

20 steps to teaching unplugged

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/20-steps-teaching-unplugged-0>



Luke Meddings

Put aside your coursebook, and get your students talking! Luke Meddings provides a stimulating talk on the main ideas that underpin the teaching unplugged approach to English language teaching (ELT).

About this training session

In this talk, Luke Meddings provides a comprehensive overview of teaching unplugged in the field of English language teaching.

He uses twenty slides, presented in random order, to highlight and explain the main principles and ideas that underpin teaching unplugged'. He reminds us that teaching unplugged is based on a three-point framework. It should be:

- conversation driven
- materials light
- focused on emergent language.

In essence, he says that English language teaching does not have to follow the highly structured, linear approach to teaching that is traditionally found in coursebooks. Additionally, teachers can go beyond the prescribed ways of teaching that they have learned on pre-service and in-service teacher-training courses. Learning a language, he says, should be bottom-up and learner-centred.

Who is this seminar for?

- All teachers, regardless of experience, will find this seminar useful.
- Teachers in pre-service training programmes
- Teacher trainers
- Teachers and trainers interested in learner-centred classroom practice.

About the speaker

Luke Meddings is an award-winning author, trainer and international speaker. In 2000 he co-founded the Dogme ELT movement with Scott Thornbury, and their book *Teaching Unplugged* (Delta, 2009) won a British Council ELTon award in 2010. He and Lindsay Clandfield set up the independent e-publishing collective called 'The Round' in 2011. Their book, '52: a year of subversive activity for the ELT classroom', was published in 2012.

0. Twenty steps to teaching unplugged
1. Bend me, shape me
2. Using personal learning networks (PLNs)
3. Create reference points
4. See each lesson as a social event
5. Focus on your learners' language
6. Focus on your learners' lives
7. Be flexible
8. Revisit, revise, reshape
9. Turn everyday life into dialogues, role-plays and narratives
10. Say no to the photocopier!
11. What's the buzz?
12. Trust in the human
13. Get out of the way of learning
14. Find the angle
15. Full English
16. Keep learners on their toes
17. Make use of bottom-up technology
18. Use evolved learning practices
19. Get in the zone
20. Have fun!

Before you watch

Three of the twenty slides that make up Luke Meddings' talk are entitled:

- See each lesson as a social event
- Create reference points
- Use evolved learning practices such as repetition, drilling, and memorisation

What do you think these might mean in relation to:

- learner-centeredness?
- traditional classroom techniques?
- the syllabus?

Real life practice

Task 1 - for novice teachers

This is a structured lesson plan for teachers who would like a structured approach to trying out the teaching unplugged approach. It is based on a framework offered by Ken Lackman, called CAT (Conversation Activated Teaching), which he outlines in his blog post. With this framework he offers a way for teachers to take emergent language and reformulate it without being intrusive or dominant in a lesson.

- Invite students to choose a topic for focus in the lesson. After initial thinking time, brainstorm a list and ask the students to vote, select the most popular topic.
- Ask students to discuss the topic in pairs, with one student asking questions and the other student answering. Then change over. The conversation time can be as long or as short as you think desirable, depending on the value students are getting from the interaction. The teacher can monitor and make notes.
- The teacher then models this interaction with a volunteer student. They model the conversation together at the front of the class. Meanwhile, the rest of the class listens and notes down any key language, such as questions and expressions.
- Invite students to compare the language they have noted. Meantime, the teacher also notes down the language that came up and can be used for the language focus part of the lesson.
- Now there is a language focus section to the lesson. Focus on form, meaning and pronunciation. The teacher reconstructs the main language points onto the board. Elicit the language from students and write them on the board. Here you have two choices:
 1. Either write the language as actually said by the class, correct or incorrect, and take this as the starting point for focused work on language form. The class can be invited to correct it, or the teacher can correct it.
 2. Or if your focus is on the fluency of the lesson, the teacher can save time in this specific lesson by writing the correct form of the language directly onto the board (immediate reformulation).
- Then the students can form new pairs and practice the conversations on the chosen topic again, encouraged by the teacher to use as much of the correct language as possible.
- The conversations can be repeated with different pairs of students for as long as the students are enjoying the interaction and the opportunity to practice and learn the language.
- Further useful language exponents that arise can be added to the useful language on the board.
- Seek feedback from the students (all of them) on how they found this lesson.
- Share your findings with other teachers in your school or in your PLN (personal learning network).

Task 2 - for experienced teachers - experimentation - student leading the session

- In advance of your lesson, ask a confident student to bring to class something that they are really interested in – it could be a picture, a photo, a piece of music, a book, anything. Tell them that you would like them to tell the class about this interest for about three minutes. They can talk and invite questions, however they would like to do it, until the class have exhausted their questions on the subject.

- Tell the class, meanwhile, that in the next lesson the theme is 'something I am interested in' and that student 'x' will lead on this and that everyone will get a chance to chat, ask questions and talk about something they are interested in.
- The objective for professional development for you as a teacher will be to experiment with how you steer the lesson from this starting point, based on the theme of 'emergent language', which is one of the three main cornerstones of teaching unplugged. Then reflect afterwards with a fellow teacher on how it went.

Here are some ideas for how you might proceed after the student to class conversation. You might focus on:

- emergent language and speaking practice for the whole lesson
- emergent language in controlled form, meaning pronunciation and practice
- emergent language through an extension writing task

Or you could give an on the spot, invented dictation based on the language you were hearing from the lead student and proceed from here.

Bear in mind that you said everyone would have a chance to talk about something they are interested in. How will you do this?

Remember to ask the students for their feedback on this lesson format. Ask for good points and constructive suggestions for when you try the lesson approach again in the future.

After the lesson, focus your reflection on these questions:

- How did you feel about giving control over to the students?
- How did you feel about not knowing what language might come up in the lesson?
- What language did emerge?
- What language did you choose to focus on?
- How did your lesson proceed?
- What feedback did the lesson receive and how will you define your teaching as a result?

Report on your findings to a wider PLN (personal learning network). You could write a blog post and then tweet about it?

Top tips

1. Focus on the fundamental principles of teaching unplugged, based around the importance of bottom-up learning and maximising interaction between students, and apply them as often as you can to your classroom situation.
2. Conversation-driven - you can't know what your students are interested in talking about if you don't find out as much about them as possible. Be interested in your students' lives; find out their interests. Share your life with them as well.
3. Materials light - if you are in a situation where you use a coursebook in every lesson, aim to reduce your reliance on it and arrange lessons that focus on the real world of your students.
4. Emergent language - the key to developing your skills as a teacher who can respond professionally to students' emergent language is first to really listen to the language your students are using (and not using) in your regular classes, making notes about this for your reference, and working out how you might work with it. You can develop this skill before diving
5. Reflect on the learning theories that underpin the teaching unplugged approach to teaching. Read more about Lev Vygotsky and socio-cultural theory and the Zone of Proximal Development.

Join the discussion!

Discuss these questions with your colleagues, if you can:

1. There is sometimes a tendency on hearing about a 'method' or 'approach' to teaching that you are expected to accept it or reject it wholeheartedly. Instead, surely it is wiser to extract the best bits and synthesise them into your eclectic teaching practice? What do you think are the best bits of teaching unplugged that you can apply successfully in your teaching context?

2. One negative accusation made about teaching unplugged is that it's a recipe for lazy teachers who simply don't prepare their classes. How would you refute this accusation?
3. Some teachers have said that there is nothing new about the teaching unplugged approach, that teachers have been applying the principles associated with this approach for years. How far do you agree with this? What do you think is new or different about it?
4. Do you believe that teachers who work with the teaching unplugged approach need to be English language experts in order to deal effectively with emergent language?
5. Another point of view is that teaching unplugged can only work with confident, higher level students. What evidence do you have to refute or support this? If you have used the teaching unplugged approach with lower level students, share your experience and learning points with other teachers on this forum.