

Strategies for Efficient Use of Teaching Time

Steve Darn and Gülfem Aslan

Abstract

Many teachers working in proficiency orientated institutions, whether they work in national, local teaching contexts or global ones, find themselves confronted with a heavily loaded curriculum, often split into language and separate skills, and a very limited time frame to work within. This dilemma often leads teachers to what seems to be an inescapably hasty, and more often than not, overloaded delivery of the requisite language patterns, skills and strategies. As a result, not only do students suffer from an inability to absorb information and lack of sufficient consolidation time, but also conscientious teachers worry about the quality of teaching and learning that is going on under such stress. What is more, in the majority of cases, teachers often rightly feel that they are ineffectual in affecting major changes in the syllabus. However, many of the same teachers may also be aware of the sense and logic of the 'less is more' approach. Faced with this quandary, this article considers practical ways of reducing the workload for both teachers and students without affecting the learning outcome. Optimising learning strategies are considered at the 'before teaching', 'while teaching' and 'between teaching' stages, covering areas from planning and preparation to fostering learner autonomy.

Whilst taking into account the practical circumstances in which teachers work, this article offers global solutions to local issues and aims to remind teachers that 'there is more to life than increasing its speed'.

Introduction

Teaching is a time consuming occupation, and one in which both learner achievement and job satisfaction are proportional to time and effort expended, yet one of the commonest complaints heard from teachers is 'I haven't got time'.

In certain countries, cultures and education systems, however, this complaint is not directed towards extra duties, marking, running extra-curricular activities or coaching a school team, but merely towards classroom time in relation to content and materials to be taught.

These cultures and systems are often those with a tradition of rote learning and an emphasis on linguistic competence, and despite the communicative nature of globally designed materials, syllabuses are often structural in design, overloaded, proficiency orientated and set to meet an examination target. In such teaching contexts, the common teacher's complaint is extended to 'I haven't got time to practise the language', or 'I haven't got time for the speaking activities'. Cardinal sins are committed; language is not presented in context, production is minimal, mechanical exercises prevail, listening texts are ignored, and there is little or no pronunciation practice. Lessons tend to consist of explanations, copious examples and repetitive decontextualised guided practice activities designed for individual learners to complete and teachers to check as rapidly as possible. The solution to error is seen as further practice rather than reteaching. Time is seen as wasted in setting up communicative activities, and problems are compounded by an attitude to error manifest by yet more worksheets.

Working within such constraints, teachers are forced to misuse well designed course materials, and revert to the chalk and talk techniques by which they were probably

taught themselves, however contemporary their training may have been. Most of these teachers are fully aware, however, that ‘more of the same’ is not the answer, that language learning is a bridge to life outside and after the classroom, and that there is an achievable balance between the linguistic and communicative competencies.

“If there's one lament that I've heard over and over again from teachers it's the statement "I have too much content to cover!" It lies behind much of the resistance to change in teaching methods which I have encountered and has probably killed more innovations than any administrative dictates or situational constraints ever could.” (Marilla Svinicki, University of Texas)

There are however, strategies that teachers can adopt to create time for more meaningful classroom activities whilst maintaining a manageable pace of learning, beginning with a number of questions fundamental to planning and preparation:

- How much can be done well in the time available?
- What can be left out?
- What can be amalgamated?
- What can be done beforehand?
- What can be done later?
- What they can do themselves?
- What's left?
- What's the logical order?
- Who's going to do what?
- How can it be made make it interesting, motivating and relevant?

The answers to these questions provide a basic sensibility in the overloaded teacher's decision making process, and lead to further decisions involving choice, integration and prioritisation, and a reappraisal of factors such as responsibility, motivation and autonomy. There are many strategies that ultimately lead to time saving and efficiency, some of which are used regularly by discerning teachers and some of which are used occasionally. However, the collective use of time and resource management strategies is rare. Individual strategies include:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| • Providing incentives | • Prioritising | • Offering rewards |
| • Giving encouragement | • Establishing ground-rules | • Being prepared |
| • Training the learners | • Providing study skills | • Encouraging autonomy |
| • Providing self access facilities | • Sharing the workload | • Sharing responsibilities |
| • Peer teaching | • Sustaining motivation | • Maintaining interest |
| • Achieving flow | • Using different frameworks | • Integrating language and skills |
| • Avoiding overload | • Giving homework | • Providing pre- and post- tasks |
| • Using project work | • Minimising | • Using technology |

mechanical
exercises

wisely

Broadly, these strategies may be categorised according to their chronological place in the teaching and learning process: before teaching, while teaching and between/after teaching.

Before teaching

Interest, motivation and flow

Teachers tend to complain that their students seem unmotivated and this affects their own motivation and performance in the classroom. There are two questions, which such teachers might ask:

1. Might it not be the other way round?
2. Would you like to be a learner in your own class?

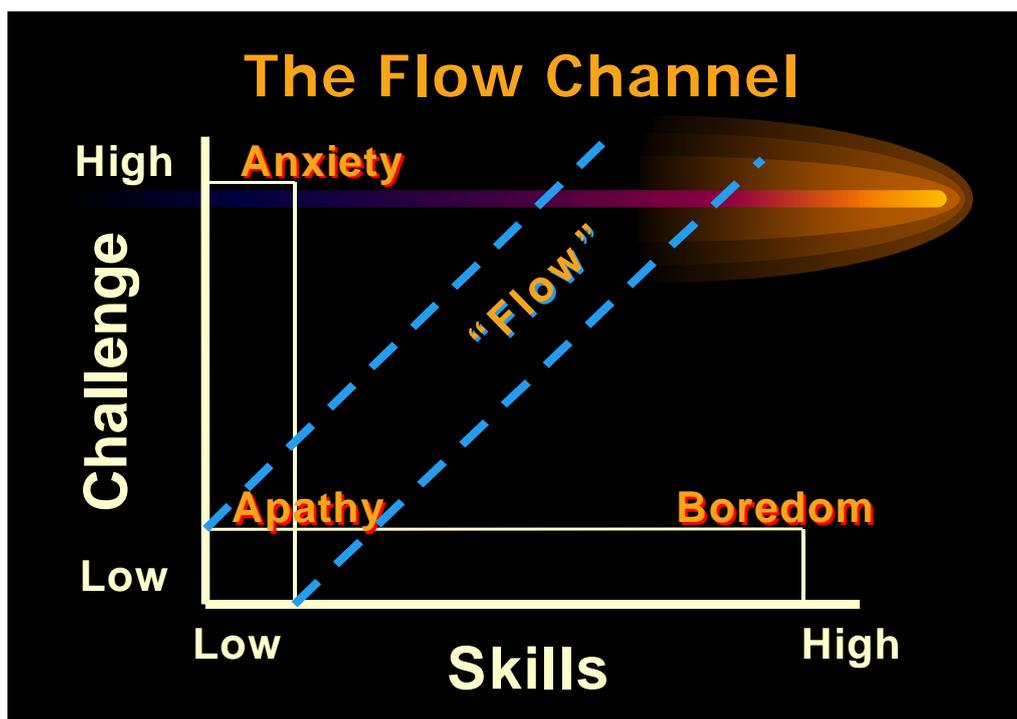
Few learners, particularly in examination-orientated institutions, are able to fully motivate themselves, and it is one of the teacher's roles to provide that motivation, even before teaching starts, by clearly defining goals and how they are going to be achieved. However, in order to create a positive learning environment; intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation is what is required. Hence, typical motivational tactics such as reward, punishment and stimulation are unlikely to meet with success, whereas the promotion of interest, curiosity, novelty and enjoyment are more likely to promote a better long-term classroom atmosphere through individual and group intrinsic motivation.

In this sense, the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is akin to the difference between process and product. Although, for example, reading because there are reading questions on the final examination is a powerful short-term motivator, reading for pleasure is a long-term activity which will promote the gradual development of reading sub-skills and an important life-skill. Reading for interest, however, like any activity, involves the selection of materials which are relevant to the learners' own interests and needs, and may involve the rejection of materials produced for the global market and the substitution of original or adapted materials.

There are three agents which teachers need to provide to establish intrinsic motivation: time, choice and positive feedback. Without these, learners are unable to achieve their goals, are not part of the decision-making process, and are likely to become demotivated. Added to these are the concepts of optimum task-challenge and flow.

Optimum task-challenge is to do with achievability, manageability or 'doability'. Tasks, which are too difficult, are inevitably demotivating, while tasks which are too easy, such as mechanical worksheet exercises, offer no challenge. The task, which, although it may appear difficult, is actually manageable, leads to a sense of accomplishment and increased intrinsic motivation. In the development of reading and listening skills, learners are often discouraged by the apparent difficulty of a text, but pleasantly surprised to find that they can manage the task which is set. Hence the importance of the text-task relationship.

Tasks which provide no challenge or which are unachievable from the outset both lead to apathy. In the former case, they also lead to boredom, and in the latter, to anxiety. Somewhere between these two extremes lies the 'flow channel'.



Flow is a concept borrowed from psychology, particularly the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The concept describes a mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterised by a feeling of energy and focus, full involvement, and success in the process (rather than the product) of the activity.

Csikszentmihalyi identifies nine components of flow, not all of which are required at one time for flow to be experienced:

1. *Clear goals* (expectations and rules are discernible)
2. *Concentrating and focusing* (a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention)
3. *A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness* (as a result of focus, action and achievement)
4. *Distorted sense of time* (Time seems to pass quickly)
5. *Direct and immediate feedback* (successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that adjustments can be made as needed).
6. *Balance between ability level and challenge* (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult).
7. *A sense of personal control* (by the learner over the activity).
8. *The activity is intrinsically rewarding* (the doing of the task is enjoyable)
9. *A non-threatening, non-disturbing environment*

The communicative classroom already involves some of these considerations, which are also indicators of good teaching, while the more abstract components of flow, such as alleviating self-consciousness and turning control over to the learners, are often deliberately overlooked by teachers. These components may appear unachievable or threatening to the teacher's authority, or the teacher may be unaware of how to implement these strategies. Teachers and learners sense when flow has been achieved, leaving the classroom with a positive feeling and thinking that the lesson

went quickly. Teachers might profitably reflect on what the characteristics of those lessons were.

Establishing responsibilities

The notion of personal control as one of the components of flow might more readily be stated as learner involvement, not only in an activity but also in the management and decision making processes of the classroom. This process is step towards learner autonomy and responsibility and a workload which is more evenly distributed between teacher and learners. Learner involvement is a gradual process and involves negotiation, learner self-confidence and willingness from the teacher to release control. Teachers might make a start by asking themselves the questions below, and if the answer to the majority is themselves, then thinking of ways of shifting the balance.

Whose Responsibility?

T: Teacher only S: Students only TS: Teacher and Students

- Who provides the visuals?
- Who gives the dictation?
- Who gives the instructions?
- Who does the photocopying?
- Who repeats what has been said if the others haven't heard it?
 - Who writes on the board?
 - Who do the students speak to?
 - Who do the students look at?
 - Who selects the vocabulary?
- Who chooses the seating arrangements and moves the chairs and tables?
 - Who tests?
 - Who breaks the silences?

This is a first stage, leading perhaps to higher levels of learner involvement such as choosing tasks and materials, peer teaching, giving feedback to the teacher and being part of the syllabus negotiation process.

Prioritising

All teachers working in proficiency orientated institutions work within the constraints of a syllabus and a limited time frame. At the same time, the syllabus is often overloaded and based on a global-design course book and a variety of supplementary materials. The assumption, then, is that learners all require the same input and all teachers adhere closely to the syllabus. Most teachers working under these circumstances will also tell you that they haven't got time to do everything, can't do things 'properly' and have to miss things out. There are a number of considerations here: syllabus design, choice of materials, timing and selection. Given that the syllabus and materials are often imposed, the teacher's responsibility is to make

informed decisions about how much time to devote to specific types of content and activities.

Most multi-layered course books are based on an integrated syllabus, which provides a balanced diet of language input and skills development. This is appropriate on a global scale, as are the materials, tasks and exercises included in each unit of the book. However, neither the balance of input nor the materials and tasks may be suited to any particular individual or learning group. The other negating factor is that under time limitations, teachers tend to omit content which is easy to cut out or difficult to manage, notwithstanding the needs of the learners. Again, 'chalk and talk' presentations and mechanical exercises tend to be favoured over communicative activities which demand higher levels of organisation and classroom management whilst appearing to be more time consuming. The consequences are that lessons are exercises in time-filling rather than constructive use of time and, as we have already seen, lacking in the characteristics which produce motivation and flow.

Prioritising is the key to time and content management and relies on one of the basic principles of informed eclecticism; that the teacher should know what the learners want and need. Once this has been established, decisions can be made about the balance of language and skills content, receptive and productive skills, time devoted to practice, and the most efficient way of presenting language. This does not mean 'missing out' chunks of content from the syllabus, merely adjusting the balance to suit the state of learning of the group at any one time. There are other simple tactics: shifting mechanical exercises out of classroom time, setting extensive tasks for homework, utilising self-access facilities where available and adapting materials. Prioritising is an integral part of the long and short term planning processes, often the key to effective teaching and while time consuming in themselves, enormously time and effort saving in the long run.

While teaching

Integration

Most syllabuses purport to provide a balance of language and skills, the bias being a product of the nature and purpose of the course, be it general English or ESP or EAP where certain skills may be emphasised. Most course books also claim to provide such a balance. Nevertheless, many institutions insist on supplementing the course book with other substantial materials, so that learners may end up with a course book, a reading book, a writing book, a grammar practice book and several volumes of photocopied practice materials from various sources. Such is the sheer volume, in terms of quantity, time and expense, of the learner's task. More is not always more in terms of learning, and one wonders if the relationship between learning and materials, in the same way as profits and investment, responds to the economic laws of diminishing marginal utility. It may well be the case that useful material from one book is abandoned in order to make time for materials from another book designed for similar though slightly more specific purposes. A unit from a standard course book might well look something like this:

Unit X - People, places and things	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relative clauses • -ed/-ing adjectives • Synonyms • English signs
Language Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a gap-fill exercise about a rich man
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammar • Vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strange person, place, and a thing
Skills Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing a picture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Speaking • Listening • Writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchanging information about a strange person, place or thing • Radio ads • Group work - devising an advert • Describing your favourite person or part of your town

There is, of course, a balance of language and skills work here, and if one looks closely, a variety of activities to practise the language and the skills, and enough variety of interaction patterns to satisfy the demands of the communicative classroom. There is also enough material here, bearing in mind the possibilities of prioritising and adapting, for several hours of constructive classroom teaching and learning.

The main advantage of using a single course book with an integrated syllabus is that English is seen, by both learners and teachers, as a single subject and taught as a whole rather than a number of separate parts, thus avoiding oft-heard remarks such as 'I'm a writing teacher' and 'I like my grammar lessons, but I don't like my listening and video lessons'.

Teaching or testing

An interesting project for teachers is to write down, over the course of a week, a month or a term, all the activities that they ask learners to do in class, and how much time is spent on each of them. The second stage is to categorise the activities into those which increase the knowledge and skills of the learners, and those which effectively test their existing knowledge. Add up the time spent on the latter, add the time spent on teaching and preparing specifically for tests, administering tests, marking and giving feedback on tests, plus the 'dead' time before and after tests when learners refuse to do anything. The result is a phenomenal amount of time spent on test-related activities, syllabuses which turn into examination preparation and the waste of a huge amount of constructive teaching time.

Learner Training

'A set of strategies designed to raise learners' awareness of what is involved in the process of learning a second language, which encourage learners to become more involved in and responsible for their own learning, and which help learners to develop and strengthen their strategies for language learning.' (Tricia Hedge, ELTJ; January 1993)

Learner training plays a huge role in both the development of learners' study skills and the development of learner autonomy. Learning a language is an ongoing process which stops neither at the classroom door nor at the end of school-based education. If one of a teacher's aims is to prepare learners for lifelong learning, then learner training must be an integral part of any syllabus.

Learner training is best started from the outset, but for learners who have already been exposed to traditional teacher-centred and rote learning systems, the process starts later and consists of deconditioning and retraining. Learner training is essential for many reasons, some of which are to overcome obstacles to good learning:

- Constraints on time (and often money)
- The sheer enormity of the language learning task
- The 'unteachability' of many aspects of the language
- Learning despite bad teaching
- Replacing bad habits with good ones

Learner training is **not** about responding simplistically to the question 'What can I do to improve my English?' Although good advice, obvious tips such as

- Watch programmes in English on TV
- Listen to English songs
- Read English books
- Find an English e-pal
- Find exercises on the Internet
- Keep a diary in English

are not enough. Learner training is about helping learners to systematically plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning activities and consists of two major areas: psychological preparation and methodological preparation. Psychological preparation is concerned with understanding the learning process, awareness of teacher and learner roles and responsibilities and confidence building. Methodological preparation is concerned with the acquisition of study skills, strategies for learning and techniques for self-evaluation.

Between teaching

Pre- and post- tasks

An important part of prioritising is deciding which tasks and activities need to be done and monitored in the classroom and which can comfortably be done at home or in a self-access facility. This, together with the obvious need for continuity and preparation by the learner as well as the teacher, and the optimum use of classroom time, makes what is done before and after class as important as what is done in the classroom itself.

Before a class, both the learners and the teacher need to prepare. For this to happen, learners need to know the structure of the syllabus and what is going to happen in the next lesson, most of which they can glean from their sourcebook. One effective way of winding up a lesson is to provide both a summary and an introduction to the next class, and to tell the learners what they need to do in terms of preparation. Preparation is a valid alternative to retrospective homework and may involve fairly simple tasks

such as familiarisation with the forthcoming unit, using a dictionary to find the meanings of new words in the next reading passage, or using the Internet to find some background information about a new theme. Often the last of these is most productive, since it reduces the amount of time the teacher needs to spend on setting the scene, providing context, or adding global and cultural knowledge to a topic. Learners with computer access find these tasks stimulating, quick and easy to accomplish, and less arduous than searching for information in paper-based sources. Such an approach involves seeing lessons as a continuum rather than discreet units and requires at least medium-term planning from the teacher.

There is a distinction to be made between post-lesson tasks and homework. Homework is traditionally seen as practising what has been learned in the classroom and giving extensive tasks for which there is no classroom time. There is nothing wrong with using homework to reinforce knowledge or to make time for extensive reading, but post-lesson activities are better seen as means of extending knowledge and involving learners in choices about their own learning. One useful tactic is to provide learners with a menu of tasks, most of which have to be completed over a period of time. Project work is also a meaningful activity, which can be spread over a series of lessons or even a term. Technology is again of use in that learners can follow links to extend their knowledge of topics that interest them, the initial link being supplied by the teacher or any member of the class, as in the example of an interactive text below.

Jeans are [trousers](#) traditionally made from [denim](#), but may also be made from a variety of fabrics including cotton and corduroy. Originally work [clothes](#), they became popular among [teenagers](#) starting in the [1950s](#). Historic brands include [Levi's](#) and [Wrangler](#). Today Jeans are a very popular form of casual dress around the world and come in many styles and colors. The earliest known precursor for jeans is the Indian export of a thick cotton cloth, in the 16th century, known as [dungaree](#). Dyed in [indigo](#), it was sold near the Dongarii Fort near [Mumbai](#). Jeans were first created in [Genoa, Italy](#) when the city was an independent [Republic](#), and The first denim came from [Nîmes](#), France.

The primary value of project and Web-based work is that it extends not only knowledge of language, but also knowledge of content, and in schools and universities there is much to be said for the content and language integrated learning approach.

Autonomy

If some of our aims are to prepare learners for life outside the classroom, to make them aware of their responsibilities for their own learning, and to train them in how to learn, the final product is likely to be, or at least resemble, the autonomous learner.

'The autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher.' (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975)

'teachers...have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat'. (Sheerin, 1997, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997)

There are two popular misconceptions amongst teachers about learner autonomy. The first is that it is synonymous with developing study skills and telling the learners what they can do outside the classroom to improve their teaching. The second is that it is a dangerous and subversive activity which leads to loss of teacher authority and classroom anarchy. The reality is that learner autonomy is a realistic long-term goal, is an educationally sound concept and is beneficial to both learners and teachers. Interestingly, research shows that because autonomy is a cooperative process, learner autonomy fosters teacher autonomy and vice-versa.

Perhaps it is useful to make an analogy between autonomy and the student-centred classroom. In the student-centred classroom, the focus is on the learners rather than the teachers, and the teacher is a monitor, a facilitator and an evaluator. For the autonomous learner, the focus is on the self, whether inside or outside the classroom, and learning processes are self actuated, facilitated, monitored and evaluated. The autonomous learner has mastered a number of crucial abilities which were previously the province of the teacher:

- a) *directed attention*, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task
- b) *selective attention*, paying attention to specific aspects of a task
- c) *self-monitoring*, checking one's performance as one speaks, reads, listens etc.
- d) *self-evaluation*, appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards
- e) *self-reporting*, talking or writing about their learning experiences in semi structured interviews, questionnaires, diaries etc.
- f) *self-reinforcement*, rewarding oneself for success.

'A teacher is one who makes herself progressively unnecessary'
(Thomas Carruthers)

Conclusion

This article has been a synthesis of more than twenty strategies listed in the introduction which, individually and collectively lead to time saving and increase efficiency. In the same way that teachers operate under the constraints of time and an overload of content, we have had to make decisions regarding choice, prioritising, amalgamating and omitting for the sake of space and time. It is however, worth reflecting on all those strategies, and others, and to begin to make decisions about which strategies to adopt in order to optimise teaching and learning in any given context.

'There is more to life than simply increasing its speed'
(Mahatma Ghandi).

Recommended reading

- Paul Black, *Testing: Friend or Foe? - Theory and Practice of Assessment and Testing*, Routledge Falmer, 1997
- Michael Breen and Andrew Littlejohn, *Classroom Decision Making: Negotiation and Process Syllabuses in Practice*, CUP, 2000
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Collins, 1990
- Gail Ellis and Barbara Sinclair, *Learning to Learn English: A Course in Learner Training*, CUP, 1989)
- Diana Fried-Booth, *Project Work*, OUP, 2002
- Yoshiyuki Nakata, *Motivation And Experience in Foreign Language Learning*, Peter Lang Publishing, 2006
- Lesley Painter and Alan Maley, *Homework*, OUP 2003
- Agota Scharle and Anita Szabo, *Learner Autonomy: A Guide to Developing Learner Responsibility*, CUP, 2000
- David Smith, *Teaching English with Information Technology*, Modern English Publishing, 2005

Note: this article is based on a presentation given by the authors at the 9th Middle East Technical University International ELT Convention, Ankara, May 2006.

Steve Darn and Gülfem Aslan, Izmir and Istanbul, Turkey, August 2006