

5 tips for teaching teenagers



Teenagers are often described as an unwelcome bunch of learners that pose multiple difficulties to teachers. And it may be true as it is for any age group when you do not know how to deal with them. I have been teaching teenagers for the past 20 years and they are in fact my favourite age group. So here are my top 5 tips for teaching teens.

Rapport: Building rapport with teens is essential for success. If you don't, they will probably complain about everything and anything you say or propose. A genuine interest in them and their lives will really improve your relationship with teenagers. They have a talent for seeing through you and knowing if you are being genuine or faking this interest. You could use the first minutes of class to engage in informal conversation about their lives.

Interests: Take time to get to know their interests and using them in your planning. You can do an online survey, for example with Survey Monkey, at the beginning of the year and then use the results to inform your planning. It's difficult to please everybody but you can go for popular topics chosen by many of your students. Even if your syllabus is constrained in terms of what you can add, you can organise reading, listening and speaking tasks around these topics of interest. You can also take into account their preferred type of activities: listening to music, watching whole films, watching short videos, etc., which will vary from group to group.

Choice: My favourite!!!! Build choice into your classroom activities. I have experimented with different ways of introducing choice into my lessons. It should be clear that you cannot just let students choose what they want to do. I refer to choice as a planned strategy within a lesson. In order to do so, you first need to identify the main objective of your task. That is not up for choice! Once your main objective is clear you can come up with more than one way of achieving it. The choice can be in the type of task, the tool to be used, the way to present it, among others.

Here are some examples:

- If you want students to write a narrative or argumentative essay or any other type of text, you can provide a few alternative titles for them to choose.
- If you want to revise certain vocabulary or grammar, you can write at least two different task types for the same concept.
- If you want students to make a presentation on a specific topic, you can let students choose what tool to use to make the presentation. Powerpoint? A video? A poster? Let them choose!

- If you want students to improve their presentations skills and fluency, you can allow them to choose the topic. Let it be something they are interested in! (which links to the previous tip)
- If you have worked with a book and you want students to do a wrap-up project, you can let them come up with ideas of what to do. You can always guide them by giving them a few options so that they know what you expect from them. In this case it is a wise idea to approve the choices before any work is done in order to avoid misdirected tasks or projects.

You may be thinking that this implies more work for the teacher and although it is in some cases, the benefits in terms of motivation are far greater.

Variety: Teens get bored easily. Use variety as your ally. You can vary topics, types of tasks, etc. Predictability can ruin your class. You can change the order in which you normally do things and come up with unexpected, original tasks to break down classroom routine. If you have the possibility of changing where you can have your class, do so! A classroom, a library, a playground, a garden.... Anywhere is good for a lesson. You can plan for specific tasks to be done in these alternative spaces.

Challenge: Do not play it safe.... Add challenge. Challenge can come in different ways.

- Creating slightly more difficult tasks. More difficult tasks will require more concentration on the part of the learners and will stretch their minds thus increasing student engagement
- Introducing competitions in the classroom. Most teens are very competitive and will get involved in almost any task if there is a competition element involved. Make sure you keep track of points and set up a prize system, maybe monthly.
- Going for open-ended tasks. You can provide multiple points of entry and allow for varied and multiple possible solutions. This is also related to choice and interests. It is also a way of personalising tasks. It will increase motivation and promote creativity.

If you have been assigned a group of teens, do not despair! Try these tips and experiment with your own ideas as well. Teens are as enjoyable as any other age group!

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