

# NOTES FOR TEFL TEACHERS

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### ASSESSING YOUR TEACHING STYLE

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In this document there are 29 questions to ask yourself about your role as a teacher and whether there are areas where you have slipped into bad habits.

The questions and answers are based on various surveys I have conducted informally with teachers and students. The opinions expressed are subjective, but should help you to re-evaluate your performance even if you do not particularly agree with them.

This is the first in a series of documents on ELT teaching. Hope you find it useful.

I would love to hear feedback (and be informed of any typos): [adrian.wallwork@gmail.com](mailto:adrian.wallwork@gmail.com)

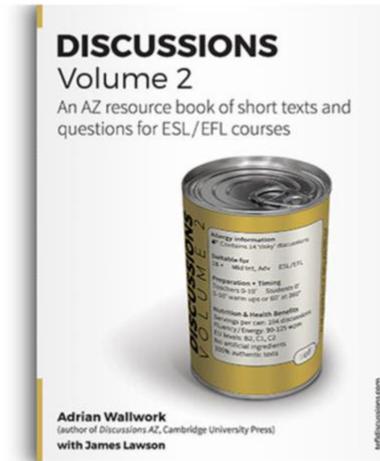
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# TEFL DISCUSSIONS

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## **1 What are the habits of good teachers?**

Many teachers would consider the following to be good habits. Why? How easy are they to stick to? Which are the three most important?

1. Desist from looking at the clock.
2. Get side-tracked when appropriate.
3. Give lessons with take-home value.
4. Steer clear of labelling your students.
5. Propose interesting topics of conversation / discussion.
6. Resist preaching or obsessing about your pet subjects.
7. Know where your arms, hands and fingers are at all times.
8. Avoid a predictable routine to the organization of your lessons.
9. Give very clear instructions for every task you set your students.
10. Speak slowly and clearly enough for everyone to understand you.
11. Pamper and listen to your students as if you were their hairdresser.
12. Have a normal speaking voice rather than automatic teacher mode.
13. Check up on the latest methodologies before the start of a new course.
14. Keep the same momentum going in class from the first lesson to the last.
15. Ensure your students know why what you are teaching them is important.

## **2 How can I find out if I have any bad habits?**

The longer you teach for, the more likely you are to fall into bad habits. The problem is that you may not be even aware that you have these habits.

There are three main ways to find out whether you have fallen into bad habits:

- observations by fellow teachers
- videoing yourself
- feedback from your students

If you work in a language school, then you can ask to be observed. Few teachers like being observed but if done professionally, your observer can give you useful feedback on:

- any annoying mannerisms you may have
- the clarity and length of your instructions and explanations
- time keeping and class management
- your body language

- your relationship with students

It helps if you have a list of factors that will be observed on (or that you want to have feedback about) - you can either prepare this yourself, or use the school's existing one and add any elements of your own.

If you really cannot bear the idea of being observed, then the next best solution is to video yourself, many of the things that an observer will notice should also be apparent to you.

Finally, you can get feedback from your students. Ideally your school should already have a policy of getting anonymous feedback on teachers. If not, you will need to set up your own system. You can do this by asking each student to write a report (possibly in their own language) on you. You will need to give them some clear criteria (see below) for them to judge you on, and give them a space to add any other additional comments.

Obviously, this needs to be done anonymously. Simply ask students to type out their 'report' (without putting their name), print it, and leave it in a designated place where you can then collect it.

Alternatively you can set up a suggestions box where students can leave comments at any point during the course.

The result will be that you have a great opportunity to hear both what students like and dislike about you and your teaching style. The added benefit is that your students will have clear evidence that you take your job seriously.

In addition to the criteria mentioned above for observations (annoying mannerisms, clarity etc.) you can ask for feedback from your students on:

- the amount of homework given
- how much and how well you correct them when they speak and their written work
- how interesting and relevant your lessons are

The rest of this chapter is in the form of a checklist of questions that focus on some bad habits that you may or (hopefully!) may not be getting into.

### **3 Do you tend to start the course with the best intentions and then tail off? How can you keep yourself motivated?**

I have carried out various surveys of my students over the years both regarding their experience of my lessons but also of other teachers (not just EFL, but also at school and university). A Bangladeshi student in my survey, Md. Minhaz-UI Haque, had this revealing comment to make:

*Many teachers start courses with interesting and easy method and attract the attention of students, but their finishing is not good. As a result, students are not fully benefitted.*

All teachers are probably guilty of this. We start off a new academic year or a new course full of enthusiasm, ready to experiment new ideas, and with lots of good intentions about improving our performance. The hard thing is to keep it up.

I find it helps if you:

- set yourself some clear goals (e.g. you are going to work on any area that perhaps you have neglected before, such as pronunciation or writing skills)
- give your students clear goals
- don't always adopt the same style in each lesson, but you find new ways for example to present that old grammar rule
- occasionally have guests to your lessons (other teachers, friends, interesting people you happen to meet) and take over other people's lessons
- get your school to organize workshops where you can pick up new approaches
- exchange ideas with other teachers
- get suggestions from your students about how to organize your lessons
- get students to change where they usually sit - this may promote a new class dynamic

All the above should help you to keep fresh and to keep the momentum going throughout the course, rather than just for the first month!

#### **4 Do you ever question the methods and strategies you are using / giving?**

After you have been teaching a while, you get into a set routine of what and how you teach. For example, in the early lessons of a new course you may decide to teach students:

- phonetics - you encourage them to note down the phonetics next to each word that they find difficult to pronounce
- note taking - you may, for example, encourage them to use a particular colour-coded system for noting down vocabulary, phrases, grammar, pronunciation etc.
- dictionary skills - you dedicate a lesson to teaching them how to use a mono or bilingual dictionary effectively

All of the above may be useful strategies, but it pays to examine whether they really are necessary, whether you yourself consistently make use of them (e.g. do you always write the phonetical transcription next to new words when you write them on the board), whether they actually use them

(how many students are still adopting your colour-coded scheme a month after the course has begun?), and whether they are time well spent (do any of your students actually use paper dictionaries? would you be better off talking about the best online dictionaries? or the benefits of Google Translate?).

Ask other teachers whether they use the same methods, and what they think the relative merits are.

Likewise, if you have never used such methods, investigate whether it might be worth your while experimenting with them.

### **5 Do you like your students? Do you have favourites?**

You will connect immediately with some students. Probably those students who:

- seem most similar to you
- seem most similar to students (or people in general) you have liked in the past
- seem to like you

But you should try and like (or at least focus on) all your students. Even those students who you wouldn't want to be seen dead with outside the class must have some attractive feature that you can seek out and try to appreciate. If you fail to do this, you will probably make less eye contact with them, interact less with them, and thereby show a preference for other students. This is not going to make a good class dynamic.

### **6 Are you giving the right instructions and are they clear?**

My young son had an Indian kid in his class, Adi. Adi had only been in the country for a couple of months. The teacher was giving the class their first written test and had handed out an exercise. After a few minutes, my son noticed that Adi was sitting there doing nothing. My son thought that perhaps Adi had decided he couldn't understand the exercise due to language problems. At the end of the test, Adi handed in a blank piece of paper with his name at the top.

My wife and I were friends of Adi's parents and we discovered that Adi had failed to do his exercise not because he hadn't understood it, but because the teacher had not instructed the class to start the exercise. In his hometown back in India, no kid did anything in class unless explicitly told to do so by their teacher.

OK, this case is rather extreme. But the point is that you should never assume that your students have understood what you have instructed them to do. Nor should you ever underestimate differences in cultural expectations.

## **7 What are you doing with your hands and arms?**

The best way to understand whether your body language could be improved is by videoing yourself in action. If you can't do this, then make a conscious effort to avoid:

- scratching your eyes, picking your nose or ears
- biting your nails, or cracking your finger bones
- making strange faces
- stroking your fingers through your hair
- touching your genitals
- fidgeting with pens, rings, coins or whatever
- putting your hands behind your back or constantly folding your arms across your chest
- making eye contact always with the same students - make sure you pan around the class and involve everyone
- pacing up and down
- never moving from your desk (if you have one)

You probably don't think you are doing any of the above, but can you be sure??!!

## **8 How do you position yourself with respect to the whiteboard / blackboard / VDU?**

When you write something on the blackboard make sure that as far as possible you are not blocking someone's view. This can be incredibly frustrating for a student behind your back who is forced to carry on copying long after everyone else has finished and you are now talking. Here are some other tips:

- ensure that your handwriting is legible and can be read from the back of the class
- write in a straight line
- make sure it is clear where one word ends and the next begins (particularly beginners have little idea of how a word should look / be spelt)
- don't rub anything off the board before checking that everyone has finished copying

- try to have some organization on the board - don't spread items randomly over the board, don't cramp sentences or words, don't write up the side of the board

If you have a choice, don't use a blackboard at all, but hook your laptop to a TV, big monitor or projector, and just write directly into a file, which you can then email to your students. This method also means you that you keep a record of everything you teach, which is great for preparing tests.

## **9 How inspiring is your voice? Do you go into teacher mode when you speak?**

Your voice has a huge impact on how attentive your class will be. You don't need to adopt a particular 'teacher voice', but simply speak in a normal way.

On YouTube or ted.com listen to actors and presenters who have interesting voices and analyse them.

Then record yourself and listen to your voice critically. For instance you may discover that you *um* and *er* very frequently without even realising it. You can stop yourself from saying 'er' if you speak in short sentences and pause / breathe instead of saying 'er'. In any case, speaking in short sentences will certainly facilitate your student's comprehension of what you are saying.

If the sound of your voice never changes or you have a very repetitive intonation (e.g. at the end of each phrase your voice goes up or is significantly reduced in volume), your students will lose essential clues for understanding what you are saying.

- Try varying the speed at which you say words. Slow down when you are explaining a difficult point. Speed up when what you are saying will be easy for your students to grasp.
- Don't drop your voice at the end of a sentence.
- Don't speak in a monotone, try to vary the pitch (i.e. how high or low a sound is) in your voice.

Many teachers after a few years seem to adopt a teacher's voice, which also interestingly extends to when they are socializing with fellow compatriots outside the classroom.

Having a teacher's voice is habit that you should consider breaking. It sounds artificial and is not what students will ever hear in the real world.

A student in a survey I conducted had this useful advice:

*The English teacher has to speak slowly when he/she talks about grammar or important concepts. However sometimes for example when she is telling an anecdote, she has to speak*

*faster to get me used to understand mother tongue in a different context of the English lesson.*

## **10 Are you talking too much? ... Or not enough?**

I did my TEFL preparatory course at International House in London when I was 23. My two tutors were obsessed by TTT (teacher talking time). They preached that teachers should talk the minimal amount possible.

I would say this is true when the teacher is being a teacher so to speak, i.e. when giving instructions and explanations. Always get straight to the point. Be as clear as possible. And don't provide too much detail. If you waffle on such occasions, you are both wasting time and probably also confusing your students.

However, you are not always being a teacher. Sometimes your role is to be an example of a native English speaker talking about something interesting or relevant to your life and the students. I don't think there is anything wrong with recounting anecdotes, expressing opinions about your home country or the country where you are living now, etc. By doing so you are providing your students with an authentic listening exercise. At the same time you are giving them insights into who you are - the more comfortable they feel with you, the more likely they are to speak up and express themselves.

## **11 Do you take into account that students learn in different ways?**

In *Presenting with Power* the author Shay McConnon writes:

*Juries remember only 60% of what they are told. Why? The case is not about them.*

The chances of your students remembering what they have learned during your lessons can be improved immensely if

- they learn in a context that is relevant to them
- they talk and read about things that are of interest to them
- they learn grammar rules by coming up with (or working out) the rules themselves

Unsurprisingly, 90% of people learn best by being shown (visual people - 60%) and / or having a go themselves (kinaesthetic people - 30%). A mere 10% learn best simply by hearing, reading and being told.

This obviously has massive implications for the way you teach - your lessons should never be made up solely of reading exercises and grammar explanations from you.

The more involved your students are, the more they will remember. A student who reads something and hears about, sees it being done, does it themselves and EXPLAINS how to do it to someone else will remember up to 90% of the information given, whereas someone who just reads it or hears it will only remember 10% and 20% respectively.

Shay McConnon, again writing about presentations, states that people forget 40% of what was said within twenty minutes of hearing a presentation. Apparently within half a day they lose 60%, and within one week 90% of it has gone.

What is true of presentations is also like to be true of any situation where information has been given to someone (though how the original researchers managed to come up with these statistics is another story!).

## **12 Do students always know why you are teaching them something and what the benefits are?**

"Why am I being taught this?" is a frequent question asked by students when they are inflicted with apparently pointless exercises. Whenever possible, everything you teach your students should be in some kind of context that the students can clearly relate to and / or see the benefit of.

What does context mean? Well, many teachers in their first lesson to beginners will teach the students some common expressions used in greetings such as *hello, good morning, see you later*. Don't just write these in a list on the board and expect students to copy them down (which is what has happened to me in every beginner's course for a new language that I have been a student of). Put students in pairs and instruct them to greet each other. By doing this, they are also forced to think about how to respond - do they repeat the word or phrase that their interlocutor used, or do they have to use a new phrase? Clearly, I am not telling you anything you don't already know, but it is easy to forget.

Even if you are devising some sentences for students to read aloud for them to practice their pronunciation these sentences should - ideally - have some validity in themselves. If you are practising the *th* sound - you could use a fun tongue twister rather than other irrelevant word.

Obviously, you cannot take this to an extreme. You should not waste loads of time thinking of ways of putting everything into a suitable context. So if there is no reasonable context for what you are doing, then you need to explain this to your students so that they understand what you are trying to do and will thus be with you all the way.

## **13 Do you never get sidetracked?**

Many teachers believe that they should not be the focus of the lesson, and if they do drift off topic, they think it is important to bring it back to the 'nice lesson plan' they had organized. Others will only get sidetracked if what they are saying is somehow relevant to the lesson – generally in terms of topic, but it could also be a grammar item. In both cases teachers feel that at the end of the lesson students might ask themselves 'what have we done in today's lesson?'

It is important that everyone feels they have got something out of the lesson. So for those students who may feel that you are rabbiting on about an experience you had at university is not relevant to them learning English, you can tell them (preferably before you launch into your anecdote) that they must listen carefully as at the end of the lesson you will be asking them to write down five or six sentences that quote you pretty much word for word.

If you do not open up to your students, how can you expect them to open up to you?

#### 14 Do you avoid what you find difficult to teach?

Open the contents pages of a few upper intermediate and advanced coursebooks. Look through the grammar, vocabulary, and functional language items. Are there ones that you never actually teach?

If there are items that you have never taught, it could be because you don't like teaching them. There are probably two interrelated reasons for this:

- they are difficult to teach (and possibly even difficult for you to understand)
- you feel they are irrelevant

These points are interrelated because if something is difficult to teach it is highly likely that it is not something that is used particularly frequently and/or can easily be substituted. For example, the grammatical use (not the actual meaning) of phrasal verbs is spectacularly difficult to teach ... and in my opinion not even useful for students to learn. If there is something that is likely to confuse students, it is probably best not being taught.

So don't beat yourself up if you are not teaching certain things. The key thing, in my opinion, is that students come away from the lesson feeling satisfied ... not frustrated.

Of course there are some relatively complex grammar points that are worth teaching. For example, the present perfect has many uses, all of which are probably worth teaching even though they may be quite hard for students to understand.

As far as I know, there is no language in the world that uses the present perfect to say: *I have been here for a month* (meaning that you arrived a month ago and are still here now). Other languages use the present and students will come up with sentences like:

*I am here since a month.*

or worse (because it has a different meaning from the one intended)

*I am here for a month.*

This distinction is clearly very important:

*I am here for ...* I arrived at some indefinite time and plan to stay for a / another month

*I have been here for ...* I am telling you how long ago I arrived here)

In summary, you need to decide what is and is not important to teach. Students can survive perfectly well without ever using the past perfect continuous or knowing the difference between *try and do it like this* and *try to do it like this*. But they can confuse their listeners / readers if they begin a sentence with: *I am here* instead of *I have been here*. So my guideline would be: can students live happily without me teaching the this? am I likely to do more damage (i.e. by confusing them) than good by teaching it? If so, don't worry if you have been avoiding and continue to avoid teaching it. And if it comes up in your coursebook you can legitimately consider skipping it.

### **15 Are you actually teaching them anything that they couldn't do by themselves if so inclined?**

When planning your lesson, try to make as many of the activities as possible the kind of activities that students could not have done by themselves at home. The Internet enables them to do all kinds of English learning by themselves: reading, listening, grammar exercises.

The two things that they can't get through the Internet are:

- talking practice (both in terms of fluency and pronunciation/intonation)
- immediate feedback on their performance and corrections

I believe that unless you are following an exam course, the two areas above are where at least 80% of your lesson should be focused.

### **16 How predictable are your lessons?**

Students like to feel that their lesson has been organized / structured specifically for them. But this does not mean that every lesson has to be structured in the same way.

When I interviewed a group of students all from the same class, they told me that their regular teacher (who was actually the boss of the most prestigious language school in town) always followed the same pattern in his lessons. He would introduce a topic, teach related vocabulary, then get students to discuss the topic, and finally address their mistakes. This kind of structure is fine ... but not every lesson for heaven's sake!

The problem was that students knew exactly how the lesson was going to be every time. Having a structure to your lessons is important (students feel safe and reassured), but the structure should not be the same in every lesson otherwise tedium quickly sets in.

## **17 How relevant are the topics you choose for discussion?**

Don't fixate on your pet interests when choosing the types of topics you get students to talk about.

Don't assume that just because you don't find something interesting that neither will your students.

Choose topics based on their interests.

A respondent to my student survey who had had many English teachers over the years:

*I don't want to discuss things that I would find hard even in my own language, so even if you think that you have some great discussion ideas which you yourself would like to discuss, your students may not agree with. You have to respect them and not force your discussion on them.*

In any case, having interesting topics to discuss in class is not enough, as highlighted by this comment:

*I had one English teacher that put a lot of effort in making not boring lessons but did not teach me anything, because she required too little effort and did not pay enough attention to my errors and difficulties.*

This was mirrored in another comment:

*The only remark I could make on my past teacher it's about the topics of conversation proposed by the teacher to practice the language. I discussed world news and important social issues, something about psychic and paranormal activities, but during the lessons we had no opportunity to practice scenes from everyday life to improve our current lexicon.*

Students have to perceive that there is some value to your lesson. They are not there solely to be entertained - though being entertained is an important element.

## **18 Do you tend to preach, proselytize and obsess?**

A teacher may be so preoccupied with own particular belief system that they don't recognize real disinterest when they see it in their students. Instead they may think that the disinterested student is just ignorant or oblivious for some reason, they then feel sorry for them and think that they need to be educated.

For example, let's imagine that a teacher is obsessed with health, eating organically, and preventing cancer. This is to do with her own fears (of death) for herself and also her family. She can't believe that others might not care for these things like she does. When she encounters disinterest, she decides that the student either doesn't understand the importance of these things or is too ignorant to care. Or why else would they not share the same concerns as her?

If you think that a student actually isn't interested in relation to what for you are important principles and standards, it will be hard for you not to judge the student. Instead you need to be student led, i.e. focus on what they find interesting and important, rather than what are priorities for you.

However, this does not mean that you should accept views from students that are racist, sexist, or politically clearly not correct. In such cases I think you should intervene. You can simply say firmly:

*I am sorry but in my classes I do not want to hear such views.*

*I am sorry but such views are not appropriate here.*

But don't then try to 'convert' students to your point of view, however worthy you feel your point of view is.

In summary:

- don't impose your views on students; but equally don't let students voice views that are clearly unacceptable in a language class
- if possible orient discussions to topics that you know your students find interesting

**19 Do you always stop your students from using their own language in a monolingual group? If so, why?**

Sometimes the topic you give ss to discuss is so interesting that students forget they are in an English lesson, and they simply want and need to express their opinion. If they are struggling to do so, or if one student has something interesting to say but is really haltering, consider have a time out and letting them speak in their own language. After five minutes you can then get them to write a summary in English of what was said. This is in fact good translation practice as they will have to report their original words from their own language into English. You could also use this as an opportunity to practise direct and indirect speech. Alternatively, they can then have the conversation again, but in English. Or they can trace back the conversation, remembering how it started and then who said what and in what order.

Don't feel that their talking in their own language is taboo - always evaluate in terms of the cost (in this case, five minutes of English-speaking time 'lost'), with the benefit (novelty value, freedom, lack of stress plus all the English value: reconstructing the conversation, grammar practice, translation).

It always helps to remember or imagine how you would feel if you had to conduct a similar conversation in French, Russian or whatever. Think of the frustrations you feel.

## **20 Is it OK for you as a teacher to use your students' native language occasionally?**

Part of being a good teacher is being efficient. If it takes you two minutes to explain a complicated grammatical rule in their language, but it would take you many more minutes to explain it in English, then why not use their language?

When giving the meaning of new vocabulary item, ask yourself whether in this case it wouldn't be a lot easier just to give the translation?

Basically you need to make a balance, e.g. don't always translate new words for them, but equally don't always embark on lengthy explanations. Use a variety of methods:

- translate the word
- explain / define the word
- get students to look up the word in the dictionary or on the internet
- put the word in a context and see if students can guess the meaning
- mime or draw the word (if you are into miming and drawing!)
- get a student who already knows the word to explain the meaning to his/her fellow students

And use such a variety of methods not just when teaching vocabulary, but when teaching anything and everything.

## **21 Are you giving students enough time to reply to your questions?**

If you ask someone a question, give them a decent time in which to reply - they need time to think. So don't think the long pause before they reply is embarrassing. If you need an indication of whether you are waiting too long look at the reaction of the other students - are they showing signs of frustration? Rather than saying: *Do / Did you understand the question?* make it seem that you are responsible in some way for the student not understanding. This will help to avoid them losing face. So you can say: *Let me rephrase that* and then ask the question in a different way. You could also direct the question to the whole class, so that again the student doesn't lose face or feel embarrassed.

Bear in mind that students may not admit they have not understood a question, and even if they say they have understood this doesn't necessarily mean that they really have understood.

## **22 Do you never play games?**

Some teachers shy away from playing games in the classroom because they project themselves onto the students and feel that they themselves would feel awkward if they were asked to play a game.

However not all games involve walking around the classroom, playing a role, or doing anything that is the least embarrassing.

You can play / do:

- language games (20 questions, MORE)
- psychological games (see 00)
- lateral thinking games (see 00)
- intelligence tests and riddles (see 00)
- traditional board games (e.g. Trivial Pursuit, Taboo, Pictionary)
- card games (students have to explain rules to card games in their country and the others have to listen to the explanations. The games are best played with the cards facing up, then the 'teacher' can explain what moves people should make / should have made).

The use of games in the class can relax the students and help them to interact with each other. They promote a lot of conversation, using a host of grammar structures, particularly modal verbs in both affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms (must, have to, must not, don't have to, can, cannot, do I have to, should I? etc.)

## **23 Are you giving your students homework?**

In my survey of students, Nguyen Hung, from Viet Nam, told me that his teachers *did not care about homework, I mean they gave HomeWorks to students but did not want to check them all.*

You may well decide that there is no point in giving certain groups of students homework as experience has taught you that very few if any students actually do it. This is particularly true of participants in Business English courses who are often hard pressed even to come to the lessons.

But if you do set homework, at least have the courtesy to correct it.

From the point of view of you not having tons of stuff to correct, the secret to homework is where possible to make it a self-study exercise, where students do the exercise and then consult the key to check their answers. Your role then is just to discuss any problems they have.

Alternatively, you can go over the homework with them during the lesson. But most students are aware that this can quickly turn into a time-wasting activity.

You can also set them homework that doesn't entail any correction by setting them tasks such as watching a particular video on YouTube or Ted.com. The following lesson you can then get them to compare notes with each other, or use the video as a springboard for a discussion.

But sometimes you will have to set 'serious' homework, particularly if your students are preparing for a particular examination (either internal or external). If the homework is written, then I find it easier to get students to type it and email it to me. This means I can use 'Track Changes' to correct their work and add comments. In any case, it is crucial that you do correct their homework in one way or another.

#### **24 Are you inadvertently irritating your students?**

There are certain things that you may not be aware of that will aggravate your students:

- mispronouncing their names
- making fun of them in front of the class
- responding to their question by saying that you already answered that question earlier in the lesson
- not giving them the opportunity to ask questions, e.g. no question slot at the end of the lesson
- always focusing on and/or praising the same students
- talking badly about their country
- criticizing the textbook (remember that they will probably have paid for it themselves)
- ignoring them when they have clearly not understood

#### **25 Are you labelling students as no-hopers?**

To be a good teacher you need to be a good psychologist. You can achieve wonders simply by praising and encouraging someone who you had previously labelled as 'no hoper' - watch them change and improve, and enjoy the process.

Don't let them feel inferior, stupid, or embarrassed because they don't understand. Make them feel good about themselves.

Explain that it is OK to make mistakes. In fact, that you cannot learn a language without making mistakes.

## **26 Do you laugh at or with your students?**

Binh Luong Thanh, one of the students in my survey, when asked what the ideal qualities of an English teacher, replied:

*Open-minded: He/she should remember that there are hundreds of languages in the world, and so there are almost the same number of ways of speaking, so please do not laugh at strange tones. And if the English teacher is open-minded, closed students are convinced to discuss more and more with their teacher.*

And in answer to the question of what she didn't like about some of her past teachers, she wrote:

*Show-off teachers: They think they are the best, they can laugh noisily when you say something incorrect.*

It's great to have a good sense of humour. Most students really appreciate it. But you really do have to be careful when you laugh at their pronunciation. Sometimes I find it impossible not to be convulsed in laughter at some of the amazing sounds my students produce. But I always try to create beforehand an atmosphere in which my students know that I think very highly of them and always have their best interests at heart.

Equally, you should never laugh at or scorn someone's opinion, and never say anything negative about their hometown or country - unless of course you know the person very well or they ask you for your candid opinion.

If you do laugh inappropriately at what your students say or write, then you risk not only making them feel small and embarrassed, but also of them losing face with their fellow students. The result will be that they will lose confidence and clam up, and you will lose the respect of your class. So if you do laugh inappropriately make sure you apologize immediately and consider sending the student in question an email of apology.

## **27 Do you ever deviate from your normal lessons? Do you ever let students into your private life?**

There is a tendency for some teachers just to repeat a formula that they know is both useful for the students and which generally has the desired outcome. But students like surprises – they don't want to always follow the same predictable format.

A teacher's style of lesson is clearly very dependent on their personality. If a teacher is reserved in her private life, she is likely to be reserved in lessons too. In my experience, in any type of teaching / training (not just languages but music, Pilates, football) participants are likely to become more involved if

1. the teacher / trainer seems willing to deviate from the normal course of events
2. they know something about the personal life of their teacher

In the second case, this doesn't mean you have to reveal intensely personal details about your family or love life though there is nothing wrong in doing so with appropriate students. You can tell the students about where you come from, what education system you went through, why you studied what you did at university, what your favourite movie is, who your best friend is etc.

Students of today do not have the concentration levels of those of 20 years ago, even 10 years ago. They expect a variety of stimuli and a frequent change of topic. They enjoy hearing interesting facts and figures, and through social media are often interested in each other's lives (including that of the teacher).

So think about whether occasionally you need to change your style a bit, be a little more flexible and less textbook-teacher oriented. As a result you are likely to enjoy your lessons more, and be willing not just to take on exam classes but conversation classes too. It will also give you the chance to reinvent yourself, something which I believe all teachers need to do at regular intervals, otherwise they risk getting prematurely burnt out.

## **28 Are you constantly checking to see what time it is?**

There is nothing more discouraging for students than seeing their teacher with a desperate expression on his/her face glancing at the clock on the wall to see what time it is. This gives two messages to your students:

- the teacher is either more bored than I am or is in a total panic
- the teacher clearly hasn't planned what he/she is doing and is desperately trying to conjure up ways to fill up the time before the lesson ends

If you do look at the clock it should be accompanied by an explanation such as: *OK, we've got ten minutes to do the final exercise* or *OK, we don't really have time to finish this exercise, you can do it for homework, now let's just summarize what we have learned today.*

When you are being observed by another teacher, it pays to have a lesson plan that sticks to certain time allocations. However in everyday teaching you don't need to become obsessed with getting all your timing spot on. If you don't manage to do everything you wanted to do, then no problem - it's not like you distributed your lesson plan to all your students. The important thing is that there is a sense of structure to what you are doing and there is some kind of wind down before the lesson ends. Here are some possible ways of concluding your lesson:

Things not to do in the last ten minutes:

- start something completely new
- look blank

In any case at the end of a lesson, students should not be left wondering what the hell they have learned during your lesson

## **29 What's a good way of evaluating my teaching style?**

The grammar videos on YouTube are probably more useful for you than for your students. By watching them you can quickly see what works and what doesn't. You'll learn about the speed with which some of these teachers talk, and the sheer amount of patter that does along with their explanations which often a lot of grammatical constructions that students are unlikely to have met before.

You will also see what order they present information in, and which order possibly works best.

Basically, they will help you with your teaching style.

They may also help you understand which style audiences seem to like the most by seeing the number of 'likes'.

You can also show these videos in class and ask you class to assess the teacher - what did they like and not like about the teacher's presentation style? This will give them an opportunity to indirectly talk about your teaching style.

I watched various videos on the present perfect in English and I seriously doubt whether the viewers (which ranged between 20,000 and 150,000) would have understood much. The sheer amount of talking time by the teacher makes it almost impossible for the student to distinguish between when the teacher is saying something important and when they are simply adlibbing. I found exactly the same problem watching teachers of other languages, e.g. Italian teachers presenting the Italian equivalent of the present perfect.

One teacher began by saying that the present perfect was the *most difficult* tense to learn, others saying it was a *real challenge*. Beginning with a negative comment is discouraging for students. Your role should always be to present grammar as manageable and achievable. If you say something negative you are conditioning your students to think they are going to find it difficult.

At the time of writing, I would say that the grammar explanations on YouTube are not worth your students watching. But the situation is bound to improve, so it is worth checking them out occasionally. On the other hand, I think the pronunciation exercises are certainly worth watching as the camera can zoom in on mouth and tongue positions in a way that would not be possible for a teacher in front of a live group of students.

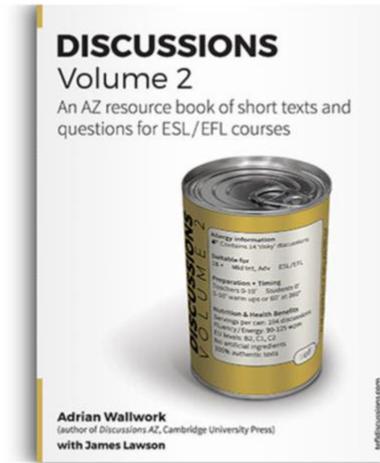
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