

An insight into teaching teens

Keeping teens on task and focused can often be more difficult than cooking the perfect boiled egg; you know, when you crack that egg open to find there's no runny yolk to dip your toast into. Oh the humanity!

So how are teens and perfect boiled eggs similar, I hear you ask? Well, as with making a boiled egg, the temperature needs to be perfect. By this, I mean the temperature of your class. You need to gauge how 'hot for the topic' your students are. It also takes time and patience. Don't rush that egg (or student), but don't take it out too soon (or cut your student off before they've finished).



In order to write this blog, I first had to do some research, which I conducted in the form of a questionnaire given to my teen students. The information I received back was both interesting and insightful, giving a more in depth view of what students want and need. For the next, one or two thousand words or so, we'll look at some of the more popular and interesting comments and information provided by this questionnaire.

English academies vs English in schools

When being posed the question “How is learning English in a language academy, different to learning English in primary or secondary school?”, I was only a little surprised to read the biggest difference is speaking.

Language academies are heavily based on interaction and use of the language, whereas primary and secondary schools focus more on copying from a book. It never fails to surprise me when a new student joins the academy and looks like a deer in headlights the moment they are asked to speak. One student even mentioned in her comments that students can sometimes be shy. When this happens, again, be patient. It's not that your student is being lazy or doesn't want to speak, they are simply not used to it. There are a few things you can do to help with this:

- **Speak to any new students before the class starts to get some information about them.** Joining a new class with new people is daunting in its own way, but when the teacher asks you to introduce yourself it can become a whole new level of scary. I'm sure we all remember team building workshops or starting a new job where you had to stand up and “say something interesting” about yourself. It was awful, no one liked it. Don't make your teens go through the same thing.
- **Introduce them to the class and get them set up in a pair to become more relaxed.** Set your pair up with someone who is more confident but also not the loud one of the class. This will make your new student even more shy. Start with a discussion or a Q&A exercise to help your student become more confident and sure of themselves before asking them to talk in front of the class. Remember, your student is new and doesn't yet know their level compared to others and may be worried to speak up through fear of making a mistake. Give them time in a pair to plan, then check their information before speaking.
- **Don't become frustrated when they don't speak.** This applies to both new and current students. Your frustration will pass on to them and make them less inclined to talk. Instead, guide them by asking easy-to-answer closed questions, then work your way up to open questions. Lead them, don't force them.
- **Give them time.** A lot of the time, students don't want to speak through fear of making a

mistake or embarrassing themselves. You can help by boarding the question instead of just asking it directly to students – this puts them on the spot and makes it difficult to give an immediate response. Having a pre-boarded question before class starts is always beneficial, especially when, in my case, teens tend to trickle into class before it starts (and after). Give students time to think about the question and look for vocabulary to help them express themselves. With really nervous teens, check their work and help them with any errors before they speak.

Speaking is an incredibly important part of language learning. It allows us as teachers to check any errors, misunderstandings or pronunciation problems. Teens get less of this at their day-to-day school, so try and practise this skill as much as possible in class.

Tasks

Which brings us on to the next area: What do students like learning about in class? What tasks energise and engage them and which bore them to tears?



It goes as no surprise that teens do not like working from a book. They find it dull, monotonous and boring. They do this at school and don't want to be doing it after as well. What the majority of them did say, was that they learned best when seeing the language in use, through videos, listening to people, etc.

One comment that really caught my eye was when a student said *"I like learning things that keep my head up, not down in a book"*. Yes, as with many academies, you may have to work from a book or syllabus and like many others you may have to source your own materials or a combination of both. Whatever the case may be, it is our job to ensure students are engaged and active. Always ask yourself how would they use this in their day-to-day lives? What are possible ways they could use it? What are topics teens would like learning about? I recently discovered through conversation with my teens in class that we all loved *The Walking Dead*. What better setting than end-of-the-world zombie-apocalypse survival to practise The Second Conditional? I + would + get the hell out of town!

What *did* surprise me was that students *do* enjoy learning grammar and vocabulary. They understand its importance and how they need to understand it to progress. However, the key word that rang out was **interesting**. Copying grammar down and filling in gaps is just not interesting for these kids, *whodathunkit?* Again, it's all about themes and common interests, keeping up with trends – my teen students told me the other day when talking about social networking that "Facebook isn't cool anymore". This led to an interesting discussion, (whilst secretly prompting them to use comparatives and superlatives), about what social network sites were cool and which were naff.

Extra input

I asked students what extra input they enjoyed having the most in class. Videos were obviously a clear winner. Everything from film trailers, funny adverts, interesting discussion topics to epic fails, they can't get enough. A few weeks ago we were practising modal verbs of deduction, where the final practise was to watch a series of what-happens-next video fails. Students had so much fun watching the videos and guessing what would come next they were using the language naturally and without really thinking about it.



In second place was music and, unfortunately, that doesn't mean classic bands such as Pearl Jam, New Order or Massive Attack. More hip hoppy, bip boppity stuff although, thankfully so far, no Justin Bieber or Miley Cyrus, so they have that going for them at least. The good news is that you can do activities where you don't need to listen to the full song, instead just the chorus, and even I have to admit they were catchy. To review reported speech and reporting patterns, I printed out the first part and chorus of popular songs and printed them out with a full sentence missing, with the obvious aim to listen and fill it in, for those of you familiar with *Nevermind the Buzzcocks*, it's similar to their *Next Lines* round. After that, we used the boarded reporting verbs to re-write the sentences. Some were good, such as "*John Newman asked if I could love him again, I told him I couldn't*". Some were a little strange: "*Sia threatened to swing from a chandelier, so I told her to do it*". All in all, it was a fun and successful task without using any books.

Lastly, we have projects. These came in all kinds of ideas from students including poster design, making a comic book strip, writing a story or creating a newspaper. I've seen seemingly tired teens perk up the instant I get the magazines, scissors and pens out. This is also a great way of getting them to work together and share ideas. A popular task is creating their own planet or island with their own sets of rules and ideas for what's there. Students then present their idea and the others 'visit' and review their stay.

Teachers

When asked which kinds of teachers helped students' learning experience and how could we improve, there were lots of different responses, as one student summed up very well '*I think a student needs a variety of types of teachers in order to learn in different ways and adapt better to different situations*'.



I asked some students to expand on this idea and this is what they said:

“Personality is important, they have to like what they teach”

“My teacher is a little strict but also funny, so she does a good combination”

“My teacher is like a friend who explains interesting things”

“I like teachers who are funny because when you are with them you interact more and class is more fun”

“Teachers who make different activities”

“The funny teachers are always better because they make the classes seem less long, and if we play games it's easier to learn”

“I like strict and fun teachers, because I want to learn, but with fun”

“I think both teachers I have are very good, they are so nice and they always help you”

“I like a teacher that explains the theory of the examples with videos”

So, not a lot of pressure then...

The important thing is to keep a balance. Classes can't be out of control but they also can't be under exam conditions: you need to establish the boundaries. You can even have your students help you with the 'rules of the class', a great way to start all new classes as well as reviewing and practising modals of obligation and necessity, although be prepared for them to say “the teacher can't give a lot of homework”.

What your teens want you to know

A few left this question blank, although the ones that did respond made some very interesting points.

A few of them mentioned how important it was that their teacher spoke English throughout the class so that they had to use it in their questions and responses as well as when giving examples. I don't let students simply shout out what they think the word is in their own language as mistakes and misunderstandings can happen; instead they must use it in a sentence to practise it and for me to check. Even if you speak their language and know the translation is correct, this is still a good thing to do with your students. They're learning English and so it's that word they should be using and remembering, not the one in their native tongue.

Another popular comment was for the teacher to interact with the students. They want you to get involved, they're interested in who you are, using yourself in examples, especially the funny and slightly embarrassing ones will remind your students that you are not a robot. Have fun with them and, in turn, they will respect you more.

One comment really made me stop and it is this final comment I will leave you with after rambling on for nearly five pages - your boiled egg (head) is most definitely over cooked by now, my apologies, but I hope some of the information in here was worth it.

“I would like that my teachers remembered when they were teenagers in class”

