

Your Most Essential Audiovisual Aid—Yourself!

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How many teachers recognize this situation?—Teacher A comes into the staff room and collapses into a chair with a groan. “This class I have this semester is just hopeless. They can’t seem to learn anything. They just sit there the whole time like sacks of potatoes, with glazed expressions on their faces. I can’t get any response out of them. They’re so boring!” Teacher B listens, and replies rather hesitantly: “Oh dear. I can’t understand it. I taught them last semester, and I found them quite rewarding. Perhaps...” (his voice trails away uncertainly). Teacher A responds: “Well, it’s obvious that they just aren’t up to the work in this level. They can’t follow what I’m talking about at all.”

Most teachers have participated in or overheard conversations like this one. The instincts of the good EFL teacher lead him to feel that the problem here lies not with the class, but elsewhere. How often do we find a whole class of “unresponsive, boring” students? How often do we find a whole class of students whose language-learning ability changes radically during the vacation?

I want to leave aside the possibility that the teaching materials are too difficult, or inappropriate: after all, most classroom teachers can’t do much to change the materials, and most of us know that you can make any material do the job if you really have to. Let’s assume, also, that Teacher A and Teacher B are both equally proficient in English and equally well trained. What, then, is the variable that has turned “a good class” into “a bad class” so quickly?

The answer, it seems to me, is the *personality* of the teacher. A boring teacher will soon create for himself or herself a bored class, which is a boring class, and leads to a bored teacher: this is a vicious circle and can become worse and worse. On the other hand, an enthusiastic teacher is hard to resist, and except in the presence of very adverse

additional factors will generate a responsive enthusiasm in his class: the students’ enthusiasm reaches him as feedback and stimulus to further enthusiasm in a reciprocal process which leads to a rewarding experience for students and teacher.

The obvious next question is: how do students differentiate between a teacher who is interested and enthusiastic, and one who is not? This brings me to my title: a teacher is his own (potential) best audiovisual aid. Students, consciously or unconsciously, judge a teacher by the visual and aural stimuli he sends out, starting from the very first moments of contact with a new teacher. The “signals” that the teacher sends out are what the students use as their first measure of his personality, his attitude to teaching, to students as people, to individual learning problems, to his materials. This first instinctive judgment, once made, is hard to alter, so we need to make sure it’s a positive one. Of course, it *can* be altered if a teacher starts behaving differently and keeps it up long enough, but it’s much easier to start by creating the atmosphere you *want* in your classroom.

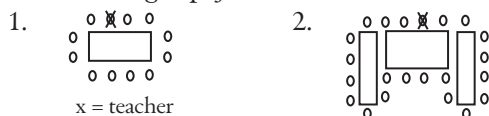
Notice that I’m not talking about language proficiency, qualifications, teaching experience, thorough knowledge of grammatical theory, or of how to use a language laboratory, or any of those things that an EFL teacher might have missed out on and is unable to do anything about—I’m talking about improving our appearance, the way our students perceive us—and that’s something that every teacher *can* do something about.

Here are some suggestions. None of them are original; they’re ideas I’ve picked up from colleagues, books, and articles over the years, and many of them are very obvious indeed. But sometimes it’s the most obvious things that get neglected—that’s why it may be useful to see them all written down together like this.

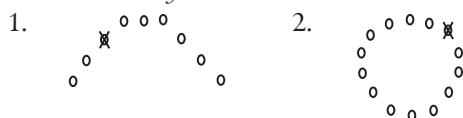
The teacher as “visual aid”

Physical position. The way you position yourself relative to your class tells the students something about you. If you feel constrained by the layout of the furniture in the classroom, change it around if you possibly can. If you can't, try to change rooms. A general rule is, get as close to the students as you can. Don't sit or stand on a dais. Don't sit behind a desk. Use the desk for lesson “props” if necessary, but stay in front of it. If you need to sit, sit as part of the class, or at least sit in front of the desk. Here are some possible configurations:

A: around a table/group of tables

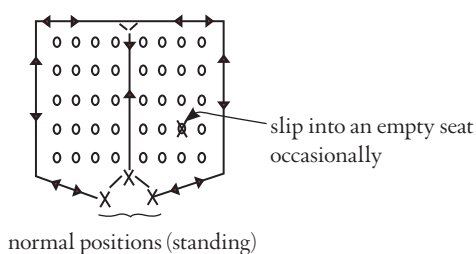


B: a room with “study chairs”



When the class is very large, you might not be able to function as one of the group and still be seen and heard. In this case, *stand* in front of the class, and move among them as often as possible, creating the impression of contact, of being part of the group; diminish the physical distance as much as possible. Using whatever approach(es) suit your physical situation, change your position from lesson to lesson—don't be too predictable.

C: fixed furniture or a very big class



Eye Contact. It is extremely important to make good eye contact with each student in the class whenever you are addressing the class as a whole, and to make eye contact with an individual you are addressing or who is speaking to you. “Eye contact” means that your eyes look directly at the other person's as they look at yours—your eyes “meet.”

The teacher has to make the effort to keep his eyes lively, aware, and interested, moving around the room taking in everything, fixing on a specific student long enough to make contact, but not long enough to seem to be staring and thus make the student uneasy, taking in the whole room again, fixing on another student, and so on. It doesn't take very

long for the habit to become automatic—but don't make the mistake of always fixing on your “best” (or your “worst”) students—share your attention. If you look only at your textbook or the ceiling, or if your eyes are usually unfocused, the students will feel that they don't have your attention, and they won't give you theirs. The knowledge that a teacher demands eye contact keeps students alert (the eyes are the “mirror of the soul”—and, some might say, of the brain!), and the act of making eye contact provides the teacher with a form of immediate feedback on the impact of what he is saying. This feedback aspect is especially important in very large classes, where the teacher is forced to be more “distant” from his students than he would wish. In smaller classes, good eye contact between teacher and students, and between the students, plays a very important part in developing a feeling of group cohesiveness and of shared learning.

In some cultures, eye contact is discouraged, especially between the sexes or between inferior and superior (which may be how the student/teacher relationship is viewed), but I believe we should do everything we can to banish this attitude from the EFL classroom, while accepting it in native-language situations.

Posture. Always hold your body so that you look alert: an erect posture, no slumping or sagging. Remember that your voice carries better when your head is held up on your neck; if your chin sinks towards your chest, your voice will sink into the floor. An erect posture also makes it easier for you to make eye contact around the room. *Control* your body: be aware of the “message” it is sending to your students. Don't keep completely still or the students might fall asleep, but don't move too much, or movement becomes fidgeting, and the students will assume that you are bored or impatient or nervous. Extreme habits of movement such as pacing the floor are very distracting for the students.

Arms and Hands. Use your arms and hands when you talk, to emphasize a point, describe a shape, a movement, etc., but don't overdo it, and always try to keep arm and hand movements meaningful—otherwise they can become distractors instead of supporting your words. When you are listening to a student, keep arms and hands still: your students may be put off if they think you are fidgeting because they are boring you. Avoid like the plague such irritating habits as tapping a pen or clinking coins together—remember how they drove you crazy when you were a student?!

Face. Facial expression is very important. The difference between a smile and a frown may be the difference between a student who learns and one who does not. Don't forget the wide variety of facial expressions you are

capable of: try to become conscious of the expressions you commonly use and their effects on people. Make your face expressive when you are talking, to add point to your comments in the same way as you use your hands. But be especially careful of your facial expressions when you are *not* talking, when the students are the center of attention. Don't let your facial muscles sag, don't look bored; try to cultivate a sympathetic, encouraging expression. A slight lift to the eyebrows, and to the corners of the mouth, might do a lot to get your students talking. (Practice in front of a mirror—well, why not? Actors do it all the time, and we all know teachers are actors!)

Try to remember that your “body language” tells your students a lot about you and your attitude to what you are doing: if your body tells them you are enthusiastic about your job and caring about them, they will respond positively; if your body sends out “negative vibes” they will respond negatively.

Teacher as “audio aid”

Remember the teachers who put you to sleep when you were at school? Almost certainly it was mainly their *voice* that had that soporific effect on you. Does your voice put your students to sleep? If you have observed your students' reactions honestly and self-critically, you will know the answer to that question.

One way to find out whether your voice is an asset or a liability to you as a teacher is to record a whole lesson and then study the resultant recording carefully and analyze your good and bad points. If your voice is monotonous, try to work out why it is, and what you can do to make yourself sound more interesting: make a conscious effort to vary your pitch, intonation, rhythm, and tone. This will avoid monotony and also aid the students' listening comprehension. Do you always speak clearly, or do you sometimes mumble or swallow words or run groups of words together? Practice speaking clearly while maintaining a natural speech style; don't slide into the other extreme of enunciating unnaturally to make sure students hear each word in isolation. Is your volume right? You should pitch your voice loudly enough so that every student can hear you, but no student finds you uncomfortably loud. Too much volume is a distractor, as is too little; note also that a teacher who sometimes pitches his voice rather low can be very effective—the students will strain to hear (but use this technique sparingly).

As you listen to your recording of yourself, notice also whether you make a lot of “false starts” (hesitations or rephrasings halfway through a sentence). While such “false starts” are a natural feature of spoken language, students, es-

pecially at the lower language-learning levels, can't always follow you through them. Try to have your ideas clearly arranged in your mind before you start to speak, so that you keep “false starts” to a minimum. Also try to avoid unfinished sentences, the kind that fade away without having gone anywhere, such as: “We were going to look at the next passage today but ...” If the sentence was worth beginning, it should be worth completing, and if it wasn't worth beginning ...(!)

Finally, *how much* do you talk? If you listen to your recording and realize that you were talking during most of the lesson, you need to ask yourself some serious questions: Was it necessary for you to talk so much? What were the students doing while you were talking? Did the students learn something from what you said? How do you know? Could they have learned the same thing in a different way? In general, all of us tend to remember best the things that we learned through our own effort, and are less likely to recall the things an “expert” told us. Whether you are a behaviorist or a nativist, it remains true that language learning is a skill that must be actively practiced as well as theoretically understood.

So—if your class is boring, or if they're “just not getting it”—are *you* growing stale? Brush up your AV package!