

Teaching Teenagers – 18th September 2003

Welcome to ELT Forum, today we have Jeremy Harmer in the chat room to talk about teaching teenagers.

<johnny> Hi Jeremy
<Jill> Hi Jeremy
<jeremy-Harmer> Good afternoon/evening Jill.
<Harvey> hello Jeremy
<Harvey> I've just qualified and about to be let loose on teenage classes in Singapore!
-magdalla- Hi
<Harvey> Where are u? I'm in Birmingham in the UK
<magdalla> I'm a bit further. I live in Poland
<Harvey> What about you Jo? Where are you from
<jo> I'm teaching in Spain at the moment - 2 classes of sulky teenagers

Choosing coursebooks / materials

<magdalla> I wonder what course books you all are using
<jeremy_harmer> And if you are all teaching teens at the moment?
<Harvey> I have just qualified so I would be interested to know. How do I choose?
<magdalla> I teach teens older and younger ones
<jeremy_harmer> Harvey that's quite a question! I think the best way is to think carefully about what you are looking for make a list in terms of what a book should look like, what bits it should have (student book, workbook etc)...
<Harvey> The problem is I am going to Singapore next month to start teaching so I don't know what my class will be like!
<jeremy_harmer> Think about how you think it should treat grammar, topics etc. And then when you've made your list turn it into statements of the 'perfect coursebook' and measure all the books you look at against that list.
<jo> I teach younger teens, 13 yr olds
<jeremy_harmer> (Oh, Harvey, and by the way, if you look at the 'topic archive' on this site you'll find stuff about choosing coursebooks in the coursebooks topic.
<Harvey> Thanks Jeremy. So what aspect is particularly important for teens? Grammar?
<jeremy_harmer> Well, Harvey, I am impressed by the introduction to a book called Teaching Teenagers by Schratz and Puchta which suggests that it's topics - and making connections with teens' own lives that is the key!
<Harvey> That sounds sensible

Motivating teenagers

<jeremy_harmer> Magdalla, hi, what books do you use, and do you like them?
<magdalla> The problem with books for me is that some might be too easy and students especially teens get bored
<jeremy_harmer> Magdalla, I think that's a real issue (boredom, I mean) and coursebooks can't answer that on their own, of course.
<johnny> Magdalla, do you have any tips on stopping teens from getting bored?
<jeremy_harmer> I am thinking, Magdalla, that one of the skills of a teen teacher is letting them 'loose' on any topic, from the coursebook.
<magdalla> Ask they questions they always wondered about
<anna> I am teaching a class of teenagers for the first time (its a new job) but I find it difficult to get through to them. They are so unmotivated compared to the adults I've taught before.
<jeremy_harmer> Get them to write the questions, cut up texts (a bit too primary-like sometimes) write their own grammar exercises. I mean somehow getting the ownership of the material over to them.
<magdalla> Very often mixed ability classes make it impossible to follow the book
<jeremy_harmer> Yes, Magdalia (hi Neil), get them to question the text -if you see what I mean - get them to react to texts and materials. Put them in the centre of the frame. Mixed ability is an ongoing problem for just about all of us (BTW have a look at the Mixed ability topic in the ELT Forum archive, if you can) Sometimes in

situations like that the coursebook is a kind of jumping-off point rather than the source of all wisdom

<Harvey>

So they are almost learning what they want to learn?

<jeremy_harmer>

Harvey, yes that's exactly it, I think. Sounds easy. Ha!

<Harvey>

Is giving them some ownership asking for discipline trouble?

<jeremy_harmer>

It's so difficult to give cut and dried advice about discipline. The kind of ownership we've got into discussing works fine with a class where there is a good deal of mutual respect, but it's less successful, of course, when things aren't going well. Then we have to start looking at the whole area of class management. (BTW I don't want you to think I'm anti-coursebook here - why would I be?!)

Getting teens talking

<jo>

Have you any tips for getting my students to talk more in class? I mean in English - they have no trouble talking in class the rest of the time ;-)

<magdalla>

and maybe any tips for getting them listening to one another???

<neil>

Have you ever looked at 'Creative Grammar Practice' -its perfect for teenagers as it essentially drills them in totally cool and fun ways - its also by Puchta (co-) I think, and coincidentally by Longman - well worth a look.

<jo>

No, I haven't. thanks Neil, I'll have a look at that sometime

<jeremy_harmer>

Jo, I think that can be very difficult. My rather cliched first answer is to say don't expect too much too soon...

<magdalla>

I ask my students to learn to tell the story of reading text, even beginners can talk with pre-taught stock phrases

<jeremy_harmer>

This is all good. Creative GP is great. re-telling stories is great too, I think.

Students can re-tell stories from their point of view, or as one of the characters, or making 2 deliberate mistakes or lots of tings like that

<neil>

Sorry have to dash -its morning here in Vancouver and kind of mad busy - catch you next time!

<jeremy_harmer>

Neil, great to have you along. Come back next time!

<jo>

Maybe that's where I'm going wrong, I've been asking them to talk about themselves, which I guess is harder

<jeremy_harmer>

And getting students to write questions they want to ask for interviewing each other brings us back to the ownership thing.

<Harvey>

Sounds like a lot of preparation for the student

<jeremy_harmer>

True, Harvey, but if the question-making is part of the lesson, then it has a benefit.

<magdalla>

Students asking questions? Good idea but they seldom can. If they don't study I have to explain all the fuss about tenses and grammar

Giving teenagers ownership

<jeremy_harmer>

In one of my favourite articles about homework from English Teaching Professional the author talks about how she & her students were fed up with homework and so she got them to say what homework they thought they wanted (and would be useful), and the end-result.

<jeremy_harmer>

Was that everyone (including the teacher) got much more out of it. Ownership again!

<Harvey>

I think giving them ownership demands a lot of trust from the teacher - is that right?

<jeremy_harmer>

What do you think about Harvey's question, Magdalla & Jo?

<jo>

I'm not sure I'd trust my students to choose their own homework, even if it is a nice idea

<magdalla>

I think some students will just do nothing. If they are to choose homework they might choose nothing

<jeremy_harmer>

Jo, I mean they all decide what kind of homework they (including the teacher) wanted to do. And yes, Magdalla, of course you're right, some students...well it would be boring if they were all the same!

<anna>

Jeremy, how do you feel about teaching teenagers - do you have an age group you prefer?

<jeremy_harmer>

Anna, no not really. I once, like all teachers, had a nightmare group of teens, but I've had some wonderful ones too. And ditto adults - a large mix of nice and nasty

over the years. If I had to choose my favourite, I suppose it would be late teens / early adults. except that isn't true, because there was one group of teens who were just fantastic. Hell, you never can tell!

Encouraging studying out of the class

<magdalla> Just now I struggle with students who fail to repeat material after the lesson
<jeremy_harmer> Magdalia what do you mean - that they just don't do any studying out of class?
<magdalla> That's right, they don't learn outside class
<jeremy_harmer> It's so difficult that, isn't it. *We* know that you get along much faster if you do some self-study, but teens don't get it. Or rather they have other lives, other considerations!
<Bruno> Luckily English seems to be a subject for which most pupils are quite motivated
<johnny> Where do you teach Bruno?
<Bruno> I'm a teacher trainer in Belgium, Bruges
<magdalla> I've been to Bruges, greetings
<jeremy_harmer> Bruno, so the attitude to English among teens is pretty positive in Belgium?
<Bruno> It is. Youth culture is English, pop music, films, TV...
<magdalla> Apparently some teens don't bother about studying
<Harvey> So Jeremy and everyone, how can we encourage self-study?
<jo> So is the standard quite high there?
<Bruno> Good materials for self-study is an important aspect, I think
<Harvey> Any recommendations?
<magdalla> I was very much motivated to study French by songs and French friends
<jeremy_harmer> Harvey, you know that boring old saying about horses and water and drinking? With good materials (I agree Bruno), good training and most of all the teacher's passion and enthusiasm for self study, some students will really get into it. But only some.
<Bruno> Activities dealing with songs and video are always very motivating.
<Magdalla- > One teacher in my school makes students learn by being very strict
<Bruno> That is not really intrinsic motivation, is it, Magdalla?
<magdalla> That's right Bruno but what to do if students keep not doing their homework?
<jeremy_harmer> Well, Bruno, not sure about that. When I did some research with secondary kids here they all expressed a deep need for the teacher to be in control of the class without (of course) being 'nasty' about it. But it was they who wanted order, not chaos
<magdalla> I will never win with that strict teacher for whose classes everyone has a homework, but not for mine
<Bruno> I agree that pupils need structure and order, but not ""law and order""

Using the Internet with teens

<Bruno> Some pupils also like doing exercises on the computer. Educational CD-ROMs or Internet activities can, be helpful.
<anna> I've found using the internet can be good too
<jeremy_harmer> How have you both used the Internet, Bruno and Anna?
<Bruno> I have used it quite a lot, also for Hot Potatoes exercises.
<magdalla> What are hot potatoes ex?
<Bruno> They are web-based activities, very easy to make (e.g. matching ex., crosswords, puzzles...
<Harvey> I suppose today's teenagers are getting more and more internet friendly even more than their teachers
<jeremy_harmer> Well, my feeling about that, Harvey, is that some students are totally Internet-friendly (and keen on it) but others aren't. And the Internet only works if the material itself is good and motivating.
<magdalla> I had internet class once and teacher need strength to make them do what he wants
<anna> What sites do people use with their students?
<Bruno> I have done an activity with biography.com that Clive Newton suggested and it worked very well.
<jeremy_harmer> Yes, I love that site, Bruno. If you get them reading biographies in class with pre-prepared material and then send them off to do a search there using the same

techniques, the chances are, Magdalia, that they'll do it keenly

<anna> That sounds interesting, I've tried news sites like CNN but if students aren't interested in the main story it doesn't work so well

<Bruno> The tasks should be well defined and structured, of course.

<Harvey> More ownership Jeremy!

<jeremy_harmer> Yes, it's funny how that seems to have been a main theme of today's forum!

<magdalla> As for me they need skills to tackle them and the language

<Bruno> And you can do so much more than just reading comprehension on the net. They can communicate about their findings. You can create information gaps.

<jeremy_harmer> Anna, your earlier question about sites...do you mean language-based sites or general info sites?

<anna> Well I was just curious to see what people used? Whether you find sites designers for learners better or just pick general sites that will interest them instead??

<Bruno> I prefer general sites. imdb.com is very motivating too.

The teacher / student relationship in teenage classes

<anna> I've found that when I've taught a good group of teens, It's been really good, but when I got a bad group? I don't want to remember!

<magdalla> I understand you Anna

<jeremy_harmer> Oh Anna, isn't that just the worst thing! I never understand why some groups 'go sour' and teachers often think it's their fault, but usually it isn't. I guess the best thing, though, is to remember that lots of groups 'come round' in the end. Perseverance, making contact with them, trying out different activities, all that

<anna> Well, I'll remember that next time but hope there is no next time!

<jeremy_harmer> It's a funny business, teaching. You think you 'know' but even so suddenly you have one of those groups. Happened to me in January and I couldn't really work out how to deal with it. A good (re-)learning experience.

<magdalla> Once I asked my students what they want during their classes

<magdalla> some said more speaking and games and groupwork but some said more homework and grammar

<jeremy_harmer> Hi Asia. We're on a mixture of Internet, difficult groups, student ownership.... what would you like to talk about?

<Asia> How to make contact with the students?

<Asia> How to draw the line between respect for them and managing them to some extent?

<Bruno> You have to try to get into their world of interest and emotions.

<jeremy_harmer> A teacher I spoke to in Mexico in July, Asia (since we've been talking about computers) set up his own chat room every Friday afternoon for any students to 'come along' and discuss any problems. he said it was really successful.

<Bruno> Taking them seriously normally will make them respect you.

<Bruno> We use the Blackboard learning environment and I have had interesting items on the discussion forums.

<anna> You mean a chat room on the internet, not a real room?

<jeremy_harmer> Yes!

<Harvey> Good writing practice I should think

<jeremy_harmer> Well, good chat-writing - but that's an entirely unique environment!

<Bruno> The problem is that sometimes they totally forget about spelling on the net. Or they use the chat lingo they're used to.

<jeremy_harmer> Yes, Bruno, that's right, because the need for accuracy (spelling, punctuation, grammar etc) is not so obligatory

<anna> That's interesting - I'm still learning about all the internet things. What's blackboard Bruno?

<Bruno> Blackboard is a learning environment with chat options, discussion forums, places for your assignments, a calendar and much more.

<magdalla> I once made a lesson about chat language - very motivating

<Harvey> Should we be worried about them using such things as 'ur', l8r, btw, etc

<jeremy_harmer> I don't think so Harvey. It's just one new and very exciting variety of English but it's no substitute for other kinds of writing.

<Bruno> Not in that context, I should think, Harvey

<jo> Thanks for the ideas Jeremy, everyone. Sorry but I have to go now

<Harvey> Magdalla, you said you made a lesson of chat language
<magdalla> Yes, I asked to figure out some abbreviations like btw. They did it! They were better than me

<Bruno> Chat language can be a means to an end, but I wouldn't consider it a goal in itself in EFL

<Harvey> Does anyone teach web language?
<Bruno> You can also make them add feelings to the different smilies :-)
<jeremy_harmer> Well, I've certainly included text messaging in a new book of mine - I agree with David Crystal that it's one of the biggest linguistic changes in our lifetimes. It's fun, and most kids use it.

<Bruno> It is certainly effective and fast communication
<Harvey> Which book is that Jeremy? Sounds interesting – I think its so new that other books haven't covered it

<jeremy_harmer> Ah well, I've included it in a book called How to Teach writing (coming out early next year) amongst others.

<Bruno> It is certainly effective and fast communication
<jeremy_harmer> But I agree entirely, Bruno, that it's not a central part of teaching English writing or speaking.

<magdalla> i have to go, bye and thanks for talking
<johnny> Bye Magdalla
<jeremy_harmer> Magdalia, it was great to have you along. Bye.
<johnny> Well its time to wrap up I think
<anna> Me too, thanks everybody. I'll think about this is class tomorrow
<Bruno> Well, ok, bye everyone!
<johnny> Does anyone have any final questions? Thanks for joining us
<jeremy_harmer> Johnny, thanks so much for moderating this session so effectively. I look forward to many more! And thanks to everyone who made this such a lively occasion! You can see the transcript of this chat on this site next week. Well see you all in November for the next one. It's Teaching Young Learners, with special guest Annie Hughes. Thanks Jeremy for your expertise!

<johnny> Yes indeed. Bye everybody. See you then.

<jeremy_harmer>
