

## ELT Journal

### **Dealing with Difficulties: Solutions, Strategies, and Suggestions for Successful Teaching**

L. Prodromou and L. Clandfield

*ELT J* 62:420-422, 2008.

doi:10.1093/elt/ccn049

---

The full text of this article, along with updated information and services is available online at

<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/62/4/420>

#### **Reprints**

Reprints of this article can be ordered at

[http://www.oxfordjournals.org/corporate\\_services/reprints.html](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/corporate_services/reprints.html)

#### **Email and RSS alerting**

Sign up for email alerts, and subscribe to this journal's RSS feeds at

<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>

#### **PowerPoint® image downloads**

Images from this journal can be downloaded with one click as a PowerPoint slide.

#### **Journal information**

Additional information about ELT Journal, including how to subscribe can be found at <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>

#### **Published on behalf of**

Oxford University Press

<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/>

# Reviews

## **Dealing with Difficulties: Solutions, Strategies, and Suggestions for Successful Teaching**

L. Prodromou and L. Clandfield

Delta Publishing 2007, 127 pp., £17.50

ISBN 978 1 905085 00 2

The approach behind *Dealing with Difficulties* is a familiar one. A few years ago it would have been termed 'humanistic', though now it is more generally accepted that shared goals and mutual respect between students and students and teachers are essential ingredients for successful classrooms. The book sets out to show how these can help teachers to both avoid and overcome many familiar classroom problems. The topics selected are large classes and classroom management, discipline problems, mixed-level classes, homework, teaching exam classes, and professional development. The list will prompt an immediate response from teachers faced with large classes of unruly students, with students at different levels, or constrained by the demands of an examination in a situation where there are few resources. These are teachers who with some justification may feel that their needs are often ignored by ELT materials writers.

Following a short introduction, the book has six main sections corresponding to each of the topics. Each begins with a justification for its selection and general principles behind the suggestions. There follow detailed descriptions of the activities. The authors point out that these are not intended to be supplementary but ideas that can 'actually change ways of teaching' (p. 8). They are set out with the level, aim, duration, materials required, skills, and language generated clearly indicated in a box at the top of the page, followed by a step-by-step procedure. In the case of a few of the sub-topics 'where "recipes" cannot apply' (p. 8), such as handling latecomers and correcting homework, we are given instead a number of tips and techniques.

Many of the issues in the first section—large classes and classroom management—are of a kind that

frequently come up on Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) courses: how can I get everyone's attention? How can I put students into groups? How can I start or finish the lesson? How should I introduce my lesson? What can I do if someone arrives late? What is a good way of introducing the topic of a text? There are also interesting ideas for oral work which exploit the advantages offered by large groups. These include both chorus drilling and chants and also a number of freer activities which involve the whole class, rather than relying exclusively on group work. All the suggestions are examples of good classroom practice. Moreover, they are on the whole simple, involve minimal preparation and few resources, and they are easy to set up. For experienced teachers, much is familiar and some of it may seem obvious, such as the importance of knowing your students' names, but that does not lessen its worth. Activities which caught my eye were 'think, pair, share' which can serve as a mnemonic for students (and teachers) for dealing with a reading comprehension activity. I also liked the 'first five minute incentives' for motivating students to arrive on time.

As the authors note, 'discipline is probably the number one concern of many teachers' (p. 39). In the section on discipline problems, the authors analyse the kinds of problems that may arise and reasons for them. The overriding principles behind the activities are that students themselves should take responsibility for class discipline and that raising student self-esteem can prevent problems arising in the first place. There is excellent advice in the form of tips for 'diffusing discipline' and some sensible suggestions for establishing rules and regulations. For example, it is good to see a detailed procedure for making a class contract, and ideas for following it up. Sometimes when students need to quieten down or when their behaviour is in danger of getting out of hand, it can help to move on to an activity that will calm them down. There are examples of these in a subsection called 'Discipline friendly tasks', which also includes ways of building group cohesion and developing self-esteem. There are other useful ideas

on raising awareness of discipline problems and building good behaviour. Perhaps less impressive is the subsection on introducing an element of surprise: the suggestion to change classroom layout by rearranging chairs and tables in the middle of a lesson might be more likely to disrupt and annoy than 'refresh' (p. 55), as the authors claim.

The authors' approach to mixed-level classes draws on Vygotsky (1978): 'what learners can do with the assistance of others is more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone' (p. 59). This section is brimful of superb ideas for grading tasks for different levels within a class, for extending tasks to keep early finishers busy, and for catering for different learning styles within the class. The beauty of most of the ideas is that they do not require much preparation; indeed some require none at all, for example 'Books open, books closed' (p. 63). In this activity, students opt to either (A) do the comprehension task accompanying a listening exercise or (B) simply listen to the recording with their books closed and make some notes on it; A and B students then get together and pool their knowledge. The last part of the section has tips and activities for involving all the members of the class in what is going on.

Homework is selected as a difficulty because often 'students simply don't do it' (p. 88). Thus, there are activities for 'valuing homework'; these include a survey to find out what kind of homework students want, and a useful idea for checklists of common errors that students can refer to before and after their homework is marked. Most teachers encourage students to use their English outside the classroom, so it is helpful therefore to have some specific suggestions in the subsection 'Linking homework to classwork'. Marking is of course a major issue and the authors provide a list of tips for both reducing the amount teachers do and improving the way in which it is done. The final collection of activities in this section is for following up homework and covers correcting errors and redrafting.

Teaching exam classes often means that lessons are dominated by exam practice. The methodology becomes repetitive and, as the authors point out, we 'abandon our usual teaching practices' (p. 110). They present a number of tips for exploiting test items, and there is then a series of activities on much the same theme entitled 'Teaching not testing'. The principle behind the ideas is that 'teaching' can be a part of test practice and this can be made more engaging if it involves personal responses to texts and questions. Again, most of the activities are straightforward and require little preparation. I particularly liked a series of

ideas for exploiting multiple-choice questions, and there are also very good suggestions for getting more out of gap-fills and sentence transformations. The final part of this section contains activities aimed at reducing anxiety about tests and exams.

The last, shortest, and probably least effective section of the book concerns professional development, which, as the authors acknowledge, is a different kind of problem. Nonetheless, since a feeling of stagnation causes teachers to lose motivation, it can in itself give rise to problems in the classroom. There is a series of tips for 'how you can deal with difficulties collaboratively' (p. 124), which is essentially a way of getting teachers together to talk. There is also a paragraph which encourages teachers to read in order to find solutions to their problems; here, though, perhaps the authors are leaning on an open door.

At the end of the book, a usefully annotated list of recommended further reading is provided. This includes many familiar ELT names who have covered similar territory. The topic of discipline, though, seems to be absent from ELT literature, and the authors suggest works primarily intended for teachers in mainstream education but applicable to other contexts. Prodromou's own earlier book *Mixed Ability Classes* (1996), although perhaps through modesty not mentioned in the list, is well worth moving on to from *Dealing with Difficulties* as it deals with that topic in greater depth and does not duplicate practical suggestions.

Prodromou and Clandfield have put together an interesting and eminently practical collection. It is rare, for me at least, to find a handbook of this kind in which the vast majority of the activities seem worth trying. Of course, many are more suited to specific kinds of learners: some of those concerned with discipline are for use with teenagers and young adults rather than older learners, and, in general, the activities could not be used with primary-level classes without considerable adaptation. A certain amount of classroom experience is demanded: for instance, the classroom management skills involved in setting up simultaneous activities in a lesson, as advocated in the section on teaching mixed-level classes, would challenge a newly qualified teacher. Inevitably some of the ideas are culture bound: a class discussion on good and bad teachers (p. 46), for example, would be unacceptable in some contexts. In spite of that, I am sure teachers I have worked with in different parts of the world including southern Africa and China would find much to inspire them. It reflects wide experience and the reader is confident the authors have personal experience of the difficulties they

describe and have come up with solutions that are likely to work.

As well as being a useful source of ideas and inspiration to individual teachers in various contexts, *Dealing with Difficulties* can be used on teacher development courses and I would strongly recommend it to DELTA candidates. Although there is no shortage of ideas for teachers today both in print and on the Web, it stands out. It has already achieved well-deserved prestige having been highly commended in the 2007 English-Speaking Union awards and deserves to become a classic of its kind.

### References

---

**Prodromou, L.** 1996. *Mixed Ability Classes* (new edition). MEP-Monographs. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

**Vygotsky, L. S.** 1978. *Mind in Society* (new edition). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

### The reviewer

---

**Barbara Webb** has worked as a teacher and teacher trainer in Sri Lanka, France, China, and Mozambique and for the Bell Educational Trust in the UK. She currently teaches at Essex University. She is co-author of *Move Intermediate* for Macmillan and has written several courses for secondary schools in different parts of Africa.

**Email:** [bmwebb@aol.com](mailto:bmwebb@aol.com)

*doi:*10.1093/elt/ccn049