‘Demand High’ teaching
By Adrian Underhill and Jim Scrivener, UK

The Demand High ELT website at demandhighelt.wordpress.com was launched in March 2012 by Adrian Underhill and Jim Scrivener. Since then, they’ve given conference presentations and seminars in different countries aiming to explain and explore the concept.

What is Demand-High Teaching?
Demand High Teaching asks:

• Are our learners capable of more than we currently ask of them?
• Have the tasks and techniques we use in class become rituals and ends in themselves?
• How can we stop “covering material” and start focusing on the potential for deep learning?
• What small tweaks and adjustments can we make to shift the whole focus of our teaching towards getting that engine of learning going?

What Demand-High Teaching is not
Demand High Teaching is not a method and it is not anti any method. It is not anti-Communicative Approach or Teaching Unplugged or Task Based Learning. It simply suggests adjustments to whatever it is we are already doing in class to gain greater depth of tangible engagement and learning by students.

Demand-High Teaching does not mean making things more difficult in ways that do not help the majority of students (e.g. setting exercises that are too hard). This is what they call an un-doable demand.

The proponents suggest instead a demand that comes precisely at the point where the learner is capable of making their next steps forward – and then helping them to meet that demand, rather than avoiding it. This is doable demand. We could say perhaps that this relates to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD.

The Website
Over time, the proponents of Demand-High Teaching hope that their website will offer a wide range of practical tools for teachers and trainers. It is already building. There are, for example, some downloadable observation tasks treating issues like “Does the Task Obscure the Learning?” (focusing on whether a task or its instructions, set-up, structure, point-scoring, checking etc obscure the learning that is supposed to arise from the task) and “Learner Involvement in Answering the Teacher’s Questions” (looking at whether the teacher tends to close down questions almost as soon as they have been asked and what other things they could do instead during that time).

There are also a few ready-to-go seminars designed to help us run an interesting session on Demand-High. The seminars are aimed at Teacher Trainers, Directors or Studies, Academic managers, interested Teachers etc who would like to offer an in-service training session.

Is Demand High Teaching new?
The saying goes that there is nothing new under the sun. But we can have a new and increased emphasis on an area of our work that seems to have got a bit neglected of late.

You may remember an article in this journal by Penny Ur in Volume 22 Number 2 (pp 2-4) entitled, “Using class time for learning”. In this article Penny reaffirmed her view that…’if students aren’t learning in my class, then I’m not doing my job properly.’ She went on to explore different kinds of class tasks, in the light of the amount of motivation, challenge and learning they might lead to, gave us some strategies for improving routine language learning activities, looked at a number of types of time-wasting that can be avoided, and gave ideas as to how all this can be broached with teachers in training. It is great that the topic of using class time well, so improving student learning, has come back again into focus under Demand High Teaching.

I met up with Adrian and Jim at a conference in Greenwich, UK in January 2013 and was able to ask them a few follow-up questions.

TW: First of all, is there anything you would like to add to the short piece above to make sure your ideas are well-represented?

AU and JS: Yes, two things. First, what we are trying to get at with Demand-High is not quite synonymous with “…the topic of using class time well, so improving student learning…” It’s more to do with encouraging teachers to see beyond the mechanics of task, material and lesson aims to start becoming more sensitive to what happens inside when a human is learning. We call this making learning visible.

TW: What do you feel DOES happen inside a learner and how do you make it visible?

AU and JS: There are a number of different inner learning moves that happen in response to any classroom task. We can’t see inside the learner’s head, but we can study our own doing of a task and we can intuit how a learner might respond. One activity we may do in teacher workshops is to take any typical classroom learning task and to look first at the teacher instructions, and then at all the inner moves the learner will have to make to do that task. Thus, rather than asking big questions like “What is the aim of your lesson?” or mechanics-focussed questions such “What does the learner have to do in this task?” we ask more close-up questions such as “In the current task, what does the learner have to do, in order to do the task?”

In doing this, a teacher may get closer in to the student’s learning zone and can target their interventions much more precisely. Over time the teacher can develop a higher skill set of active demand-rich interventions that work directly with learning as it unfolds.

We have put this workshop on the DH website and anyone can access and use it. So let’s use that as an illustration:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Teacher Instructions</th>
<th>Possible inner learning moves necessitated by the instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify all the words in a paragraph that contain a certain sound</td>
<td>“We have practised the sound /æ/ and found some example words. Now would you please look through this paragraph carefully, and underline any words you find that contain this sound /æ/”</td>
<td>• Say one of the sample words to herself, externally, and certainly internally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Extract and say the sound /æ/, also internally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hear it internally in the inner ear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hold on to that inner representation of the sound while reading the passage, probably slowly, hearing internally each vowel sound, in the inner voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• And at the same time, compare each new vowel sound with the ‘stored’ representation of /æ/. This is carried out internally using either/both the inner ear and the inner voice.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When a possible match is found, check the match for equivalence by saying the word, and extracting the vowel in question several times, and again comparing with the stored master sound.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• At various times probably test words and sounds aloud to see how that helps with the inner discemment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
This involves sensitising more teachers to. We propose a small course correction to our direction of travel.

AU and JS: For us, Demand-High is not “something that has come back into focus” since we do not recall a time when what we refer to was ever widely in focus in ELT. Conversely, we are not intending to polarize a set of new ideas against an older set. We are simply noticing that in the evolution of our (generally fairly sound) standard quartet of individual, pair work, group work or whole class.

TW: What might being aware of this help a teacher to teach in a way that benefitted more of her students?

AU and JS: We believe so. We want to explore ‘the impossible’ activity of differentially challenging all the students in a group at their own individual level and at the same time. We thus re-frame such activity as “possible”. For example, we suggest one strategy might be to teach one-to-one-in-a-group i.e. teach in a way that allows the teacher to challenge each learner at their own level and to help them upgrade their current language level. We are working to show teachers that this is a valuable additional alternative choice to the standard quartet of individual, pair work, group work or whole class.

TW: Can you give a practical example of this?

AU and JS: Well, for example, in a whole class situation where a learner is trying to make a sentence of their own but is struggling with some point of grammar, lexicon, pronunciation or expression that they appear keen to improve, working one-to-one within the whole class can be productive. The teacher may listen to what the student says, give a little feedback, let the student try again, listen, give a little more feedback and so on. Over a few iterations, the student will tangibly upgrade their sentence. And we are arguing that this is valid and valuable, despite running contrary to what we see as a fairly widespread contemporary paradigm: that generally one should praise every piece of half-formed language that a student says and that we shouldn’t interrupt or help students to upgrade language when they are primarily communicating meaning (for fear of damaging “fluency”). We are arguing that the classroom is a great place for continuous, playful, exploratory help in language upgrade – and that very often this is exactly what students want. We are not suggesting just “correction”; rather a kind of feedback that helps every student to move forward by little steps at their current level, and as far as possible on what seems to be their own agenda.

All the time that one-to-one help is happening in class, other students are invited to listen in and perhaps participate. Given a certain attitude and skill, the teacher may find that the whole group can be magnetized by the work that a single student is doing in front of them, by seeing the moves of learning made visible just for half a minute. The teacher does not undermine this by fretting about what the others are doing, and yet does not ignore them either but rather hooks them up perhaps with a look that says “Hey this is pretty interesting”. And out of this can come a different quality of attention in the class and a vivid impression of a closer learning relationship between all of us, in spite of the group size.

TW: You said you had two points you wanted to make. So ... secondly?

AU and JS: For us, Demand-High is not “something that has come back into focus” since we do not recall a time when what we refer to was ever widely in focus in ELT. Conversely, we are not intending to polarize a set of new ideas against an older set. We are simply pointing out that in the evolution of our (generally fairly sound) current methodologies, there has perhaps grown up an over-attention to task, material and the pursuit of “fun” rather than to the moment-by-moment learning that these might or might not lead to. We propose a small course correction to our direction of travel. This involves sensitising more teachers to learning. Thus we view this as learnING centred rather than learnER centered. The separate ideas and techniques that can carry the Demand High meme may all be familiar, but we think that the gathering of them together for this specific purpose, and as a meme rather than as a product or thing, may be something new.

TW: And by ‘meme’ you mean?

AU and JS: It’s a concept from Richard Dawkins and means “a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practices, which can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena” – of which articles, website, conference presentations and workshops, resources, blog references etc are visible manifestations. We use the term meme to emphasise that, at its heart, Demand-High is just an idea – not a method, approach, instruction book, guideline or anything else. And a meme has a life of its own. We have thrown this one out into the world, but how it evolves and changes and lives or dies is probably well beyond our control.

TW: Is there anything you would particularly like to say to the readers of this journal who are teacher trainers, teacher educators and teacher mentors?

AU and JS: In our talks and workshops on Demand-High we have noticed that Directors of Studies and teacher trainers seem particularly interested in the ideas we present. Perhaps because they recognize the description we give of the current state of methodology i.e. there is a lot that “works”, but we have, all the same, somehow overlooked an important gap.

As with teaching, we propose a small change of focus in teacher training (which might of course have much bigger ramifications). That is, a move towards helping teachers to think more about learning rather than worrying about the mechanics and entertainment value of lessons. This is not an argument to abandon initial training courses such as the CELTA, scrap MA syllabuses or rejig entire in-service training programmes. A trainer using one of our downloadable seminar packs “Learning to see learning” may, for example, help teachers to notice whole new aspects of what goes on in their classroom. The noticing may then nudge the way they teach into a different area.

A trainer can also ‘demand high’ of their teachers and trainees – and in doing so model a teaching style that may influence how they teach.

TW: Are there any questions you want to ask our readers?

AU and JS: Yes, several. Does this ring any bells with readers of this journal? Does what we describe seem clear and coherent? Is the name ‘Demand-High’ getting in the way? Where do we take it for its next step? Have we provisionally given to the idea (i.e. Demand High) helpful or is the name messing with our message? Does what we describe seem clear and coherent? Is the name Demand-High helpful or is the name ‘Demand High’ getting in the way? Where do we take it for its next step? Have we provisionally given to the idea (i.e. Demand High) helpful or is the name messing with our message?

Demand High website: demandhighelt.wordpress.com

Authors

Adrian Underhill is a freelance consultant and trainer, working on organisational development, leadership and facilitation skills. He is a past president of IATEFL, series editor of the Macmillan Books for Teachers series, and author of Sound Foundations and The Pronunciation App, published by Macmillan. His current interests include the role of improvisation in learning, and the total integration of pronunciation into all corners of language teaching. Email: adrian@aunderhill.co.uk

Jim Scrivener is Head of Teacher Development for Bell. His publications include Learning Teaching (Macmillan), Teaching English Grammar (Macmillan) and Classroom Management Techniques (CUP) (ESU 2012 “Overall Winner”). His next book will be Visual Grammar (Richmond). On Twitter he’s @jimscriv.