

# Back in the classroom

After over 20 years away from full-time teaching, the editor got back into the classroom for a three-week course.

**A**fter over 20 years writing, training, managing, marketing and publishing in various roles in the ELT industry I had the opportunity to go back into the classroom to teach a monolingual group for a 60 hour course spread over three weeks. I was nervous that they would notice I was not that used to teaching, particularly as most of them were not born the last time I had done it. On the other hand, I have been so close to so many changes in approach, methodology and materials over the years that I was confident that they would get a better shaped class than they would have had with the younger me. I was using new material, some I had actually published, the learners were all motivated, the classrooms were fine and I had a week or so to get ready, far more than most teachers get. What could possibly go wrong? I kept a journal of my thoughts and explored some of the areas where theory and practice do not always make easy partners.

## Level

The students were tested and placed in three classes of 11. I chose the middle group since the other two teachers were much more experienced. My group had expanded to 13 by the end of the first day as one student left each of the other classes in search of a more appropriate level. Despite my group being all from the same educational background, same mother tongue and same age, the differences in level were huge. Some could write at a near native level, with perfect cohesion whereas others struggled to put together two clauses in a sentence. When it came to listening, some grasped things quickly and others would still be trying now if

they hadn't seen the audioscript. The vocabulary range was very wide, in part due to the fact that they all came from different academic disciplines covering life sciences, agronomy, education and electronic engineering. Reading was nearly always done with the sudden appearance from bags of the electronic bilingual dictionary. At first I questioned the wisdom of this but as the course developed I realised the need for difficult words in a text to be translated, particularly those which were not key to the lesson but were impacting negatively on any sense of skills development. I argued that monolingual dictionaries would be more useful but had to accept that for efficiency reasons the Japanese definition was crucial. My fond memories of 'Using the monolingual dictionary' were not reciprocated.

Despite the individual jagged profiles within the group, they were incredibly supportive and barely used their mother tongue throughout the three weeks. I understand they even spoke to each other in English on their weekend trips to London, when no other English speakers were around. They were following a published book at B1+ level but they still found nearly all the tasks difficult. What struck me as a 'novice' teacher was the length of the rubrics and the time it took to set up each exercise. Often the set-up took the same amount of time as the exercise itself. Timings were varied, some exercises and activities taking much longer than planned and others over in a flash. Published books these days are very tightly written, often leaving very little for the teacher to do outside of the recommended flow. This is obviously helpful in terms of reaching

the prescribed lesson aim but can leave little room for improvisation.

## Standards

Over the last few years there have been various pushes in our world to increase the personalisation of lesson content, to deal with language the learners themselves produce and also to aim for production levels as close to perfection as we can get. Taking these points in order, I found the personalisation worked incredibly well on certain activities. Presentations and essays where the topic choice was left to the students brought a wide array of interesting content which the rest of the class were prepared to share. A 150-word sketch of 'The person I admire most' produced pieces about mothers, teachers, sportsmen, humanitarians and writers among others. A similar talk on 'A funny thing that happened to me' ranged from stories about pets, travel, girlfriends and acting as a tour guide. What struck me about these personalised tasks was that not only the students were more engaged but so were their classmates as they saw a new, more interesting side to them. The language required was more sophisticated but more memorable for them and it was in this kind of task that the most linguistic progress was made.

One activity which was really successful in setting high standards was a collaborative essay. We chose as our theme, 'Our stay in Oxford' and set 200 words as our length. We felt that sentences of around 15–20 words would demonstrate the ability of the class so decided on five paragraphs with two sentences in the introduction and ending, and three in the others. As a group we brainstormed

ideas, expressions and words for the five paragraphs and then set out to write each paragraph in pairs. After each paragraph the pairs shared ideas with other pairs to produce the most interesting and accurate sentences. The final compilation was done as a whole class and we edited each sentence as we went along, rejecting some sentences and combining others. As we built up the essay we could see how sentences and paragraphs linked and where cohesive devices would fit naturally. I regularly reminded them to be engaging and imaginative, something they were not completely at ease with in English but grew to understand as the task developed. What they produced was a memorable essay, probably above their individual level but by using the sum of the parts one that was a true reflection of the class ability. We spent longer on this than I had anticipated, and definitely longer than I would as a younger teacher but it was well worth the investment in time.

Another collaborative task was a new twist on an old classic I remembered

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from my initial teacher-training course. Every day *The i*, Britain’s only serious tabloid, has a page dedicated to short news items from around the world. The day I used it there were 10 stories and I wrote 20 questions which were arranged in no particular order and using synonymous words so that it was

not simply a ‘find the word in the text’ exercise. The students were put into groups of four or three and told it was a race to answer the 20 questions. I also said there were two questions per story. How they organised themselves was the most telling part of the activity. Each group took a slightly different approach, some reading the questions first, others scanning the stories to get an overview, one group dividing the stories by length and another by position on the page. It was a huge success in terms of competitiveness and completion and to build on it they then set their own questions, building in as much synonymous language as possible. Good training for IELTS where one of the tricks of the Reading paper is to be able to switch words from the question to find the right part of the text for the answer.

### Planning

As a teacher many years ago I had got into the habit of teaching away from the materials, using them as a springboard but then going with the flow of the group,



Heads down on the newspaper search. Good team-building exercise.

trying to let the class dictate the direction things went in. This was important because my groups were invariably multi-level and often coming with very different individual needs. By allowing individuals to direct the lesson outcomes, everybody felt their needs were being attended to, at least occasionally. This approach worked well when it worked but, looking back, I am not sure it was always clear what the aims were nor indeed how much had actually been planned. Lessons were memorable for the activity but not necessarily the outcome.

In today's teaching world we all know that outcomes are everything. By the end of a given group of lessons, learners must have improved their ability to do a certain communicative task, often backed up with a CEFR descriptor or a 'Can do' statement. This time the aims of the course were quite clear from the beginning so there was little room for individual needs to be added to the plan. The class were being prepared to be more competent in academic situations, taking notes, listening to lectures, thinking critically, writing essays, working collaboratively and so on. As a bonus they were also going to take IELTS the day after the course finished. This meant that the course had two distinct strands: the EAP part and the exam preparation. At the same time, there was an expectation that I would also teach them grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Unlike the younger me, I continually reminded my group of what we were doing and why – this is for the exam, this is for your academic future, this is an area where you are weak. This slightly magisterial approach seemed to work: they expected the lead to come from me – I could be collaborative but I was definitely in charge. How to reconcile this with some of the more humanistic approaches I had been used to was an interesting challenge. They had to learn to challenge ideas, thoughts and texts and the best way for them to learn was actually to challenge me. It took time, it was not what their educational culture had taught them but little by little they opened up and started to ask questions. 'Just because texts are written in books does not make them right', I would say. One easy activity which I

did remember from the past was getting the class to write their own questions about texts. These should not be simple comprehension questions but more evaluative ones like *Is it interesting? Why was it written? Is it based on information or opinion?*

## **'Of all the jobs I've had in EFL, teaching gives you the best buzz.'**

### **Approach**

I have always felt teachers need to be eclectic, taking activities and ideas from different schools of thought. No methodology is a guarantee of success and what works one day will probably not work the following day. Because I have observed so many hours of teaching in my career and seen so many outstanding training workshops I had at my fingertips a whole range of techniques which don't belong to me or any one individual but to the teaching profession. Across a four-hour teaching day I had enough time to talk a lot myself, instructing, explaining, telling stories, correcting, chatting whilst still giving them a good 70% of class-time for student production. Because none of the classes were shared with other teachers, planning was much simpler and activities that were working well could be extended whilst other ones could be contracted. We did some great choral and individual drilling, exaggerating the pronunciation to show them they could speak perfect English if they were really stretched. I encouraged a dramatic approach to dialogue work in pairs and role play to pull them out of their reticent comfort zone and into a more English sounding world. I acted as an infotainer, delivering facts in a memorable way, as well as teacher

and (probably) a cross between father figure and older brother. I must say it was one of the most professionally rewarding periods of my life.

### **Technology**

The one thing that had clearly changed since my last assignment was the technology. I was impressed by how useful the class found video, whether ELT-specific or general clips. Digital projection from a laptop makes video and images so much more striking and there is a wide range of activities which happen quite naturally. Vocabulary can be taught from a paused screen, dialogues can be invented from a mute video and a context for a reading can be created from a clip. We were doing a text on NGOs and I found a two-minute clip on Fairtrade products was a perfect lead-in. Having all the audio on an MP3 player is also incredibly practical and getting homework sent to me or handed in perfectly printed was a whole new experience. Indeed I got so into the homework that I ended up massively overloading the poor students. Having students look up things on their smartphones made the lessons go more smoothly and letting them show images and video clips made them feel much more involved in the course.

### **How did I do?**

I probably still overdo the entertaining side of teaching. I was punctual and kept up a good pace. I gave out too much homework and made a few too many jokes early on. By the end of the first week I was right back into it and by the end of the course I was sorry to see them go. I was teaching in unique circumstances in the most perfect location for EFL learners, an Oxford college, but I still think it is a great job when circumstances suit. Of all the jobs I have done in EFL, teaching gives you the best buzz. Ironically the career ladder leads us to do less and less of it whilst continuing to influence it. I would recommend a return to the classroom on a regular basis for all those who seek to bring change to the classroom just to make sure that what they are proposing makes the teacher's life better and enhances the learning.