

A: Motivation

Teaching teens can be a huge challenge if they can't see how English will be of advantage to them in their future, nor indeed how the learning process itself can engage them and arouse their curiosity. The tips in this section are a balance of serious interactions and elements of surprise, fun and gamification. They will help you not only reach out to your learners through your own enthusiasm, but also create a warm and welcoming classroom atmosphere while you challenge and support them on their individual learning paths.

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1 An energy booster to start the lesson

At the beginning of a class, teens can be sluggish. This activity usually raises their energy levels straight away.

I have frequently used this game as soon as the lesson starts, especially while I'm waiting for a latecomer; they can easily join in without disturbing the class.

- Ask the learners to stand up. Say you will ask them a question, and that those who know the answer can sit down. Although they can cheat by sitting down without knowing the answer, if you suspect that, you will ask them for the answer. If you're right, the game is over for them and they must take their chair to the front of the class and sit on it until a new game starts. If you're wrong, they are still in the game, of course.
- Ask the first question, usually about content from the previous lesson.
- In the first few rounds use some pretty challenging questions, so that not too many learners will get the opportunity to sit down straight away. Also, I don't usually ask a check question then. That raises the suspense and the level of fun for the learners.
- When learners sit down, look at them suspiciously. I do this in an exaggerated way and this usually creates quite a bit of laughter.
- Once everyone is seated, tell them to stand up again. Say that this time if they think they know the answer, they should tell their neighbour.
- Note which of the learners do this, then ask one of them for the answer. If that learner has got the answer right, they can sit down, as can any other learners who have got it right.
- As a follow-up, ask one of the learners still standing in the last round to take over from you and ask questions.
- In a very popular variation of the activity, ask questions about trivia instead of content.
- Yet another variation: one of the learners could ask the questions from the beginning of the activity. (This needs to be set up beforehand.)

Show your enthusiasm

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We know that someone who yawns makes us yawn too. But it is less well known that the opposite effect can be used to boost our learners' motivation.

Not long ago, I met someone who attended the first English class I ever taught. 'Do you still like Leonard Cohen?' he asked. 'Yes, I do,' I replied, intrigued. 'Remember when you brought one of his LPs to class? I was 13. You were so enthusiastic when you explained this song to us. My mum always said that we learn for life, not for school – and that was the first time I understood what she meant.' I thanked him for the compliment and felt quite embarrassed. Because, to the best of my memory, my first few years of teaching were filled with trial and error (with an emphasis on error); not a lot to write home about! But I have always shared my enthusiasm for the subject with my learners. A lucky strike indeed – from the very beginning I got something right that research now shows is essential for motivating learners!

Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) say that, 'If teachers are engaged and passionate about their work and their languages, then learners are more likely to be too.' So:

- Show your passion for your subject. Use books, songs, images, realia and anecdotes to make your enthusiasm tangible. You can even exaggerate a bit. Nobody has ever complained about their teacher being too passionate!
- I occasionally say, 'Oh, I love this word,' when writing a new word on the board. Then I repeat it as if tasting something scrumptious and suggest what they can do with it. Of course some teens will say things like, 'But you love *every* word!' or imitate your enthusiasm, which usually leads to laughter.
- Sometimes, when I teach a concept new to them, I tend to say things like, 'This is an important moment. Understanding this is important for your future lives. Not many adults understand this.'

Mercer, S. and Dörnyei, Z. (2020) *Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.

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Help learners see why learning English is important

As teachers we need to ‘sell’ our learners the idea that what we are teaching them will be of advantage to them.

One of the biggest problems for me as a young teacher in rural Austria was to help my learners find a satisfactory answer to the question, *Why am I supposed to learn English?* But these days, things have changed dramatically – many teenagers have contact with English outside their classroom through technology, social media and the web.

A good way of getting learners to reflect on their own motivations to learn English is a Consensogram. (For more on this, see the reference below.) Write up a series of statements or adapt these:

- If I succeed in learning English, I will have better opportunities to study and get a good job.
- People who have a good command of English are often admired.
- Once I’m at university, most of my reading will be in English.
- By learning English I might lose touch with my own culture and traditions.
- English is useful for playing online games.
- The better I can communicate in English, the more fun it’ll be to interact with people from other countries and cultures.
- The time spent learning English takes time away from other important subjects.

Ask learners to express their opinion about each statement by giving three points (*I totally agree.*), two points (*This is kind of important for me.*) and one point (*I don’t agree at all.*). Hand out coloured dots. Ask learners to stick them on a large piece of poster paper and create a rating scale in the form of a bar chart.

Ask your learners to work in pairs and discuss these questions: *What do you notice when you look at the data? What surprises you? What are your conclusions?*

Stobaugh, R. (2019) *50 Strategies to Boost Cognitive Engagement. Creative Thinking in the Classroom*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Make deals

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If you offer a good deal to a class of teens – or to an individual learner – you are likely to impress them.

I guess it's with tongue in cheek that Nelsen and Lott (2012) say, 'Since teens can be so self-centred and expect the world to revolve around them, making deals can motivate them when all else fails.' But actually, whether it's teens' self-centredness or – as I suspect – that they feel surprised and respected when we offer them a deal, deals do work! Teens perceive deal-making as cool, something that normally happens between peers. But with a teacher? Wow!

A bad deal is something like, *We'll watch this film if you promise to prepare really well for the test.* We're giving them something now, and afterwards we have no leverage. And if the test results are disappointing, it's too late anyway.

So, offer time-sensitive deals: promise learners something if they do something by a certain time. *Last week you used your own language twenty-three times in my class. If you can get this down to a maximum of 12 by Thursday, we'll play X (the game they really like) or we'll watch a clip from Y (the movie or series they really like).* Or: *I'll do you a deal. We'll do a project about American rap music if you find another teacher who's willing to join us with their class.* You offer something motivating, and learners commit to taking action from the outset. By expecting them to persuade another teacher to join the project, you demonstrate your trust in them.

Sometimes it's good to write a deal down and have it signed by everyone. That makes the deal more 'official' and shows how seriously you take it (and your learners). Don't offer anything expensive; your offering a deal is often more important than what they actually get. Humour helps, too. For example, invite learners to lunch. On the day, put up a sign: '(Your name)'s restaurant'. Then have a picnic in the school grounds.

Nelsen, J. and Lott, L. (2012) *Positive Discipline for Teenagers 3rd edition*. Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale. Kindle Edition.

5 Turn the classroom into a special place

Your learners spend a lot of time in the classroom. Make sure it offers a positive learning environment that they like coming into.

Success in the language class depends mainly on what goes on ‘... inside and between the people in the classroom,’ as Stevick (1980) pointed out. But other qualities – for example, whether the classroom itself looks and feels inviting – are important too, especially for teens.

- Giving learners a say and listening to their suggestions about changes you might make to their learning environment, even if they are small ones, can make a lot of difference. Have a suggestion box and encourage learners to use it to contribute ideas.
- Display a motivational quote on the classroom wall, e.g. *The happiest people don't have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything.* Leave it there for a few days before you ask learners to comment on it from their own point of view. Replace the quote with a new one after a week, or – even better – ask learners to find a new one.
- Ask learners to contribute to a ‘role model of the month’ project. Learners work in groups to prepare a poster on a special person who could be a role model. Ask them to research that person’s life story, and to state on the poster why he or she is a role model for them. Each group then presents their role model, and the learners vote to decide which of the posters goes up on the wall.
- Assign responsibilities (such as furniture arrangement, waste disposal, board cleaning) to individual learners on a rotating basis.
- Make sure the classroom is pleasing. Ask learners to help you decorate the room; for example, flowers can change the atmosphere significantly, and so can colours.

Stevick, E. (1980) *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Gamify learning

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We need passion and commitment from our learners. To instil those attitudes, add gaming to the learning.

Teens love digital games. They are all about being challenged and getting rewards, with elements of chance. Dopamine and endorphins are released. The excitement grows and the players feel good.

In an ideal classroom, all learners will be intrinsically motivated – they find learning fun, interesting and rewarding. But while our learners may be intrinsically motivated to do certain things, they won't necessarily be keen on English. So gaming elements can be helpful.

- Get a soft-tip/magnetic dartboard. Create question categories: content from previous lessons, sport, films, grammar, lexis, etc. Match each category with a section on the dartboard. For each category, write questions on index cards and points for the correct answer. Form pairs. A throws a dart, B draws a card from the respective pile. Play for, say, 10 minutes at the end of a lesson.
- Help learners gamify their home study. Write a to-do list at the end of a lesson, with points for each task. Before the next lesson, learners write their points on a wall chart. To add a chance element, draw a learner's name, then play *Paper, scissors, stone* with them and award points for beating you. That is hugely motivational.
- A chore can become a game. If studying a list of spellings, for example, they give themselves points: the faster they learn, the more the points. But they deduct points for using their phone while studying. This only works if they're honest with themselves!
- Establish two teams. Write/Project two choices on the board, one of them correct (e.g. spelling, *believe/beliefe*; or grammar, *she taught/ she teached*), for the learners to call out the correct one.

'Games and Your Brain: How to Use Gamification to Stop Procrastinating', <https://buffer.com/resources/brain-playing-games-why-our-brains-are-so-attracted-to-playing-games-the-science-of-gamification>

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Teach outdoors occasionally

You might like to surprise your learners by suggesting a lesson outside the classroom – but with a clear plan in mind for meaningful language work.

Tell your learners that you believe it's possible to focus on work outside the confines of the classroom (assuming parental and institutional permission). It is advisable to take your learners to a safe location that's not too noisy, e.g. a nearby park.

- Ask learners to take pen and paper with them. Tell them to walk round for about 10 minutes with an open mind about anything they notice. Give them questions to answer, e.g. *What did I notice? What did I see, hear, touch, smell?* Ask learners to find a comfortable spot and write a short text on their findings. In the next lesson, ask them to read out their texts to each other, and talk about them.
- Tell your learners a few days beforehand that you are going to take them to a place where they might meet a lot of English-speaking people; this could be, for example, an airport, a train station or a tourist attraction. Get learners to work in pairs and discuss questions they could ask people they meet there. Help them with language they need, especially on how to open a conversation and introduce themselves. You could also get them to film the interviews on their phones, but make sure they know how to ask permission to do that. Learners could then work on a report and present their findings to the class.
- If your learners have access to a class or school library, why don't you encourage them to pick a book and start reading it outside? Make sure they choose a place that will facilitate their reading process. This could be followed up with a discussion afterwards on whether their choice was a good one and what other favourite reading places they have.
- Tell learners to walk around in pairs and have a chat – on one condition only. They have to speak English, while the topic of the conversation is totally up to them.

Take your learners' learning seriously

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Ironically, when showing learners that we take their learning seriously, in order to be credible we often have to start by taking *them* seriously – as individuals with their own personalities – and not simply as learners of a language.

Zoltán Dörnyei (2001) points out that if we ‘... show commitment towards the learners’ learning and progress, there is a very good chance that they will do the same thing’. He lists a range of ways we can use to show our learners that we are committed to their learning, from caring for them when things don’t go well, to correcting and returning their homework and tests promptly, to sending them links to articles they may find interesting, and even to giving them our phone number to call us at home when they have a problem. (If the latter is one step too far for you, you might like to consider giving them your email address.)

I once offered a teenage class an hour of extra time per week outside the regular timetable, to help them with learning problems. These after-class sessions were very successful; they became quite popular, and felt a bit like a bonding experience. Things did get a bit tricky one day, though, when my learners asked me to help them with a maths problem as they had a test the next day. I’d not exactly excelled at maths myself, but was lucky enough to be able to help them with that particular question. Phew!

Make sure you set up regular sessions when your learners can share their true thoughts and opinions – ideally with them sitting in a circle. Be non-judgemental; this doesn’t mean that you need to find all their conclusions equally valid, but that when you disagree with anything one of them says, do so respectfully. Try to ask questions that encourage your learners to think more deeply and express their thoughts. Do not accept them merely stating, for instance, ‘I don’t like that’; tell them to give their reasons.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001) *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Empower learners by asking them to teach you

There is always going to be at least one learner in your class who's better than you at something. Invite your learners to find out what those things are, and to teach you about them.

Giving your learners a chance to teach you something new has several advantages:

- 1 It makes you human, and at the same time raises their self-esteem – after all, it gives them an opportunity to demonstrate to you something they are good at which you may have never found out about otherwise!
 - 2 You can be absolutely sure that the level of engagement in your class will be high and there'll probably be a lot of fun and laughter.
 - 3 You can demonstrate to them what the joy of learning something new looks like.
- Ask learners to interview you in order to find out about their areas of expertise in which you are a beginner: rap music, the ins and outs of the latest smartphone technology, a language they speak and you don't, a sport they play – it doesn't really matter. What counts is that they find something to teach you!
 - Once learners have an idea of what that might be, tell them to work in groups. Ask each group to plan how they would go about creating a mini-lesson for you. Ask them to check the web for videos or other materials that might help them with the language they need to do their task.
 - You may want to give the other learners observation tasks for each group's mini-lesson. These could be drawn up together, and could include questions about you and the way you learn, the 'teacher' and the way they teach, and everyone's feelings during the lesson.
 - Make sure learners can share their observations afterwards. Don't forget to thank your learners for their efforts in teaching you – and do tell them what you enjoyed about being taught by them!
 - As a variation, you could encourage learners to teach something to the whole class that only they are an 'expert' in.