

# A positive learning experience

**Paul Bress** gives advice to help guarantee successful teaching.

The phrase ‘a positive learning experience’ has become so clichéd that it’s now virtually meaningless. This is a shame because, essentially, it’s a potentially useful term. Teaching fads may come and go, but it’s the students who ultimately decide if their learning experience has been positive, negative or somewhere in between. This, indeed, applies not just to ELT, but to any learning experience, whatever is being learnt, and whatever the culture.

I’d like to suggest four Dos and two Don’ts for teachers. For each, I’ll try to illustrate my point by contrasting two different scenarios, providing examples where appropriate.

## Dos

### Do make the lessons relevant to the students’ personal needs and interests.

If the students in your class are mad keen on music, and you never use music as a topic, you will have missed a golden opportunity to get them to talk about something that truly interests them. But if you *do* give them the chance, you’ll probably see their faces light up. I know that this is pretty obvious, but it’s surprising how often teachers forget this golden rule of facilitating a positive experience.

### Do allow the students to be creative.

It is certainly true that the students need to practise saying the target language so that they can make themselves understood. They also need to be able to manipulate the target language so that they can use it accurately and appropriately. But, before they go out into the real world, they’ll need to have the chance to use language in a situation which is more similar to real-life interaction. For example, if they’ve been learning to repeat *What would you like for your starter?* and *I think I’ll have ...*,

it makes sense to give them a menu which they can use in a make-believe restaurant. Even better, get them to make the menu themselves, thereby increasing the creativity.

### Do pitch the level of difficulty of the tasks carefully.

Even if you have the keenest students in the world, if you ask them to carry out a task that is either much too easy or much too difficult, they will probably look as if all the energy has been sucked out of them. Why? Because, in both cases, effectively very little learning can take place. Even highly experienced teachers can sometimes pitch a lesson at the wrong level (sometimes because a lesson is ‘off the peg’ and one that they particularly like). If this is the case, it’s imperative that you modify the task to match the level of the class.

### Do ensure that there’s a clear syllabus (which is flagged up to the students).

It is possible that a teacher is both highly experienced and highly skilled, but, if there’s no clear syllabus, some students (particularly the less confident ones) will yearn for an indication of the path they’re being taken down. In fact, if they think that their course has no clear shape, they may lose interest and become reluctant to learn altogether.

## Don’ts

### Don’t be hostile to your students.

Again, I’m sure this sounds as if I’m stating the obvious, but let’s not forget that teachers are human beings who have feelings, just like everyone else. Teachers will sometimes feel angry with their students – that’s just a fact of life. However, it’s quite rare for students to be *intentionally* destructive, so directing anger at them is misguided (and can lead to a vicious circle of miscommunication).

Instead, it’s better to try to keep things in perspective (which means trying to understand what’s *really* going on for them). At the very least, students should be able to expect their teachers to be prepared to understand them.


### Don’t have favourites.

Favouring some students over others is a habit that is all too easy to slip into. If one keen student offers all the answers, why not let them do just that? Well, because then you don’t know if the rest of the class can do the task! Also, while the other students may *look* fine about the fact that you always let the same person answer, there may be resentment bubbling under the surface. It’s much fairer (as well as pedagogically necessary) to involve all your students equally. Of course, some students may occasionally choose to opt out of a particular activity, but that’s a different matter, as that’s a decision they’ve made for themselves.



Observers who are watching and evaluating a particular teacher’s lesson could do worse than use the word *CREEDS* as an aide-memoire to ensure the teacher is facilitating a positive learning experience for the students:

**C** = Creativity  
**R** = Relevance  
**E** = Empathy  
**E** = Equality  
**D** = Difficulty  
**S** = Syllabus

These criteria could be set out on a sheet used to evaluate a lesson, regardless of the teaching context. Of course, the look of the evaluation sheet might differ from institution to institution, but the thrust of the evaluation would still be the same. A teacher who consistently performs well in all six areas will be able to facilitate a very positive leaning experience for the students and should be a very valuable member of the teaching staff. 



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