

Getting Teens to Really Work in Class

Working with teenagers is not an easy task. This seems to be a notion shared by language teachers all over the world. While some instructors are very keen on working with this special age group, others are not fond of the challenge (Harmer 2007). The truth is that teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) to teens has never been easy. According to recent research in the neurosciences, the reasons for that may lie in the maturing brain of the adolescent. At their age, teens are undergoing many physical and cognitive changes that manifest themselves in the classroom. For example, teachers may have noticed that some teenage students talk non-stop and are usually not that enthusiastic about the activities planned for a lesson. What is worse is that even if students do cooperate, they can stay focused only if they manage not to fall asleep!

In order to provide some understanding about this age group's typical behaviors, this article will explore some of the changes that the brain

undergoes during adolescence. Then it will describe some activities and techniques to help teenagers stay focused and, hopefully, succeed in learning English.

Explaining puzzling teenage behavior

In the past, we could only wonder what went on inside teenage students' brains, or blame their raging hormones for their often puzzling behavior. At present, advanced technologies in brain imaging provide windows to the developing brain and offer evidence to support the claim that the brain is not fully formed at the end of childhood. Indeed, during adolescence the brain undergoes remarkable changes in both structure and function (Romeo and McEwen 2006).

Although the brain reaches 95 percent of its full size by age 6, it continues to develop throughout adolescence and into young adulthood until about age 25. During childhood, the brain grows an excessive number of connections between brain cells. In order for the brain to mature, it needs to get rid of unnecessary connections and to

stabilize the ones that are left. At about year 11 or 12, a young person begins to lose a substantial number of those connections through a process called *pruning*, based on “the ‘use it or lose it’ principle, in which those connections that are used will survive and flourish, whereas those connections that are not used wither and die” (Giedd 2004, 82–83). The process of removing unnecessary neural connections and strengthening necessary ones is vital for growing up. Since we retain the neural circuits that are actively used and lose those that are not, the way teenagers spend their time may have a profound effect on their brains (Giedd 2004).

Brain maturation typically occurs from the back to the front. Neuroscientists have shown that the area of the brain that matures most rapidly during adolescence is the prefrontal cortex, the area highly involved in decision making, thinking ahead, and comparing risks and rewards (Winters 2008). This impacts all aspects of teenage behavior, as the undeveloped front part of the brain is responsible for reasoning functions and controlling impulses (Winters 2008). When compared with older, more mature learners, teens tend to be less responsible with homework, have trouble postponing gratification, and find it difficult to summon the willpower to study for tests. According to Steinberg (2008), the teenage brain “has a well-developed accelerator but only a partly developed brake.” No wonder educating teenagers is not an easy task!

The special needs of teenage learners

The obstacles to teaching teens are not insurmountable, and can be managed to a large extent by understanding the underlying causes of teen behavior and making pedagogical choices designed to deal with their physical and emotional state. Teenagers have specific needs, and recognizing them helps teachers establish a meaningful learning environment. Although the following needs certainly apply to most ESL/EFL learners, they are more pronounced in teens.

The need for play and social interaction

Social interaction during the teenage years is critical for normal development, while social isolation during adolescence can lead to dysfunctional behaviors during adulthood

(Klein, Padow, and Romeo 2010). Teenagers like being with their peers, and they sometimes cannot wait until the class is over to have fun with their classmates. For this reason, a language-learning environment with lots of social interaction is much more conducive to learning than one with little or no interaction. This means it is important to make more room for authentic communication in our classes, and to always consider group work as a useful component of language practice activities. As an added benefit, collaborative, interactive group work requires a learner-centered approach, in which the teacher assumes the role of facilitator instead of lecturer, and this promotes student engagement and language learning (Meltzer and Hamann 2004). Games are especially useful to organize group work. They are unquestionably associated with childhood, and the need for play is a salient characteristic of adolescence. According to Anderson (2011), games “provide not only purposeful contexts in which to use language but they also stimulate interaction, provide competition and are fun—as long as rules are clear and clearly followed by all participants.”

Teachers may sometimes be reluctant to let teenagers work in groups because they fear that students may make poor use of the time. To prevent this from happening, teachers can assign short game-like activities that must be solved collaboratively by using English to negotiate turns and meaning. Thus, each activity can be an opportunity for practice in both accuracy and fluency.

As teenagers build their identities, they have to deal with peer pressure from their social group (Walqui 2000). While learning a foreign language can be a pleasant experience, it can also threaten one’s identity, and teenagers especially may feel awkward when speaking English, and somehow odd or different from their peers. The solution, according to Deubelbeiss (2010), is to create “a very warm, inviting, and risk taking atmosphere in the classroom” and to reflect on whether the lessons “help or hinder peer-bonding.”

The need for rest

Another important factor for adolescents is their need for rest. According to Carskadon (1999), teenagers need about nine hours of sleep at night to remain alert; however, most

of them rarely get that much, and as a result they may struggle to stay awake because they are sleep deprived. Teachers should seriously consider this when planning classes. If teenagers are sleepy in class, the odds are that they will not manage to stay awake and focus unless we offer options for mental stimulation and physical activity.

The need for physical activity

A study conducted at the University of Colorado revealed that “most ESL students strongly preferred kinesthetic learning as a major learning style” (Reid 1987, 97). Teachers can easily support language learning by connecting physical movement with specific objectives, such as acquiring a new language structure or skill. We should capture teenagers’ attention, so that they stay alert, by letting them stand up, change seats, or come to the front of the room to do some activity. According to Jensen (1995), “our everyday behaviors like attention, stress or drowsiness are heavily impacted by ‘floating’ chemicals known as peptides” (18). Having our students move around during class can promote the release of peptides such as *endorphins*, as well as other important natural motivators such as *norepinephrine* and *dopamine* that combat drowsiness and help students stay focused. The inclusion of brief activities involving movement leads to increased concentration, which helps keep teenagers more attentive during the whole class period.

Need to learn in a stress-reduced environment

Last but not least, teenagers need to learn in a stress-reduced environment. Stress is typically associated with adulthood and the workplace, and we all know how unpleasant it is to work under stress. But the truth is that teenagers can also be exposed to high levels of stress at school. Because the brain has greater *plasticity* during puberty—it can more easily reorganize its neural pathways—the effects of stress on the developing brain can have serious consequences. Indeed, “chronic stress during adolescence,” together with genetic factors, can cause “someone who would otherwise be mentally sound to develop a mental disorder” (Marder 2007, 54). Working under stress over extended periods is harmful, as the cumulative effect of *cortisol*, the stress hormone, damages and kills brain cells. To a certain extent, we can lower our students’

stress levels by providing them with choice whenever possible, such as with homework or deadlines. In addition, giving teenagers instructional choices allows them to take responsibility and achieve a sense of ownership over their own learning (Deubelbeiss 2010).

Activities for teenagers in the ESL/EFL classroom

Unfortunately, to most teenagers, being in class will hardly seem as exciting as hanging out with peers. They also generally find it rather difficult to postpone what they find more fun and usually have to make an effort not to fall asleep. However, we can deal with these problems by developing appropriate lessons and activities. In the next section, we present activities and techniques that support physical movement, encourage social interaction, and reduce stress.

Activity 1: Reading comprehension race

Goal: To train students to scan texts effectively
Materials needed:

- Realia, such as tickets, leaflets, instruction manuals, supermarket catalogs, or even an empty food container
- Multiple-choice statements displayed in different locations around the classroom

In this activity students go from one place in the classroom to another in teams of three or four to look for specific information at *reading stops*. At each of these stops a real-life object and one multiple-choice statement is displayed. If there are five groups, then there should be five stops, so that each group can start from a different stop and move clockwise until they have visited all of them. A group can spend only one minute at each stop—hence the name of the game, and they have to write down their answers to the multiple-choice questions on an answer sheet. Once the teams have been through all the stops, the answers for each group are checked. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate the activity:

Example 1: A catalog offering a ferret harness reads, “Tested, approved and recommended by the nation’s #1 ferret breeder.” Multiple-choice options include:

- A. The harness is made by the nation’s #1 ferret breeder.

- B. The harness is sold by the nation's #1 ferret breeder.
- C. The nation's #1 ferret breeder advises buyers to purchase that harness.

Example 2: An empty yoghurt container reads "Swiss style yoghurt" on the front and "Made in the USA" on the back. Multiple-choice options include:

- A. The yoghurt has been made in Switzerland.
- B. The yoghurt has been made in America.
- C. The yoghurt has been made in Sweden.

The right answers (Example 1: C and Example 2: B) may not be so easy to discover and this, together with the time limit and the movement involved, makes the activity challenging and fun.

Activity 2: Hand it in!

Goals: This activity provides language practice and a quick physical outlet to mentally exhausted students.

Materials needed: One envelope per team containing answers to several of the teacher's fill-in-the-blank questions; using different colors for each team's cards helps determine which team provided the greatest number of right answers.

This activity can be done indoors, if the students can run from the back to the front of the classroom, or outdoors, either in the corridor or the playground. The game proceeds as follows:

- The class forms teams, and they stand at the back of the classroom.
- Each team is given an envelope containing a set of cards with answers to the fill-in-the-blank questions that the teacher will read. Each team member receives some of the cards.
- The teacher stands at the front of the room with a list of gapped sentences and reads one.
- Every member of the team collaborates in deciding the correct answer, and the student who has the word or words that complete the sentence runs to the teacher and hands it in.
- The teacher keeps the card of the team member that arrives first with the right answer. Then the teacher reads the next gapped sentence, and the game continues.

This activity can be used for vocabulary or grammar practice to review a wide range of topics, such as adjective and preposition combinations. Cards containing prepositions can be distributed, for instance, and the student having the card that reads "at" should run and hand it in when the teacher reads the sentence "My brother is really good _____ tennis. He has won several championships." The "Hand it in!" activity can also be used as a post-reading activity to check comprehension. For example, if students have read *Cinderella*, cards can be prepared that contain right and wrong key words such as *stepsisters* and *sisters* in order to complete this sentence: "Cinderella's _____ were very jealous of her."

In certain educational institutions, it is sometimes not possible to have teenagers move so much in class. In these contexts, physical activities can be used at English Clubs or when special English events are organized. Additionally, alternate types of movement can be included in the activities, such as playing card games.

Activity 3: Pig Goes! card game

Goals: To include physical movement to fight sleepiness and boredom and to reinforce grammar or vocabulary points

Materials needed: Two sets of 30 numbered cards to be divided among the players; each numbered card contains half of a sentence. When both cards with the same number are joined together, a complete sentence is created.

Card games expose students to practice and allow a review of structural or lexical items. In the card game "Pig Goes!," groups of students match two parts of a sentence together to form one grammatically correct sentence. Depending on the size of the groups, each player is given six or eight numbered cards containing half of a sentence. All cards used by each group must have a corresponding card with the same number. The players sit or stand around a table and place a card under their right hand. Players pass one card at a time to the player on their right and quickly snatch the card that they get from the player on their left. If a player gets a card with a number that matches one of his or her cards, the player shouts "Pig!" and slaps the two cards down on the center of the table. The rest of the players have to quickly put their

hands on top of the hand of the player who shouted “Pig!” Next, the student has to read out both halves of the sentence correctly. If he or she fails, the player on the left gets a chance to form the correct sentence. The player who says the sentence correctly keeps the pair, and the player who can form the most correct sentences is the winner. Figure 1 shows how pairs of matching numbered cards join to create sentences using the second conditional.

If I _____ (have) long hair 30	I _____ (wear) it in a ponytail 30	If _____ (be) rich 22	I _____ (help) all those in need 22
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Figure 1. Numbered cards join to create sentences using the second conditional

Students should try to form a sentence only when the cards match. Based on our experience, it is important to play the game this way; if the cards are not numbered, the game can slow down—and the fun slips away—because players have to spend too much time reading the cards and thinking of possible combinations.

In order to involve teenage students as much as possible, they can prepare the cards themselves with examples and the materials needed to complete the task. This activity is optional, of course, but it can engage students and, at the same time, reduce teacher preparation time.

Activity 4: Whiteboards

Goals: To practice vocabulary, grammar, and spelling; the activity can be adapted to different English proficiency levels.

Materials needed: A whiteboard, a marker, and a disposable tissue (to be used as an eraser) for each group; inexpensive homemade whiteboards can be prepared by placing a white piece of A4 (letter size) cardboard inside a clear plastic sheet holder. By using whiteboard markers, students can easily write and erase their answers.

In this activity, students sit in groups of four to six and quickly write an answer to a question from the teacher or another student on their team’s small whiteboard. This activity can be used for a wide range of topics. If working with beginners, for example, the

teacher may read the sentence “The ball is between the chair and the table,” and students must draw the scene in no more than 30 seconds. At the time limit, students put their whiteboards up to show their answer, which can be checked by the teacher and/or other students.

The same can be done to practice spelling: words are called out and the students write them down on the whiteboard. With more proficient learners, a gapped sentence is read and learners write down the word (or words) that best fills in the blank. Teens generally welcome the opportunity to manipulate a whiteboard and markers, as the activity involves movement and adds variety to the class. We have seen 16-year-old students become engaged in this activity. Even students who are usually reluctant to participate make an effort to help the group come up with the right answer and feel rewarded when they do.

Technique for low-stress homework:

You choose!

Goal: To lower students’ anxiety level by making them aware that they have choices; this not only reduces their stress, but also empowers them.

If students are frequently tested by means of grammar quizzes, we give 12 test items and let them choose which 10 to complete. This option not only allows students to gain some control, but also gives useful evidence about their problem areas if the teacher pays attention to which items they decided to skip. Options can also be given for composition homework by providing students with alternative topics instead of assigning just one.

Technique to create the right atmosphere: Music

Goal: To lower students’ anxiety level by creating a pleasant atmosphere in class

Materials needed: Music recordings and music player

Using background music can contribute to a good language learning atmosphere by counteracting teenagers’ vulnerability to stress and consequent aggressiveness. The objectives of using music are “to slow down thought, to alleviate anxiety, to improve concentration, to find pleasure in learning, and to educate emotion” (Cury 2007, 141). A

movie soundtrack with no lyrics or classical music that the students like may help reduce the level of chatter while students work, and it may also reduce stress in class. Soft instrumental music can be played while students carry out an activity, and the volume can be lowered when the task needs to be checked. It is important to set the volume appropriately so that it neither distracts students nor disturbs nearby classrooms.

Conclusion

Teaching a foreign language to teenagers is a special challenge, and it requires a teacher who is both flexible and resourceful. Flexibility can be reinforced by knowledge of adolescent brain development. Recent brain-based research throws light on why teenage students need to move, play, and interact with peers, and why, despite all our best efforts, they sometimes doze off in class. A teacher who understands why teenage students may be drowsy in class, seem unmotivated, or have rash reactions will be better able to deal with these issues and be a more effective teacher.

The toolkit of activities and techniques discussed in this article is based not only on research, but also on our own experience teaching teens. It is our hope that the suggestions made in this article will increase teachers' repertoire of resources to help them deal successfully with this especially challenging, but certainly lovable, age group.

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