

Plug into Dogme

Wayne Trotman examines a guide to the methodology which turns classes into social events

TEACHING UNPLUGGED: DOGME IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (Delta Publishing)

Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury

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AROUND THE turn of the new millenium Scott Thornbury had grown frustrated by what he felt was the prevailing second language teaching orthodoxy in which 'people were somehow incidental to the process of teaching' while Luke Meddings had grown tired of seeing language as a product and learning as a package. Meddings responded to 'Dogme ELT', an article by Thornbury in what was then latefl Issues, which was based upon the Danish film-making movement challenging cinema's dependency on special effects. The article challenged the reliance of language teaching on technical wizardry, and instead emphasised the here and now, one that involved learners being provided with relevant content. The rest, as they say, is history, and the outcome of this meeting of minds is Teaching Unplugged, a slim, attractive and ultimately thought-provoking title.

Part A explains the core principles of Dogme ELT along with the philosophy of teaching unplugged. Put simply, Dogme ELT is based on ten principles, from which emerge the three core precepts of it being 'conversation-driven', 'materials light', and having a 'focus on emergent language'. (Warning: if you still wish to believe that working methodically through the latest coursebook from a reputable publisher is what being a language teacher is all about, can I suggest you stop right here?) Most easily taken on board is the notion that the default form of language is speech, yet how many of us take seriously the use of small talk at the start of the lesson to develop opportunities for reallife language practice? If we wish to be Dogme practitioners, we should! Making the classroom 'materials light' might disturb the sensitive-minded as it involves the removal of texts and technology. As one Dogme proponent put it after consigning such things to the incinerator 'You should have heard the roaring in the chimney.' Yet the Dogme approach is not totally anti-materials nor anti-technology; it simply rejects those kinds of materials that do not foster the development of language communities in the classroom. The third precept, dealing with language as it arises rather than in a preplanned manner, may seem a step too far for all but the most gung-ho Dogme practitioner, but taking the plunge into another way of teaching and another way of being a teacher are both argued cogently.

Part B, the bulk of this title, outlines unplugged activities and how to teach them unplugged. Unlike other teacher resources with which many of us are familiar, in this title elements such as

language points, timing and levels are not indicated; there is nothing to photocopy and there is no set order. As the authors put it, 'Each activity is designed to come to life in class.' Part B continues with a bank of activities that appear in sub-sections like 'Creating the right conditions' in which we are advised, 'Before it is a language lesson, an unplugged lesson is a social event.' Activities are typically described in sections named Think about it, Get it ready (usually followed by the comment There's nothing to prepare), Set it up, Let it run and ending with Round it off' Thus, within the lack of structure there is structure of a Dogme kind. Part C focuses on how Dogme can be applied in a variety of teaching contexts by various exponents and includes the issues and implications of teaching as a non-native speaker, of teaching with a coursebook, teaching young learners, specialised English and on one-to-one basis. Teaching Unplugged will provoke a backlash; it will be interesting to witness the response to its publication. Read it and see how unplugged you currently are – and are prepared to be.