

# Teaching teens: challenges and rewards

**Kat Robb** describes what she gets out of teaching this particular age group.



**W**hen teaching teenagers, I think teaching professionals are faced with many challenges irrespective of their teaching context. In this article I identify some of these challenges, and propose some possible solutions. First of all, however, I'd like to explain from my perspective how I view teaching teenagers, from the observations I have made during my teaching practice over the years.

Firstly, I think there is a distinct difference between adolescents from 13–15 years old, and young adults from 16–19 years old. The first group have left their childhood years behind them, geared up to confront the hurdles of early teenage years; however, they are neither children nor young adults. The second group are discovering other difficulties as their adult life begins to unfold before them, and often find themselves oscillating between adolescence and adulthood. Both of these situations can also pose difficulties

in the classroom, both from a learning and a teaching perspective.

## Motivation

Motivation is an aspect of teaching and learning that both learners and teachers alike struggle with at some point during their path of teaching or learning. When considering teenage learners, enthusiasm to learn can appear a constant uphill struggle for many reasons. There are two typical contexts with teenagers learning English: they are either studying English at school as a compulsory subject and they have to pass the course in order not to repeat the academic year, or they are studying in a private language school. In the former context, teachers will undoubtedly have issues to contend with in the classroom, including showing off and being too cool for school. In the latter context, students will typically be taking a course in order to prepare to pass a specific exam, for

example the Cambridge suite, Trinity GESE, or IELTS, and their parents will usually be the ones funding their courses. This adds extra pressure on the learners because there is often a certain expectation from the parents that learning targets will definitely be achieved because that is what they are paying for. It is, however, not uniquely the class contact time that will prepare learners, but the effort that they put in outside the classroom to engage with the language and learning material that will support their learning. In addition, both groups of teens on the younger and the older end of the spectrum will usually have instrumental motivation. Therefore, the role of the teacher is to try and help learners make the shift from instrumental to intrinsic motivation. The question is how, which leads me on to the next concept: interest.

## Interest

I think it is fair to say that if we are interested in something, we will pay more attention to it; and if it is a learning concept, then we will be more inclined to dedicate time towards progressing in order to reach the learning goals. This goes for all learners of all ages and contexts, and even more so for teenagers who are used to being exposed to a constant barrage of social media updates and digital content in their private lives nowadays. Competing with the draw and intrigue of digital media can prove challenging when it comes to deciding what materials to use in the classroom, which medium to present them through, and what content the learners are going to be exposed



to. I have found that interest levels in class greatly affect learning outcomes whether it be situational interest or personal interest.

At the beginning of every course, I carry out a needs analysis with the students. This allows them the opportunity to share their learning aims and some personal information with me, and gently pushes them to reflect on what they want to achieve during our lessons together. In addition, it also enables me to gain a sense of what learners are interested in and if they are naturally interested in learning English. The needs analysis provides me with the necessary information to know how I can optimise class contact time and offer suggestions to learners concerning activities they can be carrying out outside the classroom to scaffold their learning, such as listening to podcasts or reading blogs or magazines in English. Fostering interest and tapping into what triggers interest for teenage learners is key for me feeling I understand them, so I can better meet their learning needs. This provides learners with a more personalised and memorable learning experience and therefore becomes more relevant to them.

### Variety

Variety of tasks and activities, and practising different skills in each lesson is essential to maintain learner interest and keep them engaged. By variety, I mean that even if the learning goals for the lesson are writing-focused activities, inserting shorter activities which require the use of other skills can be used to increase diversity. For example, at the beginning of the lesson, playing a short YouTube clip to set the scene or arouse interest in the theme of the lesson, or simply as a conversation starter to warm up the class, can inject this element. Interjecting five-minute activities here and there throughout the lesson can help to keep learners alert, especially if they have low concentration spans, as can be the case with teens. Along with task variation, I find the pitch is also important, so by setting more challenging tasks that stretch learners and extend learning, the build up of complacency and boredom is prevented. Variety can also include the learners themselves, so by mixing students to work with different partners, they are able to learn and share from each other, and this also maintains diversity.

My concluding thoughts regarding teaching teenagers are that while like all of us teens have their good days and bad days, the rewards and learning outcomes far outweigh any problems or tough lessons. I love a challenge and teaching teens keeps me on my toes. There is never a dull day, and I learn so much from them about the pedagogical decisions I make in the classroom. I engage in a lot of reflective practice when teaching teens especially reflection in action when an activity isn't going according to plan and I have to think on my feet to adapt it in order to help it flow more smoothly. These challenges are what help shape me as a person and more importantly, as a teacher.



**Kat Robb** is a teacher, a learner and avid language lover living in Barcelona. She's a Trinity CERT, IELTS and EAP teacher trainer, and specialises in teaching EAP and Business English. Her special interest is the use of new technologies for teaching and learning, and she blogs at [englishandtech.com](http://englishandtech.com)

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