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## SPOTLIGHT ON YL ELT MANAGEMENT

### Fun and Enjoyment: The same thing, right? Wrong! Diana England

This article is based on my experience of managing newly qualified young learner teachers and some strategies I have adopted to encourage a more critical approach to ‘having fun’ in young learner ELT.

The first few months working in TEYLs can be a salutary experience for new teachers. In addition to developing their own linguistic awareness and ensuring they can successfully teach the language and skills in the syllabus, they may worry about how they will manage classes of children and teenagers who appear to get easily bored, distracted and even disruptive. Little wonder, then, that they may leap at opportunities to insert fun and games into their lessons - surely this will grab their students’ attention and keep them on their side? However, I would argue that simply including ‘fun’ is no automatic guarantee of effective class management, teaching or learning. Rather, what is required is consistent and principled attention to ensure children and teenagers derive enjoyment from their English classes.

What has led me to this are comments I have heard from teachers and other ELT professionals, and below are some which illustrate my concerns. As you read them, consider what they reveal about the teacher’s sense of self as an educator, their experience of teaching the particular learner group, age range and level, their concept of ‘effective’ teaching, their understanding of the process of learning and their awareness of the relationships within the class. Then, compare your reactions to mine:

- ‘I like to start my lessons with a fun warmer.’
- ‘I like using a ‘bomb’ timer or ‘random points generator’ when playing games in class.’
- ‘Anyone got something fun I can do with my teens’ class?’
- ‘It was a good lesson, the students had a lot of fun today.’
- ‘I see myself as a fun teacher.’
- ‘If you’re good, we’ll play a game at the end of the lesson.’
- ‘That’s the third time Pablo’s played ‘Backs to the Board’ in as many lessons.’
- They really enjoyed themselves on holiday.

#### ‘I like to start my lessons with a fun warmer.’

Like Suan Chong (2017), I am sceptical of the need for warmers, as they may be random activities, with little if any relevance to the lesson in hand, such as: ‘How many words can you make from

The United States'? What is planned as a short and light-hearted way of getting students to settle into the English-only environment frequently turns out to take up a sizeable chunk of the lesson, with the result that the learning objectives of the lesson have been overridden by the teacher's desire for 'fun'.

### **'I like using a 'bomb' timer or 'random points generator' when playing games in class.'**

Call me old-fashioned, but I'm not a big fan of such downloadable gadgets, as I am dubious that they result in improved learning. Distracting flashes or beeps may lead to some children getting over-excited, resulting yet again in the language learning purposes of the lesson being hijacked.

### **'Anyone got something fun I can do with my teens' class?'**

This type of request makes me wonder what is going on in the teacher's classroom. Are the lessons 'boring'? Why might this be so? And is the teacher asking for an activity linked to a particular learning objective, or will any 'fun' thing do? How will the teacher be able to ensure that some constructive learning takes place?

### **'It was a good lesson, the students had a lot of fun today.'**

So the children were happy, and there appeared to be a 'feel-good-factor' in the lesson. But does 'fun' equal 'good'? And what was 'good' about it?

### **'I see myself as a fun teacher.'**

Questions I would put to this teacher might include: Is that all you are? What do the students really think of you? Do all the students share this opinion? Does being a 'fun' teacher mean you are able to achieve better results than another type of teacher? And it's interesting to note that in this comment, the teacher sees her or himself as the source of 'fun', rather the learning environment and atmosphere s/he has helped to create.

### **'If you're good, we'll play a game at the end of the lesson.'**

There are several reasons why I am sceptical about dangling the prospect of a game under children's noses. Does the teacher see games as the only 'fun' element of a lesson? Aren't games more important as a key way of learning languages with children than a flexible extra or filler? Are games only used if they are 'well-behaved'? And what happens if they are good, but the teacher has run out of time for the game – won't they feel cheated and less likely to believe the teacher in future lessons when offered a similar deal?

### **'That's the third time Pablo's played 'Backs to the Board' in as many lessons.'**

It's very tempting when a teacher experiences success with a new activity to want to repeat and perfect it, and this is often no bad thing in terms of a teacher's self-development. But there may be a danger in repeating it too frequently with the same group of learners as the activity will be predictable and boring. A YL manager may worry that this teacher is flogging this activity because of a perceived 'wow' factor, irrespective of its relevance to the syllabus or learners' needs.

## **What fun and enjoyment mean**

A quick trawl through online dictionaries confirmed my hunch that there is a difference in meaning between 'fun' and 'enjoyment'. While both contain a concept of pleasure, the former implies something more light-hearted or trivial, not important or serious, and the latter suggests something, satisfying, beneficial and useful. We can see therefore that there is a greater sense of depth to 'enjoyment'.

It's also interesting to see how these words are used idiomatically and conversationally in English. As you read these idiomatic expressions, you may like to consider the connotations of each, then compare your ideas with mine:

- **It's not all fun and games.**
- **It was fun while it lasted.**
- **They made fun of her.**
- **Time flies when you're having fun.**
- **We were only having a bit of fun.**
- **We went on a picnic just for the fun of it.**
- **Enjoy your meal!**
- **They really enjoyed themselves on holiday.**

You can see from these examples that 'fun' implies something, trivial, temporarily enjoyable, laughing at someone else's expense, excluding someone, as well as something pleasurable and enjoyable. I was unable to find any idioms for 'enjoyment', expression above which includes the word enjoy is definitely positive.

## The lures and dangers of 'fun' activities

On the one hand, 'fun' activities may appear easy to prepare and include in a lesson, and because they are apparently motivating, teachers may believe that using them will be increasingly popular with their learners. The downside is that learning may be random or coincidental, or of questionable relevance to the course programme. The teacher may not realise how to maximize the learning opportunities inherent in an activity. They may not take into account individual learners' personalities e.g. a noisy, competitive game may not suit quieter learners, or those who are not particularly interested in competitions. Poorly thought out planning, management and use of 'fun' activities, which may be restricted in a teacher's mind to games, warmers or fillers can lead to precisely the reverse of what the teacher was hoping for: alienation, boredom, disruption, demotivation, and disengagement.

## The 'science' of enjoyment

Let's consider what goes on in our brains that enables us to derive enjoyment, the effect these have on us, and some implications for teaching. Breuning (2012) describes four chemicals responsible for happiness: dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin and endorphins.

Dopamine is a mechanism for motivation, providing the persistence necessary to work toward goals – the pleasure seeker. Just the prospect of a reward triggers the positive feeling of dopamine in the brain, causing it to release the energy required to move towards the reward. A second pleasure hit occurs when the need is met. By breaking down a desired personal goal into small achievable steps which result in a series of mini successes, we can stimulate the effects of dopamine. We can avoid dopamine 'lag' by celebrating success, and setting another goal before the current has been achieved. By doing this regularly, the brain constructs new dopamine pathways which helps it to deal with a negative dopamine habit.

**Teachers can help stimulate the release of dopamine in children's and teenagers' brains by:**

1. Helping them to set achievable goals for themselves
2. Scaffolding their learning
3. Inspiring them to move from being extrinsically to intrinsically motivated
4. Providing a supportive classroom environment
5. Recognising their achievements, and helping them to see how they are improving
6. Providing meaningful and judicious praise

**Teachers can help boost production of serotonin by:**

1. Establishing an inclusive atmosphere
2. Ensuring everyone in the class is equally valued
3. Allocating roles to promote self-esteem
4. Being genuinely positive
5. Exploiting positive outside-class experiences inside our English classes

Serotonin is a confidence molecule, produced when we feel valued or important, and controls our overall mood. It is also triggered by the memory of past successes.

Oxytocin is released through closeness with another person, be it physical proximity, eye contact or simply by being attentive and empathetic. It helps create loyalty, warmth and trust, all of which are necessary in the creation and maintenance of strong and healthy bonds and social interactions. Each time expectations are met, the brain produces more oxytocin and so oxytocin circuits are further strengthened.

**Teachers can stimulate the release of oxytocin by:**

1. By adopting a student-centred, discovery-based, interactive approach to learning
2. Promoting a cooperative, constructive and caring atmosphere
3. Encouraging children to enjoy other classmates' successes
4. Consistent nomination so individuals feel valued
5. Including regular and meaningful pair and group work activities

Endorphin is a chemical which helps us deal with difficulties. Laughing, stretching and movement can cause endorphins to be released. Even the anticipation of laughter can increase endorphin levels in the brain.

**Teachers can encourage endorphins to be triggered by:**

1. Including physical movement and tactile activities
2. Judicious use of brain breaks or light-hearted moments where students can smile and laugh
3. Ensuring there is an appropriate variety of activities and pacing in lessons

## The 'psychology' of enjoyment

Using a psychologically-based definition of enjoyment as 'an affective state of pleasure', Lumby (2009) refers to four concepts of pleasure. Firstly, 'flow experience', a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi (Williams and Burden, 1997). This happens when people are totally involved in an activity, where the following conditions apply:

- ☑ They are completely engrossed, physically and mentally
- ☑ Their concentration is very deep
- ☑ They know what they want to do
- ☑ They know how well they are doing
- ☑ They are not worried about failing
- ☑ Time passes very quickly
- ☑ They are not distracted by problems outside the activity

Secondly, there is an absence of negative affective factors, such as anxiety, boredom, pressure, stress, unfamiliarity, feeling threatened or lack of control. There is also a positive relationship between expectation of outcomes and the outcome achieved, leading to a sense of satisfaction. Lumby's final concept of pleasure involves positive social relations, which leads to a sense of belonging. You can see here obvious parallels between the psychological and neurological aspects of enjoyment. Lumby further describes the temporal nature of enjoyment as a pleasurable experience enjoyed both 'in the moment' and retrospectively. The former involves 'state' emotions which are experienced in the present and refer to a specific activity of lesson. Retrospective enjoyment involves 'trait' emotions which are built up over time, and describe a cumulative experience. Emotional traits are therefore predicated on the persistent experience of particular emotional states. In other words, if learners say they 'enjoy' their lessons, they are summing up their feelings derived from consistent recurrences of individual activities and events.

## Ways of going beyond 'fun' in the classroom

### Involving students in Action Research Cycles

My MA Action Research project involved firstly marking my students' written work using a set of descriptors designed to assess content, accuracy, range, organization, effect on the target reader and a band scale ranging from 0 to 5 (C&TS Digital, Issue 2, 2015). I then marked a second piece of writing, and prior to showing them my marks and comments on their work, I asked pairs of students to assess each other's writing using the same descriptors and band scale. They then compared their assessment to mine and discussed their assessments with their partners. Finally, they offered me some feedback on the assessment process and what they felt about it, and I have included three responses here:

- *I think it was interesting, fun because it is good to see and compare our work with other classmates to see where and what mistakes they make, and where we make mistakes, in order to understand the difficulties we have*
- *It was fun when I discovered that the marks that I gave my partner's text were the same as those Diana gave*
- *I enjoyed it a lot and I hope we can do this again*

Notice the quality of their comments and their use of 'fun', which appears at some remove from the earlier implications as something superficial, trivial, spontaneous or mocking. They were involved in a series of quite complex activities that required a significant degree of application and persistence. Yet it would appear they had experienced several, if not all of the features of 'flow' and what they termed as 'fun' was perhaps a deeper sense of 'enjoyment' with them deriving happiness, pleasure and satisfaction, where they could appreciate the potential benefits and use of the research.

### Now you see it, now you don't!

A second idea relates to repurposing and extending a sentence transformation exercise aimed at helping teenagers who will take the Cambridge PET for Schools exam. A new teacher may not immediately consider the enjoyment learning potential in language exercises such as this, and as a result, may feel the need to compensate by following it with a so-called 'fun' activity.

Give students an exercise similar to the example below and ask them to complete it in pairs:

#### Make one sentence from 1 – 4, using non-defining relative clauses.

1. My foot is better now. I hurt it playing football.  
My foot, which I hurt yesterday playing football, is better now.
2. My uncle works in the primary school. He's an art teacher.  
My uncle, who is .....
3. The swimming pool was lovely and warm. I went there for a swim.  
The swimming pool, where .....
4. Alex is my best friend. Her sister is a fire fighter.  
Alex, whose .....

Having checked that they all have the correct answers, ask students to practise saying and trying to memorise the second transformed sentences, using exaggerated intonation to indicate the interesting additional information provided by the non-defining relative clause.

The students can now test each other. One student in each pair (student A) looks at the sentences, while the other (student B) does not. Student A reads out a first sentence, and student B tries to make the transformation without looking. When they have worked through all the sentences, they swap roles and repeat the procedure.

### Beat the Teacher!

Here is an example of including a competitive element into the learning process, but where the students are not pitted against each other. Select some words related to an upcoming topic and write them on the board. Below are some relevant to an advanced secondary class:

## Describing people

over-the-top   moody   reliable   tactless   sensitive   sensible   witty  
easy going   two-faced   small-minded   dull   understanding   gentle   selfish

The teacher tells the class she bets there are at least four words that they don't know and at least three they'll mispronounce.

Working in pairs or small groups, the learners share their understandings of the words and decide how they think each word is pronounced, in terms of sounds, stress and any weak forms.

Draw the following chart the board:

Diana	You

Tell the class that they are all playing together against the teacher and the aim is to ensure s/he loses the bet. The teacher then nominates one student to select a word and define it or use it appropriately in a sentence, and pronounce it correctly. If they manage to show they understand it and pronounce it, they get a possible two points. Failure to do so means the points go to the teacher.

As well as promoting 'flow experience', these activities can also fulfil Lumby's other concepts of pleasure, and trigger the four chemicals described above in the learners' brains. Learning is carefully scaffolded, allowing for small successes; the learners are expected to problem-solve together in close cooperation in closed pairs or groups rather than being initially put on the spot, so negative affect is reduced, positive affect increased. The goals set are appropriately challenging but achievable, and the inclusion of work on pronunciation, getting students to test each other or pit themselves against the teacher, and the variety of interactions, activities and pacing should ensure that students maintain interest and motivation while providing some laughter, or at least more relaxed moments.

### Criteria for assessing the 'enjoyment' factor in upper secondary

It may be useful to show these acrostics to new teachers as a checklist when to use in lesson preparation as checklists to ensure a deeper sense of enjoyment is being included, rather than more superficial 'fun':





EXPERIENTIAL  
 ENGAGING  
 JUDICIOUS PRAISE  
 BONDING WITH OTHERS  
 DISCOVERY-BASED LEARNING  
 INTRINSIC MOTIVATION  
 SCAFFOLDED LEARNING  
 UNTHREATENING  
 SATISFYING  
  
 CONFIDENCE-BUILDING  
 CREATIVE  
 PHYSICAL MOVEMENT  
 TRAIT EMOTIONS  
 REASONABLE CHALLENGE  
 PRINCIPLED  
  
 POSITIVE AFFECT  
 VALUING OTHERS  
 STATE EMOTIONS

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**Diana England** is Director of Studies at International House, Torres Vedras in Portugal where over 70% of the students are young learners. She is a Cambridge English Delta Assessor and wrote the Focus on Young Learner Section for Module 2 of the International House London / British Council Distance Delta. As well as providing training courses for primary and secondary state school teachers in Portugal, she has also taught and trained teachers in the UK, Spain, Poland, Romania and Egypt. She is a holder of the MA in TEYL with the University of York. You can contact Diana at [Dos@ihtorresvedras.com](mailto:Dos@ihtorresvedras.com)