

# ETpedia™

## Teenagers

500 ideas for  
teaching English  
to teenagers

Edmund Dudley

Series editor: John Hughes

[www.myetpedia.com](http://www.myetpedia.com)

Pavilion



# ETpedia

## Teenagers

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# Introduction

# 10 reasons for using this resource

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## 1. You're new to teaching

Less experienced teachers will find this a useful and practical introduction to working with teenage students.

## 2. You need some ideas

More experienced teachers in search of new ideas will find good, practical activities and techniques here.

## 3. You're struggling with teens

This book does more than provide classroom ideas: it aims to help teachers better understand teenagers, and to empathise with some of the issues that teenagers have in the classroom.

## 4. You've never taught teens before

Experienced teachers who are about to work with teenagers for the first time will get a sense of the unique challenge posed by teenage classes.

## 5. You read on the run

Teachers who need something bite-sized that they can dip into between classes will appreciate the format of the book.

## 6. You're looking for staffroom discussion-starters

Senior teachers and heads of department can select units of the book to kick-start staffroom conversations, peer collaboration and idea-sharing among colleagues.

## 7. You want something that works

The ideas in the book are designed to be simple, effective and down-to-earth.

## 8. You haven't got much time to prepare lessons

Most of the practical ideas and activities in this book are straightforward and need little or no preparation.

## 9. You enjoy teaching

This book is written for teachers who love teaching, and who want their lessons to be memorable and enjoyable – both for their students and themselves.

## 10. You're curious about other teachers' experiences with teens

The author has spent many years working with teenagers, thinking about the teenage classroom and discussing teaching with colleagues. The book is a culmination of that process.

# 10 ways to use this resource

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## 1. Use it to get ideas when planning lessons

This book can be dipped into when planning practical activities for lessons.



A number of units contain an activity based on a photocopiable handout which you will find in the Appendix (pages 139–153).

## 2. Talk about it with your colleagues

Read a unit and then discuss it with your colleagues. Share your own ideas and techniques.

## 3. See what your teenage students think about it

Use one of the units (for example, Unit 4) as reading input in one of your classes. Ask your teenage students if they agree with the views expressed about teenagers.

## 4. Read it critically

No two teenage classes are the same, and experiences differ. Modify and adapt ideas to suit your own needs.

## 5. Add your own ideas in the margins

Use this book as a notebook. Jot down your thoughts and new ideas in the margins of each unit.



You can also use pages 152–153 to create your own list of 10 tips.

## 6. Read a unit a week

Tackle one short unit a week for a manageable and beneficial reading challenge.

## 7. Try out one idea every week

Choose an idea that you like from each practical unit. Try it out.

## 8. Open it at a random page

Open the book at random, read one unit, and make a note of one idea to try out, or one view about teenagers to discuss with a colleague.

## 9. Compile a 'Top 50'

Read the book from cover to cover. At the end of each unit, circle the point that you like the most.

## 10. In case of emergency

Keep the book in the staffroom for those moments when you need a quick idea for your next lesson.

# 10 facts about the author

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## Edmund Dudley ...

- ▶ is from the UK, but lives in Budapest.
- ▶ started teaching in 1992.
- ▶ is a freelance trainer, materials writer and teacher.
- ▶ has regular classes with teenage students at PTE Babits Secondary School in Pécs, Hungary.
- ▶ also speaks Hungarian – his students’ mother tongue – although English is his first language.
- ▶ has two daughters, one of them still a teenager. They both agreed to read several units of the first draft of this book, and told their dad which parts were a bit rubbish, which parts weren’t that bad, and which parts were cool. He thinks they’re the ones who are cool.
- ▶ is the co-author (with Erika Osváth) of *Mixed-Ability Teaching*, published by OUP.
- ▶ occasionally posts ideas and materials for teachers at [legyened.edublogs.org](http://legyened.edublogs.org).
- ▶ travels a lot and posts pictures on Instagram as [edtothemund](https://www.instagram.com/edtothemund).
- ▶ wasn’t always much fun to be around while this book was being written. He is therefore extremely grateful to Sinéad Laffan for her good humour, constant support and expert professional insights, especially about teaching pronunciation and listening. The best ideas in those units are hers.





# Preparation and planning

Although there are no hard-and-fast rules about what teenagers are like, teachers who have worked with teens for a long time tend to agree on some of the things that teenagers value in interactions with their teachers – and also on the things that they object to. No such judgements on our part can be completely authoritative – or indeed true for everyone – but this section attempts to list some of these key teen characteristics in the hope that being aware of them can help to make sure that our planning and preparation process is optimised.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the teenage classroom is that you're never quite sure how students are going to react to the materials and activities planned for that day. This can make the task of preparation quite challenging. As teachers, it's important for us to acknowledge – and embrace – that uncertainty. As the units in this section attempt to show, no two teenage groups are the same, and all the individual teenagers in the room are themselves undergoing the significant changes brought on by adolescence. The result is that teenagers often take us by surprise with their responses and reactions to our lessons. Anticipating this beforehand is one step towards being able to deal with it effectively in the classroom.

Careful preparation of language-learning materials is essential of course, as is an attempt to select materials that feel appropriate and interesting. Successful lessons with teenagers sometimes require something beyond appropriate materials, though: teenagers are often looking for a sense that we 'get' them as learners – and as people. The first section of this book, therefore, devotes several units to the important matter of how we can find out about our teenage students. Once we have equipped ourselves with useful information about our students, the materials that we are working with can often be tweaked and tailored to reflect their interests and preferences.

Preparing and planning lessons for teenagers therefore involves looking at both language-teaching considerations and the interpersonal dynamics of the classrooms we work in. As long as we remain flexible in our thinking and open-minded with regard to our students, it is possible to plan lessons that work, and to prepare for classes effectively.

# 10 ways that teenagers are different from young learners

Adolescence affects students in different ways, so we need to be cautious when drawing conclusions about the ways in which teenage students are different from young learners. Having said that, it is a fact that the teenage years are characterised by the changes brought about by puberty. These changes are not only physical, they also have an effect on the way that students learn, feel and interact with others.

Here are some of the ways that teenagers are different from younger learners.

## 1. More grown up

Although they are still children in many ways, teenagers are maturing fast and are much more concerned with being treated like adults. In the classroom this means that they reject activities that they deem childish, and are – with some exceptions – generally much less willing to take part in activities that include total physical response, kinaesthetic learning or singing.

## 2. Longer attention spans

Teenagers have the capacity – though not always the desire – to concentrate for longer periods than young learners. Whereas successful lessons with young learners require huge amounts of variety and regular transitions from activity to activity, lessons with teenagers should be designed partly to nurture this growing capacity they have to sustain concentration for a longer period of time.

## 3. Better at abstract thinking

Changes to the brain mean that teenagers are better at thinking in abstract terms than young learners. They are also quickly learning to be more analytical and systematic in how they process information about the world. We need to make sure that their growing cognitive capacity is regularly fed with tasks that get them thinking.

## 4. Body-conscious

The changes to the body that teenagers experience in puberty have a truly significant impact on their lives and the way they see themselves and others. Teenagers are extremely body-conscious – some to the point of distraction – and this makes it hard for them to concentrate in class. As teachers, it is important that we demonstrate sensitivity, understanding and patience, for example by not drawing attention to students' physical appearance.

## 5. In a world of their own

The egocentrism of adolescence can make many teenagers hard to reach. They can appear distant, distracted, uncommunicative, or just lost in thought. Some teenagers can't seem to stop looking out of the window or at their own reflections. A patient and sensitive attitude from the teacher is the best way to navigate this obstacle. When students' minds have wandered, try to get their attention back in a way that does not make them feel embarrassed or singled out.

## 6. Brittle self-confidence

Although teenagers can appear brash and self-confident, they are far more sensitive to the opinions of others than young learners are, and often regulate their behaviour in order to try to influence what others say about them. Be mindful of the fact that teenagers can be extremely sensitive to offhand comments from their teachers, no matter how bulletproof their behaviour might appear.

## 7. More swayed by peer pressure

Peer pressure is at its highest during the teenage years, when the influence of a pack mentality can sometimes be detected in the decision-making and behaviour of individuals in class. Be aware of this when negotiating with teenagers or discussing issues that affect the whole group: talking to students one-to-one or asking them to write down their opinions individually are the best ways to counter the power of peer pressure and to discover what individuals really think.

## 8. Sexually aware

There is no avoiding the fact that teenagers are growing in sexual maturity and are often pre-occupied with the topic of sex. This can affect how they respond to certain topics and can influence how they conduct themselves in class when working with students they are trying to make an impression on. Teachers of teens need to be calm and assertive when establishing norms of acceptable interaction between students, but should also be understanding of the fact that the inappropriate behaviour of many teens is caused by confusion and insecurity.

## 9. More rebellious

Students tend to become more rebellious as they reach adolescence, a natural consequence of the many changes they are going through on the journey from childhood to adulthood. No longer children, yet not always capable of behaving like adults, teens sometimes see teachers as domineering adult figures who are trying to order them about. In class, this can lead to confrontations and resistance, which are best met with a calm and consistent response. Be willing to hear students out and to compromise where possible. When you stand your ground, do it in a mature and respectful way.

## 10. Less concerned with getting the teacher's approval

Unlike young learners, teenagers care less about what the teacher thinks about them and more about the opinion of their classmates. Telling teenagers you are 'disappointed in them' will not have the same effect as it has on younger learners. Ultimately, teens want to keep some kind of distance between themselves and the teacher, which is quite understandable. Accept it. In the long run, teenagers are actually more likely to warm to teachers who accept them as they are than to those who try to judge them or guilt-trip them.

# 10 ways that younger teens are different from older teens

At the risk of making generalisations, it's possible to notice a gradual change in teenagers as they get older. Thirteen year olds and 14 year olds tend to conduct themselves in a different way from 18 year olds, and also have a noticeably different attitude towards the learning process.

Teenagers are also developing and maturing at different rates and in different ways, so in many cases we find that there can be a clash of norms within a single group. This is particularly true among 15 year olds and 16 year olds, where developmental differences between individual students can be most marked.

This unit focuses on younger teens, drawing attention to some of the ways in which they are likely to present a slightly different challenge from students a few years older.

## 1. Noisier

Younger teens are often noisier, more fidgety and more physically energetic in the way they behave in the classroom than older teens. In addition, they are often oblivious to the effect that their behaviour has on others. Be firm and patient when the lively behaviour of younger teens interferes with your teaching, and remember that others in the class are also put off by it. Work hard to establish and enforce ground rules, while also being tolerant of the fact that a certain level of animated behaviour is inevitable at this age.

## 2. Less self-disciplined

It takes teenagers a few years to develop enough self-discipline to avoid unnecessary conflicts. It can also be hard for them to anticipate the consequences of their actions, and to manage their time effectively. Although problems of this kind are found among teenagers of all ages, it tends to be most acute with younger teens. Instead of just telling them what they're doing is wrong, indicate what steps they can take to put things right.

## 3. More active and enthusiastic

Younger teenage students often have a strong sense of fun, and bring humour and energy to the classroom. They are often less jaded than older teenage students, who tend to be slightly more serious and goal-oriented. Younger teens want to enjoy themselves in class, and are generally more willing to take part enthusiastically in activities that offer them the chance to do this.

## 4. More attention-seeking

There are usually more class clowns who are inclined to mess around in order to impress their friends or to try to draw attention to themselves in some way. As they mature, teenagers tend to outgrow the urge to be the centre of attention in lessons, and look for more subtle and sophisticated ways to get the attention and approval of their peers.

## 5. Less focused on exams and careers

Younger teens are generally more concerned with the here-and-now, while the priorities of older teens are more geared towards attaining their goals. As a result, it is difficult to get younger teens to take exam practice seriously, as anything happening in more than a year's time seems to be in the distant future. Older teens, meanwhile, are more concerned with passing their exams, and demand lessons that are more oriented towards helping them practise and prepare.

## 6. Less interested in abstract topics

As they get older, teenage students become more interested in abstract ideas and show greater interest in debating and discussing topics that extend beyond the confines of their own lives. Younger teens have a fast-growing interest in the world at large, but have generally spent less time thinking about abstract topics than their older peers.

## 7. Less life experience

A 14 year old usually has much more limited life experience than someone three or four years older than them, and this lack of experience can have an effect on how well younger teens are able to tackle tasks that draw on real-world situations. Bear this in mind when planning tasks and activities for lessons.

## 8. Less sure of themselves

Younger teens are soaking up the world around them, and as a result are still in the process of forming some of the opinions and values that they will come to have as adults. Older teens generally have a clearer idea of where they stand on certain issues, and so are more self-assured when asked to express opinions, especially on topics connected to the outside world.

## 9. More adventurous

By the time they leave secondary school, many teenagers have fairly pragmatic expectations and ambitions for themselves; younger teens, meanwhile, are more likely to have big dreams. They often have an adventurous, more optimistic outlook on life, which can be harnessed with appropriate tasks in the language classroom.

## 10. More impulsive

Younger teens are generally more impulsive and spontaneous than their older peers. In class, we might notice that they sometimes do and say things that appear thoughtless or insensitive. Older teens, with greater life experience, are generally more tactful and measured, and usually have better social skills.

# 10 ways that teenagers are different from adult learners

We have already seen that teenage students respond well to being treated like adults. It is important to remember, though, that there are many ways in which teenagers are significantly different from grown-ups.

The following characteristics are not necessarily true of all older teenagers, but they should be taken into consideration by teachers who have decided to approach their teenage students in the same way they would approach a group of adult learners.

## 1. Less likely to empathise with the teacher

Teenage students are more likely to consider their teacher an authority figure, and do not see themselves as their teacher's social equals in the same way that adult students might. This can mean that they are more deferential or passive when it comes to negotiating learning, or that it is harder for them to empathise with the teacher's aims and perspectives than it is for adult learners.

## 2. Less willing to ask for help

Adult learners tend to be more confident about asking for help or indicating that they do not understand something in class. Teenagers, on the other hand, are more likely to stay silent and try to muddle through the best they can. Be aware of this, and take steps to ensure that teenagers have access to extra explanations and support when you sense that it might be appropriate.

## 3. More inclined to take risks

The teenage years are associated with risk-taking, and this can have both positive and negative consequences in the language classroom. The teenage attitude of 'let's-see-what-happens' can mean that lessons are enriched by students' spontaneous ideas and off-the-cuff remarks, but it can also result in slapdash work and a less methodical approach to studying.

## 4. Less autonomous

With greater life skills and learning experience, adult students are generally better equipped to find the resources they need to learn independently outside the classroom. Teenagers need more guidance. Remember to discuss study skills with your teenage students, and share techniques to help them become more autonomous in their learning (see Unit 21).

## 5. More willing to accept uncertainty

Teenagers are generally less concerned with the gaps in their knowledge and understanding than their adult counterparts. For example, you might find that teenagers have better gist reading skills, simply glossing over the unknown words they encounter in a reading text. Adult learners, on the other hand, often want to know the meaning of every new word straight away.

## 6. More likely to switch off in class

The motivation of teenage students is often less clear-cut than that of adult students. Whereas many adult students are instrumentally motivated to learn English for better life and career prospects, and have signed up – and paid – for their English classes with a determination to get the most out of them, the situation with teenagers is hazier. In many cases, teens take English classes because they have to, or because a family member is paying for them to do so. As a result, they are less likely to be self-driven, and more likely to drift when they are not in the mood to learn.

## 7. Less interested in grammar and language analysis

As exams approach, older teenage students begin to take an interest in grammar practice and language analysis activities, but generally speaking these are not things that they enjoy in their own right. For that reason, lessons with teenagers always need to have a strong communicative element. Adult learners on the other hand, tend to be interested in both analysing language and communicating in English.

## 8. Less skilled at managing their time

Teenagers often underestimate how much time they are going to need to complete a task, and also have a tendency to put things off. This can lead to late assignments and rushed work. Give them plenty of advance notice and reminders to help them get their work done on time. Adult learners, despite their busy schedules and out-of-class commitments, usually have much better time-management skills.

## 9. More emotional

Although mature in many ways, older teenagers find it harder to regulate their emotions than adults, and are sometimes hampered in their learning by their emotional states. Adults are usually – but not always – better at leaving the problems of everyday life at the classroom door.

## 10. Better mobile-phone etiquette

We often complain that teenagers are obsessed with their devices, but they are much better than adults at remembering to switch off their phones in class, and deserve credit for this. When a phone rings unexpectedly in the middle of the lesson, it is most likely to be the teacher's. If we are going to lay down the law about the use of mobile phones in class, we need to make sure that our own phone is switched off first.

# 10 things that teenagers value in their teachers

It can take time to gain the respect of a group of teenage students, no matter how good the teacher's intentions are. One of the reasons for this slow process is that teenagers tend to feel slightly threatened by new teachers, and so can be quite cautious and reactive when they encounter them for the first time. Teenagers are not usually keen to articulate the things that they value in a teacher, partly because – unlike adult learners – they are less confident in their status as 'equal partners' in the classroom and so tend not to make suggestions, instead preferring to wait and see how the teacher wishes to work.

On the other hand, teenagers are very quick to express dissatisfaction with working methods and tasks, even if they cannot always offer an explanation as to why they do not like them or suggest a better alternative. By noticing the things that teenage students resent in a teacher's working methods, it's sometimes possible to figure out what they actually value.

## 1. Willingness to experiment

Although teenagers certainly prefer a well-prepared and methodical teacher to one who is unprepared and disorganised, a little bit of novelty and creativity will also go down well. When teens complain that a lesson is 'boring', what they actually mean is that it is predictable. Try to find a new twist on revision activities rather than always doing them in the same way. (See, for example, Unit 34.3: Mini-interviews from workbook questions.)

## 2. Consistency

For all that they value novelty and innovation in language-learning activities, teenagers do want predictability and consistency from their teachers when it comes to managing the classroom and handling evaluation. Don't spring surprise tests on them, for example, or go back on your word about lesson content.

## 3. Fairness

Teenagers have the capacity to endure uninspiring lessons without getting frustrated or upset, but they will never forgive a teacher for a perceived act of unfairness. Pay special attention to how you treat students, making sure that no one receives preferential or discriminatory treatment. Avoid double standards: if student A gets into trouble for not doing the homework on Monday, but student B is let off with a smile the next day for the same oversight, the rest of the group will rightly be annoyed.

## 4. Willingness to use technology

Don't feel intimidated by teens' mastery of technology. They are actually more interested in our attitudes towards technology than our ability to master it ourselves. Naturally, teens respect those teachers who already use technology as well as they do, but they are also generally happy to explain and demonstrate apps and programs to less tech-aware teachers – provided we show a genuine interest and willingness to learn.



## 5. Not embarrassing students

Avoid comments that put individual students in embarrassing situations. Teenagers are highly concerned with how other people see them, and are particularly aware of the danger of losing face in front of their classmates. Insensitive comments by teachers (about a new hairstyle, clothes, pronunciation, test results, etc.) can make teenagers cringe – even if the comment itself is positive or seemingly innocuous. Remember that teenagers are not really interested in winning the approval of the teacher: it's the other students in the class whose opinions matter to them. Keep personal comments to a minimum. Teenage students notice if we respect them in this way, and tend to respect us back as a result.

## 6. Curiosity about their interests

When teenage students do talk about their interests in class, it can be demoralising if the teacher does not show much curiosity or interest. Such an attitude comes across as belittling and dismissive. If teenage students are particularly engaged by a topic that is of personal interest to them, encourage them – but do not require them – to bring in some extra information about the topic to the next lesson, or to do a mini-presentation on the topic. It is not necessary to share the student's enthusiasm, merely to show interest and to pay attention.

## 7. Sensitivity to students' schedules

Teenagers often have tough daily schedules, with a number of different teachers of other subjects all making demands of them at the same time. A common complaint among teens is that a teacher 'only thinks about his/her own subject'. Rather than announcing the date of a test, for example, ask the class in advance which day would suit them best, and try to come up with an arrangement that works for everyone. You might try the class-rep technique for this (see Unit 14.1).

## 8. Willingness to negotiate

As noted above, teenage students appreciate it when teachers demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to negotiate with them. In addition to giving plenty of advance notice when it comes to announcing tests and out-of-class assignments, bear in mind that teens respond well to being given options and being allowed to take responsibility for their own learning.

## 9. Setting an example

Teenagers expect their teachers to live up to the standards that they set for their students. For example, if it isn't acceptable for students to say that they didn't have time to do the homework, teenage students will resent it when we say that we didn't have time to correct the assignments that we promised to have ready for the lesson.

## 10. Ending the class on time

Resist the temptation to take another minute or two at the end of the lesson to finish an activity or explanation. Break times are precious for teenagers, and every second counts. Keep an eye on the clock and make sure you let the students go as soon as the bell goes at the end of class.

# 10 ways to find out about your teenage learners

Make an effort to find out about your teenage students. Try to discover what their learning needs and preferences are, why they are studying English, what they hope to achieve, but also something unrelated to school. The more relevant information we have about our students, the easier it is to plan lessons and learning activities that they will enjoy.

Teenagers really appreciate it when their teachers show an interest in them, and this can help to build a positive classroom dynamic. On the other hand, we should remember not to go too far. Teenagers are guarded about their private lives. We have no right to interrogate them or to demand that they share personal information.

The ideas below are all ways in which teachers can get to know their students better.

## 1. Set a personal example

Sharing information needs to be reciprocal. If we want our teenage students to provide us with information about themselves, we first need to set an example by telling the students relevant information about ourselves.

## 2. Ask questions

Keep questions simple and provide options for them to choose from. Don't be too direct. Questions such as *What kinds of learning activities do you prefer?* or *What do you want to do when you leave school?* are often too broad. Instead, narrow things down by providing options, for example:

*Do you prefer [activity-type A] or [activity-type B]?*

*Rank these jobs in order of preference.*

As you discuss their answers, other further useful information tends to emerge.

## 3. Listen to what they say

There is little point in asking questions if we don't listen to what students say. Really pay attention when students are talking about themselves. Look at them, listen carefully, and perhaps ask a follow-up question to demonstrate that you have been listening. Thank them for their answer.

## 4. Keep your eyes open

There are countless ways we can pick up snippets of information about students in the course of a lesson just by watching them. Notice what students are doing when they enter the classroom. Pay attention to the social interaction between members of the group. Watch students as they do pairwork or individual tasks (see Unit 15.9). Notice how well they listen to others. Take note of what they do when they have finished a task.

## 5. Ask them to share a website

Ask students to share a website that they think is useful or interesting. It can be a general website, or one connected to English learning. If you have the technology in your classroom, get each student to load the website they have chosen and say a few words about it. If you have an online class group set up, get students to post the link there.

## 6. Get them to write you a letter of introduction

This traditional technique is a good, if slightly old-fashioned way of getting information about your students. Tell students that you would like them to introduce themselves to you in a letter. Explain that the letter will help you to find out useful information about them, both as learners and as individuals. Ask them to tell you about themselves in their letter, focusing on information that is interesting (for example, favourite leisure activities) and useful (for example, number of years spent learning English, or plans for the future). Tell them not to include information that is obvious (for example, which school they attend) or irrelevant (for example, names and ages of their parents). Do the activity in class rather than setting it as a homework task in order to demonstrate that you value the information enough to dedicate lesson-time to gathering it. Keep the letters and re-read them throughout the year. The students normally put a lot of effort into them and they often contain some very useful information.

## 7. Create an online group

Set up a class group on an online educational platform or through social media. Use this as a way of communicating with students between lessons and as a way of sharing links and relevant information. You could ask students to post their opinions about a link you have added; alternatively, you could ask them a question in connection with using the internet for group communication (for example, to find out how many other online groups they belong to). This will give you an idea of how accustomed they are to online communication; it will also give you some information about their other interests and commitments.

## 8. Post a survey or poll

Use a survey generator (such as Google forms or Survey Monkey) to create a survey with relevant questions for the students to answer. Alternatively, use the polling function in your online group to find out students' opinions and preferences.

## 9. Get them to post a message

As an alternative to tip 6, get students to send you their introductory letter as a direct message in your online group.

## 10. Ask them to post a video

As a further alternative to writing about themselves, ask students to film themselves talking about their interests, hobbies, etc. They can send the finished video to you in the class group.

# 10 questions to ask teenagers

Ask teenage students the questions from this unit at the beginning of the year, or after you have had a few lessons together. If it is a new group, some of the questions will give students a chance to reflect on past learning experiences with different teachers. If you have already been working with the group for a year or more, the questions will provide a structure with which they can provide ongoing feedback.

Questions can be asked face-to-face in class, where they can provide the basis for small-group discussions. Alternatively, invite students to hand in written answers to the questions, or to post them to your online class group, if you have one.

In order to help students reflect on past lessons, try brainstorming the different activities they can remember doing. Students can work together to make posters, mind maps or lists, which can then be referred to when students answer the questions.



See page 140 of the Appendix for a photocopiable list of the questions.

## 1. What was your least favourite lesson last year? Why?

As you go through the responses, try to notice the main reasons cited: was it connected to topic choice, language level, working mode, or something else?

## 2. What was your favourite lesson last year? Why?

Again, see if you can draw conclusions from the answers given that can help you to identify a winning formula for planning lessons that work well.

## 3. What would you like us to stop doing in English lessons? Why?

Students usually select an activity type, often connected to assessment, but occasionally they pick up on our classroom-management habits as well.

## 4. What would you like us to keep doing in English lessons? Why?

This is a way of finding out which activities and techniques our students value.

## 5. What do you think it would be worth trying out in English lessons? Why?

This provides students with a window to make suggestions, perhaps based on good techniques that they have experienced with other teachers. Very often students just say 'Everything's OK the way it is', but it's always worth asking this question as they will be unlikely to say what they feel otherwise.

## 6. If you could choose, would you prefer to spend more time or less time learning English? Why?

This is a deceptively simple question, which can actually elicit all manner of opinions and reactions from students. Reading their answers will give us insights into the students' attitudes and motivation levels, and it may also tell us something about the effect that our own teaching is having.

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## 7. Which is the hardest day of the week for you at school? Why?

This is useful information to know, especially if you have an English lesson with the group on that particular day. You might want to make sure that you don't set deadlines or schedule tests to fall too regularly on this day of the week.

## 8. What is your opinion of the homework you get?

The answers you get should give you an idea of the students' opinion about the quantity and quality of out-of-class tasks that they are given.

## 9. What do you wish the teacher knew about you?

You never know how students are going to respond to this question. The answers you get can be facetious or serious. It's a question worth asking, though: sometimes students have something they want to get off their chest, and this question enables them to do it.

## 10. Is there anything you want to ask the teacher?

As above, this question is deliberately framed to be as open as possible. Students might ask questions about your plans for the year, they might make requests, or they might ask a personal question.

*"I ask students questions to help them become more aware of their own learning strategies. For example, asking students if they are better at remembering written words or spoken sounds can help them to start noticing their own strengths and weaknesses."*

**Diana Granado, Colombia**

# 10 things to avoid when working with teenagers

It is not always easy to teach in such a way that teenagers respect and appreciate our efforts, but it is very easy to pick up habits that work against us. With teenagers, the key thing to remember is their strong sense of justice. It is particularly important not to make decisions in the classroom that appear to be unfair, or to make assumptions about students which they feel to be ungrounded. Many of the ideas in this unit are concerned with avoiding such situations.

As teachers, we also have a serious responsibility to ensure that the students are under proper supervision during lesson time. Teenagers enjoy taking risks and acting recklessly in front of their friends, so we need to make sure that students' safety is never in jeopardy during the lesson. Accordingly, this unit also looks at avoiding situations in which the teacher could be held to account for not supervising students properly.

## 1. Arriving late for class

Our responsibility for the students begins when the bell rings for the start of the lesson, so get there in plenty of time. This is particularly important if the students are already in the classroom when the lesson begins. If an incident occurs after the bell and we are not there, we are potentially at fault.

## 2. Being influenced by the opinions of others

Our colleagues can be full of advice when they find out that we are about to start teaching a certain group of teenagers. They might say *Watch out for [Student A] – she's/he's a handful!* or *They're really smart, so work them hard.* Although such advice is well intended, it can lead to us having pre-conceived ideas about students we have not even met. It is best to be sceptical about such advice and to concentrate on treating each new class on its own merits. In any case, it is quite common for teenage groups to behave quite differently with different teachers.

## 3. Labelling students

Teachers sometimes fall into the trap of labelling certain students, perhaps based on first impressions, or maybe even based on their clothes, hairstyle or physical appearance. Avoid this counter-productive tendency, and keep an open mind about teenagers. An especially negative consequence of so-called 'labelling theory' is that it can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies: the teacher decides that a student is lazy, the student senses this, resents it, and stops trying.

## 4. Judgements about talent or ability

Try to promote a healthy growth mindset in your teenage students. Don't tell students that they're *smart, intelligent, or great at English* – praise them instead for working hard or being curious about the language. Similarly, never tell teenagers that they are *untalented or weak* – talk instead about the need to find an approach that works for them. (See Unit 20 for ideas about working with mixed-ability classes.)

## 5. Physical distance between the students and you

Teenagers sometimes try to put as much distance as they can between the teacher and themselves. Closer proximity makes communication easier, improves the classroom dynamic, and reduces the likelihood of discipline problems. Don't let teenage students fill up the classroom from the back row forwards. If there are empty spaces at the front, get students in the back to move forward. (See Unit 9.4).

## 6. Leaving the class mid-lesson

Just as arriving late for class is inadvisable, so is leaving teenage students unattended during a lesson. Occasionally you might realise in the middle of a class that you have left something on your desk in the staffroom. Don't go back for it yourself; instead, ask a responsible student to go and get it for you.

## 7. Springing unpleasant surprises

Don't give students unannounced tests or decide, spontaneously, to award a grade for the homework teenagers have just handed in. Similarly, do not call up individual students to give an oral presentation unless they have been warned in advance.

## 8. Comparing them to other groups

Teenagers hate it when the teacher compares them unfavourably to other groups, so don't say things like *I don't see what the fuss is about: I did this with 10B last week and they had no problems*. It never has the intended motivating effect, and merely fosters a sense of resentment.

## 9. Asking for information you don't actually want

Do yourself a favour and don't ask a question if you don't want to know the answer. If two distracted teenagers are doing something under the desk, asking *What are you doing?* is not a smart move. You actually don't want to know. Far better to say *Can you stop that, please?*

## 10. Losing your temper

Whatever happens, keep your cool. When emotions become strained in the classroom, we need to remain calm and assertive. Losing your temper with a class usually only adds additional strain to the situation and makes resolving problems even harder.

*"Coolness is in the eye of the beholder. So no matter how cool and eclectic you think your music collection is, your students won't agree with you. Let them find language forms in the music that they like and they'll be much more engaged."*

**Donal Fogarty, University of San Gil, Colombia**

# 10 things to remember when planning lessons for teenage students

Two important elements of planning successful lessons are anticipation and flexibility. As you look through the materials for the forthcoming lesson, try to assess how appropriate you think the topic and tasks are for your teenage students, and make selected changes to the standard Teacher's Book lesson as necessary.

Once the lesson has begun, it is important to give yourself options. Given that teenagers' reactions to topics and activities often take us by surprise, it is worth getting into the habit of developing a flexible approach that leaves some room for manoeuvre. There is no reason to lock yourself into your own lesson plan. If something is going unexpectedly well, it makes sense to capitalise on that through extension and follow-up. If something is going badly, you might want to question the wisdom of soldiering on and consider alternative courses of action.

## 1. It's OK to overrule the Teacher's Book

The Teacher's Book might suggest an activity which, based on previous experience, you know the students are going to struggle with or dislike. A common example from the teenage classroom is reading texts out loud, which teenagers find difficult, time-consuming, embarrassing, and of questionable language-learning value. Try to re-work the activity to make it more student-friendly, rather than soldiering on with a task that is guaranteed to be unpopular.

## 2. Don't ask questions that are too personal

A common way of activating new language in controlled practice is providing students with personal questions to answer. As you read the questions in the lesson plan and think of further questions yourself, make sure that the questions you are going to ask are not too personal or prying. Teenagers can be very protective of their private lives.

## 3. Controversial topics need sensitive handling

In some teenage groups, a high level of language proficiency is offset by low levels of personal maturity. Be careful when dealing with potentially controversial topics, such as immigration or national stereotypes. Don't introduce such topics unless you know that the students will be able to deal with them in a measured, constructive and diplomatic way. Test the waters first, and, if necessary, put lessons that focus on controversial topics on hold until the students are mature enough to handle them.

## 4. Check that students' links and clips are appropriate

If students have been asked to give a presentation in which they show a video clip, check it first to make sure that its content is above board and appropriate for the language classroom. Teenagers are often poor judges of what belongs in the classroom and what does not.

## 5. Plan lessons in context

Bear in mind the time of day and the day of the week when planning lessons for teenagers, taking into consideration any factors that might affect how well the students are able to focus on the content of the lesson. For example, if the English lesson is right after a PE lesson, don't schedule a test for that day: students will be tired, flustered, and rushing to get to class on time.



## 6. Involve students in planning decisions

Broadcast your plans for upcoming lessons and give students the chance to express their opinions or make suggestions about content or scheduling. Teenagers appreciate this gesture from their teachers, and often have plenty of constructive things to say.

## 7. Be honest about difficulties

Planned lessons can go badly for a variety of reasons, and often we are not sure ourselves what has gone wrong. Make the effort to investigate. Talk about it with the students. *This isn't going very well, is it?* is not only an honest thing to say, it can also be very constructive. Teenagers respect this kind of honesty from the teacher, and in many cases will open up about the difficulties they are having with an activity. It is then sometimes possible to rescue the lesson by making changes to the lesson plan mid-class.

## 8. Seize unexpected openings

Sticking too rigidly to the lesson plan can cause us to miss opportunities for authentic communication with teenagers. Don't be afraid to pursue a topic with follow-up questions if students are responding with more enthusiasm than we expected. Similarly, if something unexpected happens during the lesson (for example, a bird lands on the classroom window sill), resist the temptation to restore order and instead explore the communicative potential of the situation, for example, by asking students to describe what they saw, heard or felt.

## 9. Give appropriate deadlines

The one aspect of our lesson planning that teenagers are sure to take a keen interest in is the scheduling of tests and assignments. Make sure that you give students adequate time to prepare for tests, and try to reach an agreement about the best day of the week to schedule them for. Teenagers are quick to complain if they feel that they are being unfairly burdened with work.

## 10. Learn from lesson-planning mistakes

An unsuccessful lesson is not the end of the world, and needn't be a reason to despair. Reflect on lessons that don't go as well as planned, perhaps by writing down a few thoughts at the end of the day. Think about what you would change to the lesson plan in the light of what happened, and consider how you will teach the lesson differently next time.

*"I think of teaching as  
'eventful' rather than 'stressful'  
– above all I plan to be  
surprised by my students!"*

**Hoang Thi Khanh Tam, Hue University, College of  
Foreign Languages, Vietnam**