

1. INTRODUCTION: SEEING LEARNING

I want to teach in a way that encourages more learning to happen more often. To do this, I will have to find a way to open my eyes to it, to recognize it, to know what it is. I will have to learn to see learning better.

What I usually see are the tasks, the activities. What I mainly worry about is how those tasks and activities will work, how I can run them, how I can give good and clear instructions for them, whether they “work”, whether students are having fun, whether I am boring my students. Like most contemporary ELT teachers, my training has mainly led me towards the successful operation of such classroom tasks – as if that, in itself, will somehow guarantee that learning must then come about, automatically as a result. But increasingly, this feels like a wild bet.

I am beginning to wonder if there is actually any real link between completion of tasks and learning – or if learners having fun with games and quizzes and running around is anything more than what it appears to be on the surface: having fun with games and quizzes and running round. The learning is often incidental, random, unpredictable – and unaddressed.

The tasks that I organize are entertaining, enjoyable, engaging – and yet, by the end, what have they achieved? They have achieved the required task result – and not more – a page of filled-in answers or a discussion that has reached its conclusion or a puzzle solved or a quiz won or a list made or an information gap completed.

And I ... I have done what I was trained to do. I have set the task, run it, monitored it, closed it, run feedback on it, and then moved on to the next thing, the next new task, and then the next new task and the next.

I have let the tasks do the teaching. I have used all my energy to focus on the activities that stand in front of the learning. I have seen what students did, but not what they had to do to complete it.

Is this now the job of a teacher? To organize activities? To hope that somehow, along the way, learning will magically occur – randomly and out of anyone’s control? Could I do something more to ensure that something more is gained? To ensure that the potential for deeper learning in a task is not lost?

Yet, I hear my trainers’ voices, my Head of Departments’ voices, the checklist-holding inspectors’ voices. They seem to say:

Do not interfere too much. Do not talk too much. Do not get in the way of the learning too much. Make sure you praise and encourage (even when what my

students say is borderline incomprehensible). Back off. Students can learn a lot by themselves. A teacher's job is to create the conditions. Get them communicating. That is enough. Whatever you do, do not teach.

I am not even sure what a teacher is any more. Is it possible that there are things I could do (*unapproved things?*) that might actively help a learner to learn more, to learn faster, to achieve tangible steps forward (as opposed to the more usual miasmic, intangible sense that they might be getting slightly better at something unspecified)?

I no longer believe that learning happens by magic. But the methodology I use in class seems based on magic. I put students into a pair or a group and, somehow, that is enough, of itself, for a modern teacher to feel an achievement. When the activities come to an end and I close them down, perhaps with a feedback stage, I hope that they have learnt whatever it was that the task was designed to help them to learn. But it is a hope. I do not really have a way to see inside learners' heads, to watch and note what seems to lead to more learning, what seems to lead to less learning or what gets in the way.

My ubiquitous lesson plan aim is a "best guess" attempt to state, before the teaching starts, what sequence of tasks I will use and what the tasks will (I hope) lead to. But, of course, real learning (especially the learning of a language) does not follow such easy routes for all passengers to get to the same, fixed destinations. A large amount of what learning occurs in any lesson will be spontaneous and hard to predict in advance. Much learning will be incidental to what had been expected to be the main route.

Student Hannah will be at a certain point in her understanding of something. Student Karim will be at a quite different point. A teacher who expects to be able to predict the needs or progress of any two students in her class at any single point in the lesson is going to need the powers of a mighty clairvoyant. Teaching and learning are live. As a teacher, I need to be watching, listening, thinking and intuiting constantly, deciding for each individual learner (and *with* each individual learner) what the thing is that they need to hear, do, see, notice, think about, try, improve or use next.

If I could "see" learning in this way, I might be able to choose my interventions a little more skilfully, stepping in with a word or a hint or a suggestion or a clue at various moments in ways that are useful, that directly help the learner to move one step forward: nudging, giving feedback, supporting and, most of all, not abandoning the learner to the tyranny of just praising whatever they say with "Perfect", when I know and they know that it is not.

Demand-High is an idea ... that it may be possible to do these things, whatever my base methodology, whatever my class or context. An idea that I could believe and expect that more learning is possible, to start investigating where and how it might be possible and to become more skilful in seeing learning as it happens in ourselves and in our students.

Because ... if I can do *any* of that, I utterly transform my teaching. I utterly transform the quality of learning in my classroom.

2. THE ABSENT ELEPHANT

My question to the group of teachers was:

Imagine you are teaching a discrete piece of grammar to a class using your current course book. How good will the students be with just this grammar item when they leave your class – honestly?

They talked together for a minute or two, and then gave their answers. Most teachers felt confident that their students would have learnt the items and would be able to use them reasonably well.

We then looked at some typical current course books – good, recognized ones and award-winning ones.

- Book “A” dealt with the Present Perfect by offering two rules, two examples, 5 gap-fills from a listening, 2 gap-fill rules on the related but new area of questions and negatives, and then 7 form-focused, gap-fill questions.
- Book “B” dealt with Defining Relative Clauses by offering 4 examples, 4 pretty dense rules, 7 gap-fill questions and a review question on missing out the object.

My proposal to the teachers was:

You could not possibly learn the grammar items that the books are claiming to teach from the grammar presentations and practice offered in our course-books alone.

In fact, the stuff in the books is barely a starting point. Even for a fairly competent native speaker, just understanding the meta-text and decoding the rules takes attention, energy and time (e.g. In clauses, where the pronoun is the object, the pronoun can be left out.).

Yet, the learner is expected to look at just a very small number of examples of language in use and extrapolate from them, read, unpack, comprehend and grasp the rules, see both how to form items and how the language might be used to convey a range of meanings in various contexts and practise doing this with just seven or so questions that do not even require the student to produce language of their own, let alone form whole sentences.

Getting to know and successfully use an item of grammar takes time: exposure, many meetings, noticing, attempts to use, reactions to feedback when it is used, errors, misunderstandings and so on. Yet, in class nowadays, there is little space for this to happen.

This is not meant to be a rant about course books or their authors. I would always rather choose to teach with a course book than without one. The problem is to do with:

1. the current expectation that a course book has to include a massive range of content: work on grammar, lexis, pronunciation, function, discourse, the four skills, video watching, use of social media, learner training, critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, language for work, language for academic life, etc.; the full list is much longer. How can a book that has to deal with so much actually do *anything* well or thoroughly enough?

2. expectations about what a course book is and how a teacher can work with it. More and more people in positions of authority (including many people who should know better) are making the mistake of assuming that the course book is “the course” – and as a result – are prescribing that teachers must finish so many units in so much time e.g. “Complete the first three units by the end of next week”. As a result, a generation of teachers has felt pressurized into *speed-paging*: “just teaching the book” at a great pace, turning the pages and almost not noticing whether the turning of those pages has led to any learning or not.

Internationally, the English language has never been taught better. We are more informed about language and methodology than ever. We have better quality, more relevant, more varied, more appealing and more accessible teaching resources than ever. By and large, we like and respect our students and enjoy being with them and working with them. More teachers are trained than ever (and training programmes for teachers improve year by year).

But, despite all this, for many of us, the job of teaching is now very circumscribed. We do not teach any more; we cover course books. We organize students into pairs and groups and ask them to do course book tasks, hoping that somehow, magically, some incidental learning may erupt. We entertain and attempt to persuade our students that everything is *fun*. We sidestep or compromise the real, deeper challenges.

We do not teach a communicative approach (though we may think we do), but are beguiled and entrapped by the rituals and practices that arrived with it. Somewhere along the way we have lost sight of the reasons for it all.

We are a generation of teachers that does not seem to expect that our job is to *teach* (in any familiar sense of the word) beyond some essential classroom management (giving instructions, going through tasks and exercises and checking answers, etc.). Is that all we have become? People who move chairs about occasionally and say “Question 2”?

When I go to observe a lesson – whether secondary school students in Hangzhou or preliminary year undergraduates in Tegucigalpa – or whoever, wherever, it seems to me that I invariably notice one striking thing. It is not an elephant in the room – not something that all can see but avoid talking about. It is more an elephant that is *not* in the room – one whose absence we, as a profession, have somehow forgotten to notice.

I watch classes with students – who usually seem happy and (remarkably!) play along with the modern ELT methods – doing things such as getting into pairs and groups on command and addressing the tasks the teacher asks of them. Many lessons nowadays are likely to be very entertaining. There is often movement, lots of talking, use of music, videos, games (and games and games), use of technology (often, for no obvious reason) and so on.

And yet, despite the happiness and the apparent engagement, I cannot help wondering where that elephant has gone. The elephant is quality and depth of learning.

3. WHAT IS DEMAND-HIGH?

In class, what can I do that will get the maximum learning out of whatever the students study?

Demand-High is an idea that arose out of many years of reflective discussion, argument and focused tea-drinking between Adrian Underhill and myself. It is not a new methodology or approach. It is a suggestion for what might be very small-scale changes in how a teacher approaches their lessons – a proposal for possible *tweaks* to what they currently do in class. We believe that the Demand-High ideas may be relevant whatever a teacher’s method, experience, school, knowledge and whatever the age or level of their students.

The Demand-High argument grew out of our observation (from many hundreds of lesson observations) that a lot of classroom energy and work (on the part of both the teacher and the students) seemed to be leading to relatively little learning. We felt that we saw teachers who had become very competent at operating ELT tasks and activities – and that these filled the classroom time in enjoyable ways – but that somehow teachers were not pushing students, not challenging them to tangibly improve, nor even expecting that they might be able to achieve more. The challenge that we saw in classrooms tended to be around things like winning a game or finishing an exercise first or getting all the right answers or not being spotted as a student who did not know the right answers.

We started asking questions such as: *Are all my learners capable of more?; Could each individual in my lesson (weak or strong) learn more if I asked more of them?; How could I do that?; How can I stop “covering material” and start focusing on the potential for deeper learning?; How can I teach everyone in the room, rather than just focus on the brightest, fastest few?*

Our central concern was not a move from *teacher-centred* to *learner-centred* classrooms – but from whatever starting point existed towards a truly *learning-centred* classroom, a classroom where every learner could make a tangible improvement over the space of a lesson, improvements that built over time into wide-ranging, measurable increases in overall language skills.

Demand-High is about using any activity or classroom work to challenge every student individually at their own *learning edge* – i.e. to help to nudge and push learners forward from the point at which they currently are. It is about not assuming that a class called “Pre-Intermediate” or “B2” or whatever is of a single homogenous level – but an assumption that every class I teach will be a mixed-level class – and where each individual student has themselves a variety of levels over a range of areas and skills.

The challenge, as we see it, is not so much about setting differential tasks, but instead, to find ways of requiring differential responses from learners as they engage with whatever the current task is. In this respect, Demand-High is essentially a teacher quality, rather than a resources quality.

When we first proposed Demand-High, we set out a short provisional manifesto, which in many ways is still a fair summary of our position:

- It is OK to teach.

- You have permission to be an active interventionist teacher.
- We need to focus on where the learning is.
- Work at everyone’s pace – not just the fastest few.
- Learn the classroom management techniques that make a difference.
- Risk working hands-on with language.
- Expect more – Demand high.

The statement “It is OK to teach.” was meant to be a provocative wording. If there was a problem, it was one that our generation of writers and trainers had caused. We had told people, in various ways, that it was not the job of a teacher to teach. We had asked them to be more learner-centred. We had emphasized the need to not interfere too much when students were talking or doing an activity. We had suggested that the teacher’s role was that of someone who sets things up, and then steps back and watches from a distance, not helping, not correcting, perhaps quietly making notes for later use. Mantras about teacher talking time, about not interfering, about letting the learners do the work (and many more) had somehow mutated and fossilized over the years into general prescriptions against doing *anything* that intervened in any way. The modern teacher has become, in many cases, the person who calls out the activity number, arranges the grouping, times it all, tells people when to stop, and then checks the answers. There must be more to teaching than this.

So our argument about having “permission to be an active interventionist teacher” is not meant to be *carte blanche* for the teacher to talk pointlessly or at length or without thought – but rather permission to intervene where appropriate – with awareness and to a purpose, clear about their intention and with a specific possible outcome in mind. We are specifically advocating interventions that focus on increasing the learning. But, of course, to do that we have to study learning and become clearer about where the learning is going on and what it looks like, and be more aware as to what might help learning to happen more.

Since I first talked about Demand-High at the IATEFL conference in 2012, Adrian Underhill and I have worked with many groups of teachers, asking our questions, showing practical demonstrations and hearing their responses and ideas. We have found that what we described seemed to ring many bells for trainers, Directors of Studies and others who frequently observed lessons. However, classroom teachers (who had been trained by people like us to do the things they were doing) sometimes seemed rather more puzzled. Their reaction (much as the group of teachers I started Section 2 with) was often that their lessons were already fairly successful, that students *were* learning, that what we were describing seemed to be something that they already did. What on earth were we talking about?

Of course, with any individual group of teachers we cannot easily know what they actually do in their day-to-day classes, even when they tell us what they do. My experience over the years suggests that there is frequently a discrepancy between what I think I do and what I actually do. Such differences are brought to the fore on training courses such as the Cambridge DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching) where candidates: (a) write about their teaching before they teach, (b) are then observed doing the teaching and (c) write about it again afterwards. Some common mismatches of thought and practice on the

part of many practitioners are the beliefs that their lessons are tuned into the learners, that they respond flexibly to what the students say and do and that their own teacher actions genuinely help the learners to improve. The reality is that often a teacher is on fixed tramlines through a plan or a course book page, with his / her main preoccupation being to organize the *how* of each task, often noticing only the few students who call out the correct answers they hope to hear, but unaware of the learning (or the lack of learning) or the problems of the majority of students in his/her class. They see the front end of the process, but not the engine inside.

I appreciate this is anecdotal evidence in that I am reporting a summary of my own observations over the years – but our argument is an encouragement to check out our discoveries, suppositions and proposals for yourself and to see if you observe similar things in yourself or others and whether the suggestions for experiments in changing lead to any measurable differences.

We offer Demand-High to the groups we work with as an idea – one that is not fixed and which is available for discussion and evolution. It came about as a result of many influences over time. We wanted to offer teachers more ownership of what they did, rather than feeling reliant on or trapped by their course-book – or how the hierarchy above them required them to work with their course-book. We also wanted to make it clear to teachers that they did have choices. This was partly as a reaction to the growing success and influence of the *dogme* movement, the idea that teachers could work (largely) without pre-prepared materials, spontaneously creating lessons with the “emerging language” in a room. While there are many elements of *dogme* that we are sympathetic to, not least its flexibility and ability to respond to students, we found that an increasing number of teachers (especially more recently trained ones) saw their options as polarized. Either I am a *course book teacher* (which is seen as dull, plodding, uninspired, old-fashioned, routine-based, without the possibility of being creative) or I am a *dogme teacher* (the paradisiacal opposite: freedom, creativity, inspiring communication, leading to happy and satisfied students).

I am not suggesting that the founders of *dogme* had a vision anything like this, but the “two choices” vision has become so widespread in recent years that many teachers seem to find it hard to conceive of any other places they could be. In naming and describing our own idea of good teaching, we hoped to suggest that there were many more possibilities than just a bald A or B.

4. DEMAND-HIGH IN PRACTICE

Teacher: So tell me what should I do to apply the Demand-High method in my class?

Jim: Well – I probably need to say it again. Demand-High is not a method. So there are no fixed techniques, activities, ways of working or specific things to do in class. All that Demand-High is suggesting is that you, the teacher, could look more closely at the *learning* in class. So, spend less energy worrying about games and mechanics of tasks and put more attention trying to see what learning comes out of what your learners do. Then, ask yourself what you could do (or not do) that might help that to happen more and with

more depth.

Teacher: So I should make everything more difficult?

Jim: No! Please don't! Though I guess that this is an inevitable misunderstanding with the name we have given the idea.

We are talking about finding the *right* demand at any point in a lesson for each individual so that the demand fully challenges that individual's learning. If I ask too much (over-demand) or I ask too little (under-demand) or I make the wrong demand (irrelevant demand), these will not help a learner to take a step forward. What I want to find is the *doable demand* i.e. the one that is just *one step ahead* of where the learner is at this moment.

My job as a teacher is to help the learner to take that *upgrade step*. In this, more than anything, we are giving the job of *teaching* back to the teacher. The teacher gives *upgrade feedback* rather than praise – and in responding to the specific, focused comments (designed and directed towards helping the learner to move forward) the learner moves towards improvement (in whatever they are working on at that moment).

Teacher: *Upgrade step* and *one step ahead* both sound dangerously imprecise terms.

Jim: We are suggesting that, in context, in the classroom, with one learner who is trying to do something or say something or write something or understand something, the teacher (using his/her listening, watching, thinking and intuition) can become more aware precisely what it might be that learner needs in order to be able to move forward in what they are doing in some tangible way. The terms become precise in context. The teacher works to see learning in order to select the upgrade feedback that will help the learner to make their next upgrade step.

Teacher: These all sound like great, big ideas – but you still do not seem to be telling me what I can *do*! Give me something practical I can grasp!

Jim: When we started talking about this, we were initially a little wary of listing practical techniques for Demand-High because we felt that the essential message was simply that teachers needed to get closer to learning in their own classroom with their own students and that this might be done in many different context-congruent ways. However, we soon became aware that without practical examples we were not being clear enough about what we meant by the ideas.

So, over time, we have been assembling a large selection of classroom techniques that seem to us likely to lead to more challenging teaching and greater learning. They come with a health warning that the techniques on their own do not guarantee anything. They need to be applied with attention to the learners and the classroom (and everything else). With the wrong attitude and application they are just random techniques.

So here are just a few possible Demand-High attitude or technique tweaks:

3XP – Don't just do an exercise once and then move swiftly on. Can you go back in, mining the material for more value? A simple way to do this is 3XP ("Three times practice"). So, for example, the first time you do an exercise in the normal way e.g. students do it individually or in pairs, and then you check answers with them. But then, instead of rushing on to the next thing, you ask them to go back – not to do the same thing again, but to go deeper into the task. A second visit might have the instruction: "Cover the words. Can you remember the sentences? Say them to your partner. (It is not a test! Check whenever you need to.)" And, having done that, you take them back in for a third go: "Practise saying the sentences more naturally to each other. (Also, think about facial expressions, gestures, etc.)" By the end of three visits and re-visits to an exercise, the language will be known better, remembered better and, possibly, be more available for use in future.

PROUF – Many teachers reject repetition and substitution drilling as they feel that their students will find it boring and useless. We are offering this acronym as a mnemonic to remind teachers that there may be more profitable alternatives. PROUF stands for: Playful challenge > Repeated Opportunities > Upgrade Feedback. In other words, don't just ask your students to repeat things, give them a "Playful challenge" to produce a sentence. But then don't just say "Good" (when it probably is not), help them to tangibly, audibly improve so that they feel that they have really achieved something. Do this by giving them Upgrade Feedback (see below) – i.e. feedback that helps them to notice how they can get better. And allow them, not just one, not just two, but a number of Repeated Opportunities to get better.

Upgrade Feedback rather than praise. Praise closes everything down. There is nowhere else to go after "Good". Instead, try offering Upgrade Feedback. You could do this by:

- a) modelling language yourself for noticing or copying (e.g. sentence, part of sentence, word(s), sound(s));
- b) indicating where an upgrade is possible (e.g. fingers represent words) or what can be upgraded (e.g. by tapping a rhythm or humming the intonation);
- c) asking a question (e.g. to focus attention on an item or on meaning);
- d) giving an imperative or instruction (e.g. "Say it faster.").

Look out for upgrade steps for every individual in class (not just the three fastest!). Rather than being obsessed with a chase for right answers, can I start to find ways to help any individual student to move forward from wherever they are now? Can I find each person's individual *upgrade step* at any point in the lesson? So for example, when I ask a question: If Marianne has the wrong ending on a verb, can I help her to become aware of the problem and to either self-correct or take on board someone else's

correction? Or: If Ela has the right words in the right order (i.e. a “correct” answer) can I help her to become more aware of how to say it all in a more fluent or more expressive manner?

If every student in my class can get feedback that helps them to move forward from wherever they currently are, I can start to get away from an obsession with “correct” answers and work with helping every individual to get better.

Keep a question open. Listen to what students say (for example, when answering a question or when checking answers to an exercise) in ways that avoid immediately *rubberstamping* what they say (e.g. with “Good”). When you put your stamp of validation on a student’s answer, it extinguishes the question. There is nowhere else to go; there is no point asking anyone else for an opinion or an alternative answer. By keeping a question open, you allow the possibility for others to say their answer, try a different response, comment on the first answer, etc.

5. THE POLITICS OF DEMAND-HIGH

We have to ask ourselves if we are comfortable perpetuating – or watching others (publishers, academics, governments, authorities, experts) perpetuate the current *materials operator* vision of what a teacher is.

Should we start arguing more assertively with the ministries and the inspecting bodies and heads of departments who tell teachers to cover units of books in certain periods of time, who view learning like a product?

As technology creeps in and more experts argue for futures built around rooms full of children and their tablet computers with minimal live teaching, the machines could easily replace someone whose only job is to form groups, to say “Exercise 7” or to check right answers.

We have to assert, louder and louder that teachers do have a role and an importance. But what? Could we say that having a good, aware teacher still offers the best chance that all learners will have an equal chance at making an improvement? To do that, to differentiate ourselves from the machines, we will have to assert what it is that we can do differently, better than the machines. We will need to show ourselves as people who understand learning and what it is and can really get it to happen. The problem is that at the moment, we do not. We are still very out of touch with learning. We need to get very much closer.

We can easily refute the naïve, out-of-date descriptions of us as mere explainers or disciplinarians. We can say that if we abandon our students to those rooms full of computers and leave them alone, hoping that they will come out years later with skills and knowledge – some will – but many will not.

But it is not enough. The argument against teachers is growing more vocal and more widespread and more dangerous. It is being bought into by big corporations who would

love to sell *learning* over the Internet – from first test through adaptive exercises to final certificate – and to do away with those quaint, unnecessary teachers.

Demand-High is at least partly about finding an answer to the questions: *What is the point of a teacher?* and *Do we still need teachers?* These are becoming increasingly urgent questions.

6. CONCLUSION

There is lots of good teaching around in ELT. However, we need to ask more challenging questions of much of it. Questions such as:

- Did that game really lead to any learning?
- Did checking the ten answers to that exercise lead to any learning?
- Does my explaining this grammar lead to any learning?
- Is leaving the students alone in groups to discuss this topic for seven minutes leading to any learning?

In my own lifetime, course books and other classroom materials have become better and better. So much so that one might assume that they could do all the hard teaching work for us. They do not, but the dangerous illusion that they are the crucial, central element of a course has infiltrated many institutions and organizations.

The teacher still has a vital role. It is partly to organize. It is partly to suggest. It is partly to point the way. But it is mostly to do with helping learning to happen through the cycle of learner actions and teacher feedback.

Whatever the learner does, the teacher can help that learner to notice more, think more, focus more, decide how to do it differently when they try again, choose more wisely what to do next time and so on. Receiving and acting on feedback is how we move forward as humans.

If the teacher can learn to see more precisely where a learner is on their learning journey, they are then more able to pinpoint the next upgrade step that each learner could take. The teacher can give upgrade feedback that helps them to move forward and make that step. It is a rolling, eternal cycle of learning.

Demand-High suggests that we have a crucial role as teachers and is an attempt to help to define what that role is. Not in terms of the traditional areas that teacher training has focused on: motivating the students, exploiting your course book, making it fun, giving clear instructions, running activities, etc. – but in terms of opening up those two massive, underlying questions:

Where is the learning?

How can I help it to happen more?

Jim Scrivener is best known as author of a number of popular ELT methodology titles. *Learning Teaching* won the ARELS Frank Bell prize and has been ELTONS shortlisted. Both *Teaching English Grammar* and *Classroom Management Techniques* were winners of HRH Duke of Edinburgh English Speaking Union Prizes. He is a regular conference presenter and course leader internationally. With Adrian Underhill, Jim continues to work on developing the Demand-High idea. They run a Wordpress blog site about Demand-High at: demandhighelt.wordpress.com and a Facebook discussion site at: facebook.com/DemandHighELT, both of which promote literature about the topic.