

DEMAND HIGH (DH) IN TEACHER TRAINING

by Nancie Gantenbein (nancie.gantenbein@ihbaden.ch) and Lindsey Shapiro-Steinberg (linzsh@gmail.com)

In reconsidering the area of teacher training in ELT, we will present our ideas as a conversation, by definition exploratory, an exchange of thoughts still to be more solidly formulated. In our preliminary discussions, as we got to know each other, it became apparent that not only were we concerned about similar teacher training challenges in our respective countries – Switzerland and Israel- but even more importantly, we shared similar ideas on how to tackle some of those challenges. As teacher trainers who are both deeply invested in the Demand High (DH) approach to ELT, we began thinking about how this might apply to the area of teacher training. Before presenting our conversation, we will provide a brief overview of Demand High.

Jim Scrivener and Adrian Underhill ask some very basic and simple questions about the nature of learning in ELT- so simple, in fact, that they are often eclipsed by what appear to be more sophisticated concerns embedded within intricate pedagogical theories and methodologies. Demand High is not a methodology, claims Scrivener, but a meme.¹ Through DH, Scrivener and Underhill are wondering just how much deep learning is going on in classrooms that function well and where everyone, teacher and students, seem to be enjoying themselves. Therefore, Demand High is interested in making changes to the learning culture by posing questions such as: Are my students capable of more? Could they be challenged more? Would demanding more lead to more learning? Has the ELT class become too ritualized? In place of the constant need to cover more and more material, might more learning take place if the teacher focused on the potential for a deeper kind of learning? What small tweaks or shifts can the teacher make to what she is already doing to transform the focus of the teaching towards bringing about an upgrade in the student's performance? It's not enough that the classroom activities are enjoyable.

Two techniques that Scrivener and Underhill have proposed in order to generate a greater challenge to the students and ultimately some real learning, revolve around the way teachers traditionally give correction and feedback and how language exercises are dealt with in class. Instead of the usual teacher response of “good” or maybe even “yes, fantastic,” when going over answers, we should stop and use the answer given, to go deeper into the use and meaning of the language being learned. There are several ways in which the language of the answer can be put to work: repeating with particular

intonations, substituting certain words in the sentence, memorizing, personalizing. The same principles apply to completing the exercises in the first place. In addition to the instructions in the course book, there are other things that can be done with the language the exercise provides. These would involve a lot of repetition in interesting, challenging and meaningful ways. Most teachers spend time drilling anyway so applying some of the above-mentioned DH techniques would simply require a tweaking of what most teachers are already doing.

The conversation that follows below, reflects our efforts to apply some of the DH ideas just discussed, to teacher training:

Lindsey: I'm very concerned that there's rather a lot of rubber stamping going on in teacher training in Israel. This manifests itself in the fact that many trainee teachers in their practicum want to focus on the course books they'll be using later on in the field and feel it's important they learn to teach specifically for the matriculation exams at the end of high school. Of course, the urgency trainees feel in acquiring specific tools to prepare students for a summative assessment is often conveyed to them by cooperating teachers; it's part of the EFL ethos and it saddens me somewhat that there is not enough language learning for the pure joy of learning English in a truly meaningful way with far-reaching implications for its future use in real life. So, despite well-meaning and sound professional intentions on the part of supervisors and mentor teachers, the reality on the ground seems to persuade the teacher trainees that they need to establish classroom rituals in line with the demands of the Ministry curriculum. This leaves little space for creativity, a deeper reflection on practice and an upgrade in teacher performance.

Nancie: And along those very lines, where ritualistic teaching gets stuck in its ways, the course books have a lot to answer for. It seems to me that by allowing trainee teachers to use course books just because they are there, we may be stifling their ability to think seriously about the language learning process. Excessive reliance on course books can sabotage the potential for continual upgrading of classroom practice. Our trainee teachers and novice teachers believe that if the book got published, it must be good, and can be used as is. This is a perception that seriously needs to be corrected by teacher trainers.

Lindsey: In a way, we do the same thing in methodology classes. We give our trainee teachers recipes for “effective

¹The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a meme as “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture.”

teaching,” a nicely designed tool-box that becomes the final word. And when the trainee teacher uses that tool box, his teacher trainers tells him how well he did and then they move on to the next lesson. I’m suggesting that there is too much of an emphasis on the affective aspects of the lesson – the enjoyment factor – and that perhaps more attention needs to be focused on how much learning was actually happening. Our trainee teachers need to be asking themselves, what can my students do now, in English, as they leave the class, that they couldn’t do when they entered. And that question needs to be asked for every student leaving the class. I realize that when there are 35 kids in a class a substantiated answer to that question seems more daunting; but that’s what we need to be moving towards.

Nancie: I once heard Adrian Underhill say that a program that does a lot of training is not a learning program. So, it follows that the more our teachers learn systematically about ELT, the less they may actually learn about effective teaching. Perhaps what we need to introduce into teacher training programs is a kind of “deep end” learning approach in which the trainee teachers have to figure things out for themselves through experience and continual tweaking.² It’s not about huge innovations, but a gradual, committed, reflective process on the part of the EFL practitioner that examines and re examines just how much learning is really taking place. It’s not enough to look at how well the students cooperated and ostensibly carried out the teacher’s instructions. We have to create a supportive framework by which trainees are constantly questioning the cognitive value of their classroom practices, evaluating the language learning process, and being concerned about how much of a difference they really are making. As teacher trainers we have to facilitate a process in which our trainee teachers are always willing to try something new, never feel completely satisfied with this lesson or that since there is always something more to improve and upgrade, in order to further challenge the kids they are teaching.

Lindsey: Hmm ... I’m wondering about that deep end approach you mentioned. Mightn’t it be precisely the opposite? By that I mean that our trainee teachers need to be exposed to more DH teaching, observe excellent teachers often, perhaps more than actually teach themselves. As I understand it, one of the principles behind DH is a return to what we might call “teacheress” – a sort of reinstating of the role of the teacher as the classroom leader whose responsibility

it is to ensure that learning happens. No one would argue that learner autonomy and meta-cognition are not important but I’ve often wondered if we haven’t been a bit extreme in our placing of the EFL learner at the center by providing lots of group work and projects at the expense of quite simply good , challenging teaching. Group work is lots of fun and no one would deny its learning value but it is very self-contained and there’s no room for continually upgrading one’s performance. The learner gets a set of task instructions and off he goes. In DH the focus is much more on the teacher and the things she does in the classroom to make learning happen- not an activity or a task- but rather the way she uses and exploits those activities and tasks. That being the case, mightn’t it be possible that DH teacher training needs to make the trainer more central as she guides the trainee teacher through the process? This might mean that we leave the trainee teachers less to their own devices to self-assess but instead, become more involved ourselves in assessing their performance. Perhaps trainers should be prepared to relinquish the sometimes exaggerated praise they provide when, in actual fact, that trainee teacher’s performance has been only mediocre. At the end of day trainee teachers want to know how well they are doing. We can help them relinquish the need for continual summative assessment and encourage them to continually reflect on, revise and upgrade their methods . This kind of training will give them a much more professional approach to their evolvement as teachers. Another strategy we should consider is having the trainees observe excellent DH teachers and encourage them to imitate these role models. We might say “Do it like that but tweak it even more. What else could you do?”

Nancie: Scrivener and Underhill like to quote Earl Stevick’s view that we all wish to feel that we are “an object of primary value in a world of meaningful action.”³ This is useful for teacher trainers to remember. It is not enough that our trainee teachers engage in a lot of teaching action but this action should have depth and meaningfulness for the trainee. To begin with, depth and meaning will be emphasized by the trainer as she aids the trainee teacher in probing improving and upgrading, but eventually this process should become trainee-generated. In the same way as DH in the ELT classroom should be relevant to the trainee’s life, so trainee teachers need to learn how to teach in a way that is relevant to where their current stage of development.

²The term “deep end” is used to refer to a Task Based Learning approach in which the students are thrown into a task without necessarily having the language knowledge to carry it out but acquire it as they go along.

³Underhill and Scrivener refer to a discussion of Stevick in Arnold’s and Murphey’s *Meaningful Action: Earl Stevick’s Influence on Language Teaching* (1). For the primary source see Stevick’s *Working With Teaching Methods: What’s At Stake*, (20),

The tweaking and upgrading will be different for each trainee teacher, based on their present understanding of the language learning process - what has led to deep learning and what still needs adjustment.

Lindsey: Another way of getting the trainees to delve deeper into the learning process might be to have them teach the same material in various ways- using communicative and task-based methods but also exploiting older, more traditional ones. Indeed, the older methods placed the teacher much more at the center, guiding and probing. I am thinking of methods like Audio-lingualism, the Silent Way, and the Community Language Learning Approach which all provide much more teacher support. By exposing our trainees to these methods, encouraging them to play and experiment with them, trainees' broaden their awareness of and experience the effectiveness of a wider range of language learning possibilities.

Nancie: It's interesting that you talk about broadening horizons because that is exactly what we ourselves should be doing. We should be adjusting our approach in training courses to set an example and expose trainee teachers to Demand High so that they can demand high of themselves as teachers and of course demand high of their learners. And I think we need to emphasize that we are not necessarily talking about more effort or work on the part of either teacher or learner but simply a shift in our perception of how language learning takes place and the role of the teacher in that process. And yet, despite the absence of a lot of extra work, there is something almost relentless in an attempt to always take things to the next level. I think we both agree that this conversation has

been inspiring for us and let's hope it will improve not only our respective training programs but generate an interest in other trainers to take their "routines" to the next level.

References

Demand High ELT <http://demandhighelt.wordpress.com/>

Scrivener, Jim and Underhill, Adrian. (2013) Demand High Teaching. English Teaching Professional, 85, 16-17

Stevick, Earl. (1998) Working with Teaching methods: What's at Stake? Thomson Heinle.

Nancie Gantenbein, originally from Canada, is the Academic Director at International House Zurich-Baden in Switzerland. She has been responsible for teacher training and development for over 10 years and has been a qualified CELTA Teacher since 2008. She is a member of ETAS (English Teachers Association of Switzerland) and has recently become TT SIG Coordinator.

Lindsey Shapiro-Steinberg coordinates the teacher training program of the English Department at Herzog Academic College, Gush Etzion. She lectures on various aspects of ELT and English literature at Herzog and David Yellin Education College. She received her PhD in English literature from Bar Ilan University.

 
Save the date for the spring conference!

Make your plans now!

March 30, 2015