

Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching

by Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury

It's the last thing you need isn't it? You've done your teaching qualification, learned all you think you can about the Communicative Approach and strive to make your lessons as interesting as possible, and all of a sudden a bunch of upstarts tell you that CLT is so nineties – nowadays we should be 'teaching unplugged', producing lessons that are materials-light, conversation-driven and focused on the English students need to learn rather than what the coursebook deems we should be teaching them today. I was ready to give Dogme short shrift, but reading *Teaching Unplugged* has caused me to have a rethink.

This is not least because the authors make some excellent points in the first section of this book, which sets out the philosophy behind Dogme ELT. This includes a particularly stinging but well-written attack on modern coursebooks, and the way in which many blithely assume that all of our learners want to be white middle class speakers of English who have plenty of money to spend and need frivolity as a central plank of their lives. There is also an interesting discussion on emergent language, which is persuasive and thought-provoking in its assertion that we should be focusing a 'syllabus within' rather than frogmarching our students 'down a one-way grammar street'.

The second section of the book is its chief one – a toolkit of ideas aimed at 'uncovering' language as and when it is needed by students. This has been split into logical sections – i) setting the right conditions, ii) conversation, iii) using real-life as materials, iv) focus on form and v) mapping lessons into a course – and contains a selection of simple yet incredibly effective ideas. They are geared at using what students bring into the classroom rather than what the teacher photocopies for them, and all the ideas that I have trialled have all worked well. These vary from simple tweaks to the TEFL teacher's typical Monday-morning repertoire (rather than asking students how their weekend was, the authors suggest asking about 'the most interesting thing that happened to them' or 'the moment when they felt most relaxed') to more unusual and interesting ideas, such as using an unscheduled interruption to the lesson as material. Granted not everything would work in my context – there seems to be an assumption that everyone is happy to talk about their feelings to classmates, for example – though the authors do point out that the activities included in the toolkit should be tweaked to suit individual circumstances.

In the final section of the book the authors attempt to break down the barriers to using Dogme ELT that teachers may experience, for example being a non-native speaker, teaching exam classes or being made to use a coursebook by the school. The ideas here are evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and show how the approach could be slotted unobtrusively but beneficially into almost any context.

Having read *Teaching Unplugged*, I find myself converting – bigger chunks of my lessons are based on the concepts behind Dogme ELT, using ideas from the toolkit and the general philosophy that students should be the basis of materials rather than any third-party source. *Teaching Unplugged* is an excellent read; the case for using this new approach is argued persuasively and is easily accessible, and the toolkit contains a plethora of simple yet effective ideas that will improve any teacher's armoury.

Reviewed by Saul Pope

TEFL.net

October 2009