Downloadable resource 1:

'Bare Bones' alternative first lesson of the year

This resource corresponds to **Chapter 2: Planning lessons with teenagers**.

Rationale and basic structure

As discussed in the chapter, the advantage of a 'bare bones' lesson is manifold:

▶ It reduces unnecessary photocopying and over-preparation.

▶ It provides your first lesson of the year with a clear sense of purpose.

▶ It establishes language production and practice as a priority.

▶ It provides you with an immediate insight into your students' English.

The basic idea is that we turn the first lesson (and parts of the second or third, for larger classes) into a data-gathering activity for the teacher. We do this by:

a. Listening to each student speaking, briefly, and giving them some feedback.

b. Getting a short sample of each student's writing and marking it on the spot if possible.

c. Seeing what each student can hear from a few lines of audio.

The particulars of how you go about this will depend on your context. This resource is meant as example and starting point to base your own bare bones lessons on.

Pep talk

Throughout *Understanding Teenagers in the ELT Classroom* you will encounter the idea of explaining to your students the rationale for the tasks we give them in class. This is no exception. Some words early on will be especially useful as they themselves may not be expecting such a straight-down-to-business first lesson. In my own classes, I normally start by taking a familiar route:

> *'Our time together is about you making sentences in English and me helping you. So the most important thing I can do on this course, is listen to what you say and read what you write – in English.'*

The robust logic of this statement usually gets a nod or two.

> *'So, today I'm going to listen to you talking, then look at a little bit of your writing and then see if you can understand a short recording.'*

Speaking sample

For this, I pair up the class and provide conversation questions, having them switch partners regularly, and I monitor as many students as I can in 20 to 30 minutes.

I normally use questions from **Downloadable Resource 8: 300 conversation questions for teens**, either projected centrally or handed out on paper, one set of questions between each pair. We might use questions from one or two of the 20 topics on that resource. As an added motivation, I may prime the students first:

> *'We don't know each other very well yet (and even those of you I have taught before are older now), so this activity will also show me who is able to work independently and maintain a conversation with their partner for five minutes each time.'*

For additional strategies to help keep students on task, as well as optional seating arrangements for monitoring, see **Chapter 15: Getting them talking**.

I make a note of who I have listened to (together with error correction or input language which I feedback either to individuals or whole class) and who I have not. Examples of language collected/fed back from last academic year are:

Ismael

I went ~~to the street~~ out.

I like ~~much~~ the swimming pool a lot.

I like ~~training the~~ doing parkour.

Iván

Next summer I [would] like to go to ~~Atenas~~ Athens.

*/~~fævɒrɪt~~/ /feɪvrət/

Extra language: striker/forward

Alejandra

watched (silent 'e')

I don't know what I [am] go[ing] to do

Extra language: I'm good at it

He ~~learn~~ taught me

Marina

Meet other ~~persons~~ people

Extra language: I get sunburnt

Extra language: foreign music

Five or six new partners are normally possible before students start to flag. It may take several classes to get round everyone. In order to speed this up, a second round of speaking can be included later in the class.

These errors can then also be used as the basis for the sun, moon, heart, flower game described in **Chapter 17: Grammar and Writing**.

Writing sample

I then set a short writing task.

> *'Choose one of the questions you have just answered, your favourite, and write a short text in response to that. Make it about ten sentences long but the sentences need to be connected to each other.'*

While students are on this task, I will do one of two things:

Option A: continue to collect samples of speech by working with one student at a time on the conversation questions. See **Chapter 19: Personalisation** for more on one-to-one work.

Option B: start correcting writing straight away, asking students to show me whatever they have written so far, even if it is only a couple of lines. This helps keep the rest of the class on task and also means that by the end of the writing phase a good proportion of what has been written has already been checked.

Listening sample

For the next phase of this very first class, each student gets a blank piece of paper and we listen to half a dozen lines of an audio, which I play in stretches, looping back repeatedly almost as if it were a dictation.

> *'What are the questions teacher?'*
> *'No questions. Just write everything you hear.'*

This is a current favourite of mine. It sends out the message that the students are going to have to listen closely during the forthcoming year in a way that they may have not yet had to, and that their teacher is placing listening on an equal footing with the productive skills. I use one of the first few audios from the coursebook normally – something that is a cohesive piece of speech with sentences that follow on from each other. In terms of length, a 20 to 30 second stretch is about right. If we later look at the whole listening, and the students recognise the first few lines, no harm has been done at all.

When they have heard the piece replayed in sections and in its entirety numerous times (I will play some stretched up to 20 times), I invite individual students to read out what they have heard. Students can then be given a transcript and asked to add to what they have written down but using a different coloured pen. As they do so, the teacher can use this as a chance to have a look at what a few more students have managed to capture from the audio.

It is not always easy to predict or detect how well students will be able to decode speech. In one class last year, such an exercise enabled me to spot two very good listeners – a quieter boy who might have gone under my radar for weeks – and another whose slightly despondent manner belied his actual talent. In both cases I gained a greater appreciation of a student's abilities and the student received acknowledgment for something they were doing well.

Rules

There are several things I have not mentioned so far. Many teachers like to cover some ground rules with their classes on the first day, even drawing up a class contract between students and teacher. In a bare bones lesson like this, however, by the end of the lesson, we have already established priorities and a precedent for lessons that follow. The classes are about student performance and production, with the teacher as support and anything that gets in the way of that will be considered and treated as an issue. Regardless of individual language level, when students attempt the tasks, providing the teacher with material to work with (sentences in English), and take note of the teacher's input, not only will they be appreciated and evaluated positively but their English will also improve. In this class, we have demonstrated all this by *doing it*. However, the point can also be explicitly reiterated towards the end of the class.

From the students' perspective, they have just had a language class which was not all about listening to the teacher but which was about them communicating in that language. They have been listened to, their work has been looked at and the teacher is already starting to get an idea about their English. They will also have been given individual suggestions in the form of personalised feedback on their speaking and writing and should be saying or writing at least some sentences better already. They may also have heard a word or word combination in an audio that they have never managed to hear before.

Learning names

In a bare bones lesson like this, I may not always make the learning of student names an explicit aim of the lesson as far as the students are concerned (i.e. there may be no *getting to know you* activity or ice-breaker game). However, I do make learning each student's name a personal priority right from the start. If students enter the class in staggered intervals, I ask them their names as part of our pre-class chat and keep going back to check if I have remembered each one correctly. Taking the register is an opportunity to learn some more names, and then, in the speaking phase, as well as monitoring for language, the teacher can look around and see whose names they can already remember and whose names they need to check on. The writing phase affords the teacher another opportunity to identify students, especially if they have been asked to write their names at the top of their pieces of paper or notebooks.

The end

Rounding off the lesson, I talk to the class a little to get to know them, and I take a few questions about the course or about myself. I may even show them a photograph or two of my garden, pets or family and reciprocate any questions asked to me. I will also cover any administration matters here.

There are many ways to structure the first class of the year but I would encourage you to play about with some sort of streamlined language collecting exercise like this. My underlying point here is that by doing something that closely represents how we plan to work throughout the year, and doing it with clarity and purpose, we set the tone better than by doing something that does not.

The end