

Teaching Unplugged

Submitted by swiffin on 26 March, 2014 - 09:59

Teaching Unplugged is the term used for a teaching method and philosophy which has three primary aims: teaching through conversation, taking out external input such as course book and technology and letting the lesson content be driven by the students rather than being pre-planned by the teacher. Based on the 'Dogme ELT' approach to teaching, its origins lie in an article written in 2001 by Scott Thornbury and Luke Meddings called 'The roaring in the chimney'. They later wrote 'Teaching Unplugged', a comprehensive guide to this type of teaching and winner of the British Council ELTons award for Innovation in 2010.

The 'Teaching Unplugged' or 'Dogme ELT' movement has a very strong following amongst teachers. In fact, the [Dogme ELT discussion list](#), which was originally set up in March 2000 by Scott Thornbury to help bring this style of teaching to the fore, has now been disbanded, not due to lack of interest but because he felt the support had become so strong the method was ready to stand alone.

The main reason it's become so popular is that the main focus is one hundred per cent on the students' actual language needs. Take for example the elementary student who comes into class and says excitedly 'See..friend..no see....fifteen years!' Instead of saying 'Oh, that's nice! Now open your book at page twenty seven, we're looking at the past simple', the teacher constructs the sentence on the board: 'I've just seen a friend I haven't seen for fifteen years!' The beauty is that, even if this use of the present perfect doesn't come up in your course until pre-intermediate, you're confident that the student knows exactly what this means as it is her own sentence and you're absolutely sure you've just taught her something new as she definitely couldn't say it before. The teacher then encourages other questions if students take an interest. 'How.. you...know?' 'Where...you..meet?' 'What..he ..do..fifteen years?' 'He change?' The teacher now has a board full of great questions and a topic which can then be used as the basis for the class.

Another benefit of the teaching unplugged method is that it takes out all external input. This in turn brings down barriers that exist between the teacher and students. There's no hiding behind texts and media content. You sit openly with your students, not being afraid of silence in the classroom, and allowing students time to collect their thoughts. The situation is no longer 'them' and 'us' but everyone working together as a group with the teacher as facilitator and resource rather than director of the class. A teacher who began using this technique half-way through an academic year suddenly found out that his pre-intermediate class included, amongst other professions, a concert pianist and a comedian. Until then they had been a group of people who had worked through exercises and didn't speak English very well.

On a practical note you never waste time on annoying technical difficulties that can take up a surprising amount of class time, (the sound's not great on this CD player, I can't get the DVD to work, the internet's down again), and there are a large number of students who spend all their day staring at screens who find it a welcome relief to 'get back to basics'. It's a method that is great for teachers working in difficult circumstances as you don't need any equipment, course books or photocopies, which, of course, makes it very ecologically friendly too. It also means that whole lessons can be planned anywhere, anytime; or planning can be done away with altogether. Teachers can spend their time learning about the language they teach rather than learning how to use a photocopier.

It's quite easy to see why a method that focuses so well on the students and their needs and means little or no preparation is going to be popular with teachers, but what about the drawbacks? Probably the biggest disadvantage is related to student or parent expectations. Many students pay for a teacher whom they expect to direct the class and make the decisions about what is learnt. They expect a syllabus and a course book, or at least pieces of paper with work or notes on. If this kind of teaching is introduced without proper care students might just feel that the teacher hasn't 'bothered' to plan a lesson and is in fact 'winging it' rather than involving them in a whole new learning experience designed to perfectly suit their needs. They may feel that this kind of learning puts the onus on them and, if they are tired after a long day of work or studies they may simply prefer someone else to take charge of their learning.

The other disadvantage is that it's a course without technology. While this may have the previously mentioned benefits, it also means a course that ignores an amazing resource. A teaching unplugged course could appear outdated and old fashioned to some students who have become used to judging a service or product on the quality of its technological prowess. This is also a course without a course book and less experienced teachers can feel nervous about not knowing what they are going to teach in advance and they certainly won't have teachers' notes or answers. In an unplugged lesson anything can come up and if the teacher seems unable to deal with the unplanned emergent language, the students could lose confidence in them. Furthermore, if you take away the course book, the internet, articles from newspapers and magazines and all the other language input that we bring into class, the teacher may well feel a little exposed. What do I do if things run dry? What if nobody has anything to say?

So, if you've never tried this method, many teachers will whole-heartedly recommend that you embrace it and never look back. There's also no need to take the purist approach to Dogme ELT or Teaching Unplugged. Rather than banning technology from your classroom and binning the course book that students have spent their hard earned money on, you can always plan in an 'open' part of the lesson where you introduce a subject and react to the language that comes up.

You could also consider some kind of awareness raising activity first to prepare your students so they don't think you've either become lazy or that you don't know how to use the technology sitting in the classroom!

Further reading / activities:

<http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2010/02/28/d-is-for-dogme/>

Article 'The roaring in the chimney'

<http://www.thornburyscott.com/tu/Harmer%20response.htm>

the Dogme ELT discussion list

Live lesson: Dogme by Luke Meddings

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/seminars/live-lesson-dogme>

By Stuart Wiffin

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-unplugged> 27.03.2014

Teaching Unplugged - Activities

Submitted by swiffin on 26 March, 2014 - 10:07

If you'd like to have a first go at 'Teaching Unplugged' your aim is simply to get students to produce language and then to use the language they produce as the basis for your lesson.

The most important part of 'Teaching Unplugged' for the teacher is not how you generate the emergent language (that is the language that the students produce as they are talking) but what you do with the language.

The subject you choose can literally be anything in the world but to start off think about the following:

Chewing the fat!

This is the true Dogme ELT approach. You don't go in with your idea of the subject of the lesson but you take your lead from your group of students. Don't be afraid to simply ask your students what they did at the weekend or how their journey was to class. It is, after all, the basis of natural conversation. If you can show students how you can take what they say and turn it into a real learning point, they'll start to understand that you're not just being polite and that this chat is the core part of the lesson.

A task in which students need to work together to come to a conclusion (task-based learning)

If a shop or restaurant has closed down nearby ask students to decide what they think should replace it.

You're thinking of watching a film in English in class. Ask for five or six ideas of films then get students first to come up with the criteria for choosing, then to discuss, make a decision and give reasons for their decision.

Opinions and debates

Start students off on any controversial topic you think will create discussion. You should take into account cultural norms and taboos and maybe ask students to list some examples before choosing one.

Create an experience

Walk in silence round a nearby park or round the building where the lesson takes place. Tell students that, when they get back to the class, they are going to talk about what they saw, what they heard and what they were thinking. When you get back to the class, ask students to work in pairs or groups to talk about what they saw, what they heard and what they were thinking. If it's not possible to do this in class time, ask students to complete the task for homework and note down any thoughts immediately after their walk in preparation for talking about them in the next class.

Topics that may spark anecdotes

My scar. The last time you ... (gave someone a present, went to a restaurant). My first memory. My worst teacher.

Once the students are talking as a whole class, in groups, in pairs or with you (for one-to-one classes), this is where the important work begins. Listen and make notes of mistakes or instances where students needed different or more

advanced language to express themselves properly. This is where your expertise as a teacher really comes into play. Judge what is most useful for this particular student or group. Low levels will have problems forming questions, using the past and basic vocabulary items, whereas very high levels will need expressions and idioms to refine and improve their communicative ability. Write up the key information so you can discuss problems and new language as a class, let students ask questions and make notes. Language points you're not sure of can be taken away and dealt with in a following lesson. At least then you'll know it if it ever comes up again.

While many learners take instantly to this chatty approach, it could be that your students feel that this kind of activity is not serious or studious enough, or they may even feel that you've just come to class unprepared. If so, it could be that a small amount of awareness-raising may be enough to convince them that you're not lazy! Start with a short unplugged activity such as asking them to talk about what they've done that day. Collect useful language as suggested above and then go through the language that came up. Leave time at the end to revisit the activity. Ask students why you asked them what they'd been doing:

Was it because you were interested? Hopefully, partly yes!

Was it for a learning reason? Yes.

What language did you learn? Look again at the examples.

Why did you, the teacher, think this was good language for the students to be learning? Because it was all language they needed and didn't have.

How did they find the experience?

Would they like to try this kind of activity again? Why? Why not?

Then, even if they agree it's not at all for them, they'll know that you had their learning needs in mind and you weren't just desperately trying to fill in unplanned lesson time!

By Stuart Wiffin

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-unplugged-activities-27.03.2014>

Dogme and Technology

Submitted by SteveM on 26 March, 2014 - 08:55

Neither strict dogmeticians nor techno evangelists, we are simply teachers who appreciate both a good Dogme moment and easy-to-use technology that makes our job easier and the learners more autonomous. What do we mean by a good Dogme moment? For us, it is one where there is conversation going on generated by the learners themselves, who ideally, for a short period of time, have forgotten that they are in a classroom. As for easy-to-use technology, below you will find some of our favourite tools for creating the conversation and feeding back on it. We are assuming a classroom with an internet connection although for some of them a smartphone or tablet will suffice.

Conversation

Conversation is by nature unpredictable because spontaneous questions and real answers will send people off on tangents. Our learners will always come up against the following problems, which technology can help with: I want to say something, but I don't know how to say it. I know this word, but I don't know how to pronounce it. I'm not sure if I can say it like this in English.

With lots of conversations going on in the classroom at the same time, it is impossible for the teacher to listen to everyone all the time. We encourage our learners to use whatever means they can in order to keep the conversation going. However, at the same time, we ask them to have pen and paper at the ready to make a note of any language difficulties, like the ones mentioned above. Meanwhile, we circulate taking our own notes.

Photos

Learners' own photos are a wonderful way to create conversation, especially pictures of family, holidays or simply something that caught their eye in the street. They no longer have to hunt through photo albums at home or prise pictures from frames and remember to bring them to class because nowadays they can all be found on their mobile devices. The activities? Tell us who you take after in your family, show us the most memorable place you've visited or compare favourite photos, to name but a few. When each learner has spoken about their image once to their partner, it is time for feedback and then they repeat the activity with a new group, the objective being an improved performance.

Feedback

When it comes to feedback, we use a shared Google Drive document (1), where we write down the answers to the learners' difficulties along with our own observations. The first time we do this, we show them how to link vocabulary to an online dictionary – great for pronunciation – and, if an image speaks a thousand words, to Google Images.

Every day we add to the document so that it becomes a record of the language that has emerged in class. We send learners a link to the document and each week one of them also receives editing rights so that the responsibility for linking to the dictionary/images is theirs.

Vocabulary and pronunciation

All of us have struggled at some point when asked how to use a particularly tricky item of vocabulary. In these cases the British National Corpus (2) can be a lifesaver, and learners are always impressed by the concept and the information it contains. It can be extremely useful to show learners what they can or cannot do with new vocabulary. What it does not do, however, is help them with sounds they are having difficulty producing.

For this we use the phonemic chart, and recommend learners to download the free app (3). In class it is a useful tool for familiarising the learners with the symbols and sounds, and outside class they can use it to check pronunciation and practise. We also encourage learners to use an online dictionary (4). The advantages over a paper dictionary are threefold: it is much quicker to look up the word, learners can listen to the pronunciation, and they do not need to carry two kilos of dictionary around with them.

Presentations

Everybody has a hidden talent or is an expert in something and we make it our mission to find out what it is, but before we do that, we give a short informal talk of our own to give learners a feel for the exercise, and also because they will be more forthcoming if we share first. We then ask each of them to do the same.

They prepare at home and if they use presentation software to illustrate their talk, no reading from slides is allowed. As with all good Dogme activities, the listeners have to be active and are under strict instructions to ask lots of questions after the talk. Recent examples have included How to use Photoshop, Mixing the perfect gin and tonic (with tasting included) and Ten things you never knew about Argentina. In some cases, learners have even learnt a new skill on YouTube or Videjug, such as balloon modelling or juggling, and taught it to the rest of the class!

As the talks are happening, we make notes on the speaker's linguistic performance, which we write up on the computer after the class. We then use a free software tool called Jing (5) to send them feedback. As long as your computer has a microphone and a camera, Jing allows you to record what is happening on the screen plus your commentary for up to five minutes. You can then send this recording as a link via email, and it becomes an individual listening comprehension exercise for the learner in question. A nice follow-up to this is to ask learners to record and send you a video message using MailVu (6) reacting to the experience in class and to your feedback.

We have been fans of conversation-driven language learning for a long time, and it forms a major part of our everyday classes. The golden rule for us when using technology is that it should serve to enhance the learning experience in that context. The tools we have mentioned are free, easy to use and have proved popular with learners.

Resources

1. You could introduce your learners to Google Docs via this video:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRqUE6IHTEA>
2. <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>
3. <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/activities/phonemic-chart>
4. Cambridge <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
Macmillan <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>
Longman <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>
5. Russell Stannard explains Jing <http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/Jing/index.html>
6. He also explains MailVu <http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/mailVu/index.html>

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