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Introduction

This book is for teachers of all levels and all ages in both the private and the public sector, in language contexts where resources are abundant and where resources are scarce. However fortunate our teaching situation may be, none of us is free from at least some of the difficulties addressed here.

This book is for teachers like the one who wrote a letter to one of the authors following a workshop on learner-centred methodology and who included a set of rules for her ‘new revolutionary method for teaching English to little monsters’. Her rules were more or less as follows:

- There is only one teacher in class and not only does she know what she’s doing, but she is always right.
- When the teacher speaks, the little devils – or so-called ‘learners’ – will be quiet and pay attention. They cannot interrupt.
- Silence will be observed at all times. If they want to practise speaking, they can do it at home, in their own time.
- Pupils will not do what they think, but what they are told.

The language used – *devils, monsters* – reflects the profound alienation and sense of despair this teacher has reached. This book is a gesture of solidarity and an attempt to offer constructive solutions to the problems she identifies.

We have often felt that innovative methodologies – communicative, task-based and humanistic – fall, and often fail, on the stony ground of classrooms where both learners and teachers lack motivation. This book is a response to teachers who feel like giving up on their students, often quite understandably, for the sake of their own peace of mind. Teaching classes of unruly children or adolescents, and even classes of unmotivated adults, can be a stressful, demoralising business. Good teaching practice cannot flourish in such circumstances.

Identifying the Difficulties

In teaching, in training and especially in observing teachers at work in all sectors, we have identified the following as the most common difficulties faced by teachers:

- mixed levels
- large classes
- getting students’ attention
- keeping students’ attention
- getting students to do homework
- getting lessons off to a good start
- discipline
- teacher burn-out
- dominance of testing over teaching
- encouraging independent learning
- inability or unwillingness to adapt textbooks
- ending lessons smoothly.

We have organised these topics into the different chapters in the book and we attempt to deal with them by offering solutions and strategies for a more successful classroom.

Dealing with the Difficulties

Oddly enough, the question of discipline and mixed-level classes is not one of the most frequent at teachers’ conferences and seminars. We hear more about the latest research into language learning and cutting-edge methodologies than the bread-and-butter issues of controlling a class. There are dozens of books on motivation, communicative interaction, games in the classroom, task-based learning, and almost any subject related to teaching English, but books on what to do when students make life difficult for the teacher are few and far between. With this book we have tried to break the near-silence surrounding discipline and other ‘difficulties’.

The approach taken is, first, to examine the problem in a positive light and to try to see the opportunities for learning in what we often assume is simply a threat or an obstacle. The second stage is to eliminate the negative aspect of the difficulty by suggesting constructive solutions.

1 Large Classes and Classroom Management

This chapter focuses on aspects of managing large classes but will offer useful insights and tips into working with smaller groups, too. We are often struck by the fact that a good knowledge of language or methodology is not necessarily enough to make one a successful teacher. The sense of time and pace, the use of space and the ability to energise a group of people brought together on a random basis are essential, if elusive, skills in the classroom. These skills are vital when teaching both large and small classes.

2 Discipline Problems

This chapter looks at the many different kinds of indiscipline in the classroom. We need to explore the root causes of some of the many ways of disrupting a class before we can suggest a range of tips and activities for beginning to tackle this most intractable of all classroom problems.

3 Mixed-level Classes

This chapter argues that all classes are ‘mixed ability’ – that is, they all include diversity. An important first step is to see this diversity in a positive light and to make the most of the opportunities it offers. The techniques described in this chapter are organised in such a way as to help you see and structure your classes differently.

4 Homework

This chapter looks at strategies on how to maximise the effectiveness of homework in a variety of ways. Homework is a neglected resource, both outside and inside the classroom. This chapter looks at the challenge of homework on two levels: getting students to do it in the first place and, secondly, persuading students of the value of homework.

5 Teaching Exam Classes

The distinction between a ‘testing’ and a ‘teaching’ approach to learning is at the heart of the difficulties of teaching exam classes. On the one hand, it is the easiest thing in the world for the teacher to slip into the role of ‘examiner’ – one who has the right answers and simply seeks to check whether the students know the right answers – but this is usually done at the cost of sacrificing the best qualities we have as teachers. This chapter offers ways of maintaining the balance between testing and teaching.

6 Professional Development

The difficulties we have outlined above are not few, and, combined, they can really wear a teacher down. There are, however, ways to fight this. Whether it is with their colleagues, with the whole school or in the context of the wider educational world, or through reading ELT magazines, journals or many of the fascinating books written about every aspect of language teaching, teachers stand a much better chance of not burning out if they are continually developing professionally.

Dealing with Diversity

There’s no success like failure and failure’s no success at all. Bob Dylan

Many words related to the subject of this book are loaded with negative attitudes towards teaching and the learner; and they tend to be words beginning with ‘d’: *attention deficit, disorder, demotivation, discipline*. Indeed ‘d’ is usually a fail grade in tests! We can sum these attitudes up as the ‘difficulties’ many teachers face in dealing with group dynamics rather than any difficulty with the English language as such.

It is an underlying assumption in this book that difficulties can not only be dealt with but transformed into opportunities for further learning. This is by no means an easy task but it is the only one that opens the way to more pleasant and productive teaching and learning. The key is to see *diversity* (another ‘d’ word!) as a positive feature in the classroom. It is not an obstacle but a potential resource that can make learning richer by drawing on what the students bring to class and thus raising their self-esteem and their respect for each other.

It is the process of transforming failure into success.

Split Jokes

Level	From intermediate onwards
Aim	To get students' attention; to create a relaxed atmosphere
Duration	10 minutes
Materials	Slips of paper (or cards) with half a joke on them
Skills / Language	Speaking and listening

Preparation

Copy half a dozen jokes onto slips of paper, in halves.
For example:

Waiter, will the pancakes be long?

No, sir. Round.

Procedure

- As the students arrive in class, give them each a card with the first or second half of a joke written on it.
- Ask them to memorise the words on their slip of paper.
- Ask any student with the first half of a joke to call it out. The class listens and the student with the other half of the joke calls it out.

Student 1: *Waiter, waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup?*

Student 2: *Swimming, sir!*
- Any students who need support to remember their jokes should be allowed to consult their card if they wish to.
- When all the jokes have been heard, ask the students to recall and write down as many jokes as they can. Encourage those with good memories to help those with bad memories. Remember: this is not a test but a rapport-building task!

Variations

The students memorise their words and then get up and circulate, saying their half of the joke to other members of the class until they find their 'other half'. If you want to change the seating arrangements, they can then sit with that person.

Instead of using jokes, you could use well-known English proverbs for this activity (e.g. *Too many cooks / spoil the broth.*). At the end of the activity, ask the students for similar proverbs in their own language.

Name Circle

Level	Any
Aim	To build rapport
Duration	10 minutes
Materials	None
Skills / Language	Speaking; vocabulary: sports, hobbies

Procedure

- Ask the students to stand in one big circle or several smaller circles.
- Ask them to say their name and favourite sport or hobby, making a gesture to illustrate it:

My name is Monica and I like cycling / swimming / playing chess.
(Monica mimes the activity.)
- Ask the group to repeat the information in the third person and to imitate the action:

Her name is Monica and she likes cycling.
- Repeat for the other students in the circle.

Variations

Make this into a memory activity. The second student has to say the name and activity of the first student before they say their own:

Her name is Monica and she likes swimming. My name is Pedro and I like chess.

The next person must continue in the same way, adding a name each time.

You can do this activity with other language points, depending on what you have covered with the class. Here are some other examples:

Say your name and:

- something you did last weekend
- the most interesting place you've been
- a food you like
- a food you hate.

Mosaic Writing

Level	From elementary onwards
Aim	To provide practice in writing in a supportive atmosphere; to build a group dynamic where everyone participates
Duration	30 minutes
Materials	Pen and paper
Language / Skills	Varied

Procedure

- 1 Give the students a title of a composition. For example: *My Favourite School Subject*
- 2 Ask them to brainstorm ideas together in pairs under these headings:

Useful Vocabulary	Grammar / Tenses	Topics
History Maths boring useful	present simple future: <i>It will be useful</i>	school subjects the teacher jobs

- 3 Elicit some ideas from the whole class and ask one or two students to write up the ideas on the board, under the correct heading.
- 4 When there are enough ideas on the board, the students begin to write on one of the topics.
- 5 After a couple of minutes, say: *Stop! Circulate!*
- 6 The students pass on their composition to another person, who continues exactly where the previous writer left off.
- 7 After a minute or so, say: *Stop! Circulate!*
- 8 Continue until you have half a dozen exchanges. (It could be more if you have more time.)
- 9 When the composition is long enough, each student will have a different version of the topic, produced by half a dozen or more fellow-students.
- 10 At home, the students write their own version of the 'mosaic' composition.

Dream Game

Level	From intermediate onwards
Aim	To practise writing; to guide writing with questions; to personalise writing
Duration	30 minutes
Materials	Pen and paper
Language / Skills	Narrative tenses; adjectives to describe objects

Procedure

- 1 Tell the students that you want them to imagine that they're walking down a path, any path, anywhere. Ask them to describe the path in writing:
Is it straight / winding / narrow / wide?
Is it in a forest / mountain / beach / city?
- 2 Tell the students that as they are walking along the path, they find a stick on the ground. Ask them to describe the stick. They need to think about: size, age, colour, weight.
- 3 Ask them to write down what they do with the stick:
Do you pick it up / kick it / throw it away?
- 4 Next, they come across a fallen tree. Ask them to describe it. They need to think about: size, age, colour.
- 5 What do they do now?
Do you jump over / go round the tree?
- 6 Next, the students see a bear on the path. They describe the bear and what they do.
- 7 After this, they come to a river. They describe the river and what they do.
- 8 Finally, they come to a wall. The wall is too high to climb, too long to walk around and they cannot dig under it. What do they do?
- 9 Give them the solution below and ask them to go back and interpret their answers.

Solution

- The path represents your interpretation of life in general.
- The stick represents life's small problems and how you deal with them.
- The tree represents life's big problems and how you deal with them.
- The bear represents the opposite sex.
- The river represents marriage.
- The wall represents death.