

of difference between personal writing – poetry – and the more functional genre of letters of application.

More importantly, for many advanced learners, the most important area of writing concerns the “stark and sober style” (Andrewes 2009: 63) which is prevalent in academic writing. Unless learners are capable of mastering and reproducing the demands of that style, they will be unlikely to require the ability to produce abstracts and biodata statements for international academic conferences. By contrast, e-mails (and particularly e-mails in discussion groups (pp. 87-88)) can now be written in a mixture of acronyms, transliterations from the L1 and emoticons, provided that the communicative channel is informal.

None of the above reservations, however, should be interpreted as detracting from the overall values of this book. Its major strength lies in its impressive breadth of coverage. The nine sections explore almost every aspect of English language teaching, and each section offers a range of activities. Obviously not all of these will be appropriate for each individual teacher's circumstances, but experienced teachers will recognize this and will use the book as it is intended to be used – as a resource. It would, however, be unfortunate if the title deters some teachers from exploring the book's potential benefits for intermediate and upper-intermediate level students.

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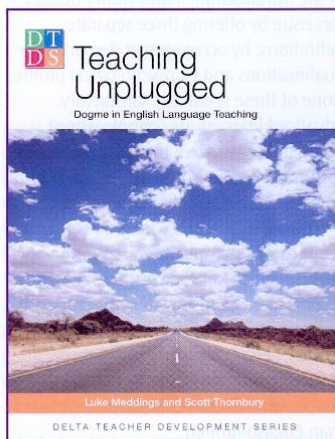
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Neil McBeath

Neil McBeath teaches at the Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching

Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury
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See page 83 for details



Teaching Unplugged is a teacher's resource book with a mission: it sets out to challenge many of the principles that the ELT world holds dear. The 'unplugged' idea comes from an MTV series which invited pop musicians to play their songs live without electric instruments. The term 'Dogme' is based on a Danish film-making movement from the 1990s called 'Dogme 95', spearheaded by director Lars von Trier. Dogme filmmakers take a purist approach, using no special effects of any kind. In a similar vein, Meddings, Thornbury and others have seized on Dogme principles to create their

own teaching philosophy. Throw out the coursebook and the handouts; say goodbye to the photocopier, the AV equipment and the interactive whiteboard. 'Unplugged' lessons need little more than paper, pens and standard white/blackboards – though there are some exceptions to this rule, as we shall see below.

Of course, in pedagogy there is nothing new under the sun: we could probably trace materials-free teaching back to Socrates. A materials-free approach has long been promoted in British ELT by inspirational teachers such as Mario Rinvolucri and Paul Davis. In fact, Meddings and Thornbury come from a long line of ELT iconoclasts stretching all the way back to Earl Stevick. There are already several materials-free resource books on the market, such as Bruce Marsland's *Lessons from Nothing* (CUP 1998) and John Hughes' *Lessons in Your Rucksack* (Modern English Publishing Ltd 2005). So does *Teaching Unplugged* have anything new to offer?

To quote the blurb on the back, the approach is “materials-light” and “conversation-driven”, “focusing on the learner and the emergent language”. This does not sound too unorthodox, even to the most stalwart lover of coursebooks and interactive technology. At its most 'unplugged', however, *Teaching Unplugged* takes the view that the students and the teacher are all the resources you need. This is a much more challenging theory: even experienced teachers quake at the knees when the photocopier/visualiser/computer breaks down, or the materials for the lesson go missing.

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Most controversially, the activities in *Teaching Unplugged* are not based on competence levels, and no timings are given. While some activities lend themselves to particular grammatical structures (e.g. past tenses), others have no particular grammatical or lexical exponents in mind. To many, particularly CELTA trainers, all this may sound like blasphemy. To the more creative, student-focused teacher who has already discovered the fact that a five-minute warmer can make a fabulous ninety-minute lesson, it will sound like liberation.

The ideas presented in *Teaching Unplugged* are more of a synthesis than a genuine revolution, but this is an extremely important synthesis nevertheless. Theory and practice are well-integrated throughout the book, and it is organised into three main sections. Part A is a full explanation of the Dogme approach. It is an enjoyable, if controversial, read, and the extra-wide page margins in this section are peppered with what American self-help books would call ‘inspirational quotes’ on the nature of teaching and learning. Part B consists of the activities themselves, interspersed with useful double-page spreads full of teaching tips. Part C is a series of reflections on the Dogme approach, and deals with areas which might be of concern to teachers who are currently wary of throwing off the shackles of the coursebook. Topics include teaching young learners, teaching specialised English and exam classes, and teaching as a non-native speaker. Less experienced teachers should find this section particularly useful, as ‘unplugged’ teaching requires confidence in handling language, classes and institutional prejudices.

Even if the Dogme philosophy leaves you unconvinced, Section B contains a very good selection of warmers, fillers, practice activities and lesson ideas. Little or no preparation is required for these activities. To those who have been in TEFL for a while, some activities will be familiar already. For example, Secret Treat and Pocket Pecha Kucha (p.53) are variations on the American grade school favourite Show-and-Tell; Paper Whispers (p.30) is a written version of Chinese Whispers; Soundshots (p.54) is based on a technique first used in two excellent little books, *Sounds Interesting* and *Sounds Intriguing*, written by Alan Maley and Alan Duff in the 1970s (and it does require some kind of recording device to be used in order to record ‘natural’ sounds). However, if this wholesale borrowing allows good ideas to be passed on to the next teaching generation, it is no bad thing.

My favourite activity in Section B is The Lesson That Was (p.63), an activity which perhaps best exemplifies the ‘unplugged’ approach to lesson planning. Instead of fixing a prior agenda via a conventional lesson plan, the teacher writes a ‘post-plan’ which “records the language that emerged, in what context, in the lesson that has just passed”. If this sounds too random, ways in which this can be organised are suggested. This ‘post-plan’ is then given to the students in the next lesson to allow questions and discussion. Brilliant. One minor niggle: this activity does involve photocopying of the ‘post-plan’ for the students, so this lesson is not strictly ‘unplugged’. Why not put the ‘post-plan’ up on a big sheet of paper stuck to the board? If institutional rules allow, you could move each plan onto the wall after every lesson and decorate your classroom, giving your students

a reminder of the language they have covered.

As a reviewer of ELT books, I am not unaware of the irony of praising a book which advocates a materials-free world. On the other hand, I doubt if the philosophy put forward in *Teaching Unplugged* will lead to the demise of the coursebook, and it is even less likely to affect the inexorable rise of technology. As a teacher, one of my major worries is the fact that far too many institutions seem to view materials and equipment as being more important than students and/or teachers. I hope that *Teaching Unplugged* will begin to redress the balance by helping teachers to see beyond the orthodoxy of mainstream ELT and its apparently insatiable appetite for the production of materials. We are, after all, teaching students – not materials.

Terri Edwards

Terri Edwards has been an EFL teacher since 1986. She has worked in Germany and Japan as well as the UK, and is currently teaching at Durham University.