

When I started out to teach English as a foreign language, I fell under the influence of a remarkable teacher. Before sitting at his feet I had read all his books and they made a deep impression on me. They shaped the way I saw not only English language teaching, but life itself. Imagine my excitement when I discovered that my guru was coming to town to give the opening plenary at our annual conference of English teachers. I secured a place in the front row of the huge auditorium and watched spellbound as my hero stepped onto the podium. He took one sapient look at the audience,

invitations to parties becoming few and far between? Do you wish you too were an exciting, scintillating, magnetic teacher, whom students worship and give Christmas presents to? If you answered 'yes' to all of these questions then you will not need to attend the following crash course in How to be a Boring Teacher.

● **Let students do nothing**

That's right. Do all the work yourself. Take the register yourself. Explain what you did the previous lesson yourself. Read out the text from the coursebook yourself. Read out the comprehension questions from the book yourself.

How to be a boring teacher

Luke Prodromou
pays tribute to his 'guru'
and gives a crash course
in 'BTM'.

put a sheaf of papers on the lectern in front of him, put his head down and began to read, his hands clutching the sides of the lectern as if he were hanging on to a lifeboat.

My heart sank as for the next 90 minutes he read out his text in a monolithic monotone, scholarly references and all: *Guru* (1956), *Guru* (1965), *Guru* (forthcoming). At the same time, we had a perfect view of the top of his head, which had already shed most of its natural covering. For 90 minutes we watched ourselves in the shining dome of my guru's head. And I thought of Hamlet when he says the aim of all lectures by experts on English language teaching was and is, as it were, to 'hold a mirror up to the teaching profession'.

So taking my cue from my guru, let me begin my course in BTM (Boring Teacher Methodology).

Do people drift away from you as you are talking? Do people look abstractedly into the distance as you wax lyrical about one of your pet subjects? Do your interlocutor's eyes glaze over blankly as you earnestly explain some fine point of Chomskyan linguistics? Does the punchline of what you think is one of your funniest jokes fall flat as a pancake? Are your

Answer the questions yourself. Write the answers on the board yourself and then rub the board clean yourself. Just get the students to listen to your lovely voice, droning on, showing them how clever you are. After all, it is not for nothing that you went to university. Do not keep your light under a bushel. Let them see how much you know.

● **Teach the book**

Start from page one and go straight through to the last page of the textbook. Lesson after lesson. Unit after unit. Do not by any means introduce any extraneous material into the lesson. Remember: the textbook is your Bible. It is not to be tampered with, questioned or rewritten. It is complete and self-contained, in no need of supplementation. After all, what kind of religious freak would write his or her own Bible? Textbook writers are omniscient; they know everything. You are benighted; you know nothing (Socrates). And your students don't know nothing neither (Bob Dylan).

● **Be right all the time**

Armed with the infallible textbook, there is no excuse for not being right all the time. You have all the answers and you correct all the mistakes. Let no-one

infringe on your right to be right. Remember the aim of all good teaching was and is to demonstrate to the learner what he or she does *not* know. To confront them, as it were, with deserts of ignorance. This will produce in them a thirst for knowledge, which only you can quench (with the help of a good teacher's book which gives all the correct answers so you don't have to think too hard). Your power lies in your possession of the right answer, and its revelation to erring students. Be a TEFL fundamentalist and you will never go wrong. A word of advice: when students commit errors or make mistakes, jump on them (the mistakes, not the students).

● **Assume students know nothing**

Explain everything in full laborious detail. Do not assume the students have done any English before, or have heard of English grammar. Do not by any means draw on their experience of life, their knowledge of the world or other school subjects. Your students are a blank sheet of paper, or as Locke said, 'tabula rasa'. You're a full vessel, they are empty vessels. This explains why you may find them a bit noisy at times; the emptier your students are, the more noise they will make. This is known as having a discipline problem. It is nothing to be alarmed about. All boring teachers have one; so ensure you have stern disciplinary measures in reserve. Do not let yourself be deceived into indulging in permissive modern methods such as eliciting. Rest assured that in some teaching contexts eliciting in class is frowned upon as time-wasting and even immoral. When beginning a new listening or reading text, go straight into it. Do not shilly-shilly around asking students what they might or might not know about the subject they are going to listen to or read. Do not procrastinate. Remember the English proverb: he or she who hesitates is lost. So get on with it.

● **Sit still**

Before you can achieve any of the above basic principles of BTM you need to appreciate the importance of body language, so make yourself comfortable at your desk at the front of the class and stay put. This is called 'ensconcing yourself' and it is quite easy to learn. Do not stand up if you can possibly avoid it. And do not fidget. Your place is in your chair, not wandering aimlessly round the room, standing in this corner or that.

Students should know where to find you when they want to speak (to each other – or cheat in a test). You shouldn't be popping up unpredictably in odd places in the classroom. Some very unconventional teachers have been known to stand at the back of the room where all they can see is the back of students' heads. In some extreme cases, they have even been known to stand on the desk itself. Such behaviour reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution (Wilde).

● **Be predictable**

It emerges naturally from what has been said above that you should in all things, wherever possible, try and be predictable. You should have a fixed routine for doing everything so students know exactly what is coming. Your lesson should have a beginning, a

reserve for early finishers. Early finishers, like the mixed-ability ideology which has given rise to this pernicious concept, is a figment of teacher trainers' vivid imagination. They too have to make a living. All classes are of the same level and all students work at the same pace, in the same way. If by any chance some learners do finish a task early do not burden them with extra exercises or tasks. Give them a chance to relax and see what's going on outside the window or in the room next door. Do not be a tyrant: students should be left alone now and then so they can chat idly to their neighbour, preferably in their own language. This is the time for the mother tongue, rather than during the lesson *per se*. After all, why should students have to speak a foreign language all the time? Remember, they have a language and

If you follow this course you can guarantee the Optimum Level of Boredom (OLB) in your classroom

middle and an end, in that order, not as in some new-fangled methods beginning with the end and going backwards. Always begin with 'Presentation'; always follow this with 'Practice' and always finish with 'Production'. That is why the letters 'PPP' appear in that order! Stick to PPP and you will never come unstuck.

● **Speak in a monotone**

You should not vary the pitch in your voice if you can possibly help it. You should try to achieve the most tedious monotone your vocal cords are capable of producing. Say everything in the same dull way. Do not distinguish between explanations and questions, instructions and asides, the beginning or the end of your discourse, the serious bits and the funny bits, the important and the trivial (not that you will have many funny or trivial bits). All of your utterances, whatever their function, must sound the same. God gave you one voice – you should not make yourself another (*Hamlet*).

● **Make sure students are idle**

Whatever else you do, watch your timing. Do not expect that students might finish an exercise at different times and do not have any activities in

culture of their own, which can help fill any unexpected gaps in the lesson. So: hands off those early finishers; hands off the mother tongue.

● **Lose your students**

This strategy does not refer to the annual trip to Britain to see the sights, Big Ben, Madame Tussauds, and whatnot. The truly boring teacher never agrees to trips of any kind, long or short. The boring teacher's private life is his or her own – he or she should not be expected to squander it in the company of students, who no doubt have their own private lives. No. Losing your students means making sure students do not know what it is you're talking about. In no circumstances should you pause to check that they are still with you. If they have not understood, that is their problem, not yours. Do not speak slowly to ensure all students are following: if they can't stand the heat, they should get out of the kitchen (George Bush).

● **Keep talking**

Related to the previous point is the very important principle of keeping the flow of teacher talk going non-stop. If you are not fluent, who is? And how on earth are students going to develop

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fluency if they do not have a good model to imitate? Remember, as Pavlov said, 'Imitation is the mother of learning,' and as Skinner added, 'Parrots learn best'. So keep talking and never be at a loss for words.


Nonsense

A lot of nonsense has been written in recent years by armchair experts in ELT about the need to motivate students and involve them in the process of learning. Students, they tell us, are the centre of the language learning process and our ultimate objective is the autonomy of the learner. This is the waffle of people haven't been inside a classroom for years, who have lost touch with reality. They are the fantasies of frustrated revolutionaries who wouldn't recognise a large mixed-

ability class if they saw one. And *they* have the cheek to tell *us* what to do! It is time we stood up for tradition and what we know works in the classroom.

If I could end on a lyrical note: the teacher is the centre of a Copernican classroom and the students, like so many planets, orbit around the teacher in their eternal, chaste beauty. When the students know their place and move in harmony around the teacher's authority and wisdom you will hear a divine music emanating from this dance of the classroom galaxy. Students are so many strings on the teacher's bow: untune those strings and hark what discord follows (*Troilus and Cressida*).

If you follow the few words of advice given in this short course on BTM you can guarantee the Optimum Level of Boredom (OLB) in your classroom. You are guaranteed to turn your students against you and against the school and against learning of every kind. You will soon be in a position to

advise other teachers on how to be boring and you could even set up Boredom Support In Groups (BSIGs) where you can, together with other boring teachers, share boring experiences. I would welcome letters from boring teachers everywhere on their most memorable and successful attempts to bore the pants off their students. Write to me, care of ETp. 

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The original idea for this article came from conversations with Jane Revell. She should not be held responsible for its contents.



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TALKBACK! TALKBACK! TALKBACK!

Mario Rinvoluceri's article 'Waving not drowning' (ETp, Issue Ten) produced some interesting feedback.

Juana Nicenboim from **Argentina** was very positive about mutual supervision: 'Thank you for trying to improve our qualities not only as teachers, but also as human beings.' However, she also wrote:

I have some doubts. Is speaking and being listened to an effective way of becoming aware of our strengths and flaws? Don't we need previous preparation? I'm 100% for peer observation, but I also have to admit that we are not trained enough. Deep inside we are afraid of being observed, and also there's an evil part waiting for others to 'make mistakes' when we reverse roles.

To which **Mario** has responded:

My proposal is that two teachers should work together *without at any point visiting or observing each other's classes*. If I have never seen you teach, there is no way I can have that demonic need to judge you and feel I am better than you.

As I listen to *your* story of *your* session, I can only hear *your* story as I do not have one of my own. Only yours is relevant.



Nick Fletcher and **Cathy Sheehy Skeffington** tried out peer supervision with other members of staff at **International House in Palma de Mallorca**:

Our interpretation of mutual supervision was that teachers A and B talk for ten minutes each in week one, and then B and C in week two, etc, every teacher being involved with someone different each week.

- In the first session, there were doubts about expressing problems and that this might colour our views towards future sessions.
- Talking solely about teaching problems was difficult, as non-work-related problems affect teaching, so we discussed these as required.
- It was good to have a set time to talk, but sometimes one person didn't have a problem and didn't know what to talk about. And isn't it OK to 'bend a colleague's ear' at any time?

- In the role of supervisor it was difficult not to do or say anything. In fact speakers found the lack of response off putting and felt more at ease when supervisors gave some sign that they were listening.
- It was good to rotate and listen to a variety of teachers, but our initial aim of finding someone we felt most comfortable with didn't materialise. Thinking that you are happiest talking to 'X' doesn't necessarily mean that 'X' feels the same!

We are currently continuing with mutual supervision, but we now have an allotted time at the end of each weekly staff meeting when one teacher goes to a classroom and anyone can go along to chat, so there's no pressure to find time or space every week.

In the book survey on pronunciation in ETp, Issue Nine, we recommended the 1991 edition of the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* by Daniel Jones (edited by Peter Roach and James Hartman). CUP have written to us pointing out that a fully revised and updated edition appeared in 1997.