroom,' as Stevick (1980) pointed out. But other qualities – for example, whether the classroom itself looks and feels inviting – are important too, especially for teens.

- Giving learners a say and listening to their suggestions about changes you might make to their learning environment, even if they are small ones, can make a lot of difference. Have a suggestion box and encourage learners to use it to contribute ideas.
- Display a motivational quote on the classroom wall, e.g. *The happiest people don't have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything.* Leave it there for a few days before you ask learners to comment on it from their own point of view. Replace the quote with a new one after a week, or – even better – ask learners to find a new one.
- Ask learners to contribute to a 'role model of the month' project. Learners work in groups to prepare a poster on a special person who could be a role model. Ask them to research that person's life story, and to state on the poster why he or she is a role model for them. Each group then presents their role model, and the learners vote to decide which of the posters goes up on the wall.
- Assign responsibilities (such as furniture arrangement, waste disposal, board cleaning) to individual learners on a rotating basis.
- Make sure the classroom is pleasing. Ask learners to help you decorate the room; for example, flowers can change the atmosphere significantly, and so can colours.

Stevick, E. (1980) *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Gamify learning

6

We need passion and commitment from our learners. To instil those attitudes, add gaming to the learning.

Teens love digital games. They are all about being challenged and getting rewards, with elements of chance. Dopamine and endorphins are released. The excitement grows and the players feel good.

In an ideal classroom, all learners will be intrinsically motivated – they find learning fun, interesting and rewarding. But while our learners may be intrinsically motivated to do certain things, they won't necessarily be keen on English. So gaming elements can be helpful.

- Get a soft-tip/magnetic dartboard. Create question categories: content from previous lessons, sport, films, grammar, lexis, etc. Match each category with a section on the dartboard. For each category, write questions on index cards and points for the correct answer. Form pairs. A throws a dart, B draws a card from the respective pile. Play for, say, 10 minutes at the end of a lesson.
- Help learners gamify their home study. Write a to-do list at the end of a lesson, with points for each task. Before the next lesson, learners write their points on a wall chart. To add a chance element, draw a learner's name, then play *Paper, scissors, stone* with them and award points for beating you. That is hugely motivational.
- A chore can become a game. If studying a list of spellings, for example, they give themselves points: the faster they learn, the more the points. But they deduct points for using their phone while studying. This only works if they're honest with themselves!
- Establish two teams. Write/Project two choices on the board, one of them correct (e.g. spelling, *believe/beliefe*; or grammar, *she taught/ she teached*), for the learners to call out the correct one.

'Games and Your Brain: How to Use Gamification to Stop Procrastinating', https://buffer.com/resources/brain-playing-games-why-our-brains-are-so-attracted-to-playing-games-the-science-of-gamification