

Teaching teens

I provide them with blank tables for this, but I let them decide upon the criteria for evaluation and whether they work with numerical entries or comments. This is a task they rise to, inventing a wide range of categories, including homework completed, participation, attitude, reading or speaking skills, pronunciation and groupwork. When they ask how their marks will be used, my response is usually the following: 'Your exact appraisals will not appear on the report cards of your classmates, but how well they work in your lesson, which will be reflected by the feedback you hand me at the end, will certainly play a role in their end-of-term marks.'

Practice

During these lessons, I take a back seat, speaking as little as possible, if at all. The student-teachers can refer any difficult questions to me, and occasionally I may intervene to remind a student that they might be making those student-teachers' lives more difficult than they need to be. Beyond the language classroom, we often assume a greater responsibility for the content of what we say than we do during a language lesson, where we primarily concentrate on using the correct forms. In the 'real world', speaking is much closer to action, in that we have personal and practical reasons for saying what we say – and personal and practical consequences follow. In the classroom, our students operate within a reduced scope of action, as compared to when they get outside – reduced choice of when to speak, reduced opportunity to personalise, reduced about or to whom, decide what to speak about or to whom, reduced movement and reduced sense of 'doing' in general. In an English class, speaking can sometimes feel divorced from doing. Speaking is just speaking – speaking for speaking's sake: to practise. The student-led lessons described here help restore the connection between teachers and doing. What the student-teachers say is their lesson. In this sense, we manage to lessen the sensation of suspended reality or the feeling that our students' lives are in some way on hold until the lesson is over.

Power

Classes like these also constitute an exercise in how to manage power in an organised and structured way that is beneficial to everyone. Respect for the teacher figure or 'teacher as person', a given that is usually demanded by default, develops towards respect for the teacher role. Whoever is in the driving seat on a particular day is the one that needs to be listened to, as it is they who have done the groundwork and have knowledge to share. I would like to think this helps the students to move more flexibly between positions of lesser and greater responsibility and between the roles of helping and being helped. These are also, I believe, characteristics that would be shared by a fairer, more sustainable, society in general.



During their lessons, the student-teachers fill out evaluation tables for their classmates, but it is they themselves who decide upon the criteria for success and the format their entries will take.



What is certain, and what I have observed very clearly, is that when freed up to manage lesson material by themselves, teenage students sometimes take the initiative and come up with explanations or turns on a task that the teachers themselves might not have done. The student featured in the last photograph, for instance, used her first language to provide her classmates with a translation of *unless* that was far more accurate than the translation I had been using for well over a decade. Another student-teacher from the same group told the class that they were going to do a traditional dictation and that the dictated material would be a paragraph taken from a full-page reading text in the coursebook. Before closing their books to do the dictation, the class had five minutes to look at the full text and familiarise themselves with its argument and language. The twist was that he refused to say in advance which the dictated paragraph would be, giving them a very valid reason to read all the paragraphs as closely as possible. 'You need to look at all the paragraphs because it might be any of them,' he explained, 'and if you concentrate now, the dictation will be easy.'

Examples such as these serve to fuel my conviction that our students are our most powerful resource. **ETP**

I would like to thank the students appearing in the photos, and their parents, for allowing me to use the images.



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