

An Eclectic's Guide to Teaching: Because One Size Doesn't Fit All

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Have you ever looked at a new textbook and said to yourself, "Oh! This unit looks interesting. Hmm, this one doesn't have enough exercises. The vocabulary is too easy in that lesson. This one is rather boring"? I have yet to find a book that is the perfect one. There are always elements that are missing – and that is why I am an eclectic teacher.

In the fall, I was with our newest staff member as she was looking through her new textbook for the year. As she browsed the lessons, I encouraged her, "Don't feel like you have to teach every unit in the book or use only the book. Make it yours. Make it interesting. Adapt it to you and to your students."

Why should we adapt our lessons?

Since I believe in student-centered learning, I try to allow my students' needs and interests to guide what and how I'm teaching. Likewise, because each class is different, I actually modify my lessons to reflect each class. Sometimes these modifications are slight, reflecting what unit to focus on if I'm teaching a group of engineers or medical students. At other times, I completely revamp the lesson and create my own unit. One friend asked how much time I had recently spent on a class project I had designed. When I replied, "Oh, about 40 hours," she looked aghast and wanted to know why I would ever spend that much time. I simply replied, "Because it makes them better students...and that is my goal."

Most of us don't have 40 hours to spend on a project (I did it over the winter break). But, we've all learned that working on a couple of units a year keeps our lessons fresh, updated, and interesting for our students...and fun for us to teach!



Denise Wood is originally from Ellensburg where she became an educator of languages: French and German. She quickly discovered that her first love, though, was teaching English to internationals while living in Tacoma, Portland, and Kennewick. In 1999, Denise moved to Russia with her husband and two children, followed by a transition to Prague, Czechia. She earned her MA in TESOL from Biola University and now lives in Poland, teaching the advanced English classes at Wrocław Language School (Wrocławska Szkoła Językowa). Sharing her passion for learning while investing in her students is among her greatest joys.

One of my favorite lessons I created is part of a unit on materialism in the New English File Advanced. The book includes excerpts on the topic of “affluenza.” After teaching the book’s lesson, students come into the next class where I divide them into groups of three. We have a courtroom scene where a third of the students are prosecutors, a third defense attorneys, and a third judges. Using news articles, I pieced together different information for each attorney to present to their judge. The case they are trying? It is the young man, Ethan Couch, who killed several people in a reckless and drunk driving accident. The defense uses “affluenza” as a justification for the rich young man’s state of mind. After the attorneys argue their cases and the judges pronounce their decision, I then tell them this is a real case that was tried a few years ago in the U.S., and I show a news clip of the event. They are all stunned to realize that this was an actual event.

How can I adapt my lesson?

I don’t know about you, but I have difficulty teaching units that I, personally, find uninteresting, while other lessons have so much potential to engage students that I explore ways to add depth and bring breadth to the topic. Both are the times when I look for authentic materials to pull into the lesson. My arsenal is vast: news feeds, articles, Facebook memes, YouTube videos, TED talks, books, and questionnaires are just some of my everyday sources I use.

1. **Choose an authentic resource, if at all possible.** We want our students to be interacting with the English we encounter daily. For example, if one of the units needs more vocabulary, Google within TED talks for similar themes found in your lesson. Then choose 8-15 words to highlight from the TED talk and create at least one activity for students to use the lexis.
2. **Make sure the vocabulary of the authentic material you use is level appropriate.** Either edit it to remove sentences, expressions, or vocabulary, or rewrite it to reflect the level. We don’t want to create undue frustration and lack of comprehension.
3. **Make sure the grammar is level appropriate, too.** By this, I mean, are there constructions that your students haven’t encountered yet? Are the verb tenses understandable for your level? Again, either remove any unnecessary elements

or edit them for your class.

4. **Is it too long?** For a resource to be “authentic,” it doesn’t need to be exactly as found on the website/book/etc. If an article is too long, slash it. I suggest no more than 250 words for most activities.
5. **Use subtitles with videos if it facilitates understanding.** Not all listening needs to feel like a “free fall” to students. It’s okay for them to have a safety net sometimes. Determining whether or not to use subtitles will depend on the goal of your activity.
6. **Try to create an activity that leads to interaction with the content.** This can be the most difficult part of using authentic materials. It’s one thing to find something appropriate; it’s another to use it effectively. Don’t be intimidated by this step, though. One skill that often needs more practice is activating vocabulary through speaking and personalizing the material. Using video clips can be a springboard for application and discussion of the unit. Make question cards that students discuss in pairs or small groups expressing their opinions or personal experiences on the topic.
7. **Experiment.** Try something. Sometimes lessons go better than we plan, sometimes worse. We should always be learning and stretching ourselves.

Enjoy the process

We can only give what we have. If we lack enthusiasm for a topic, that will be reflected in how we teach the unit. If you can spice it up and make it interesting for you, your students will respond to that positively. Ultimately, finding materials and creating activities and lessons that you enjoy will increase student participation and keep you feeling fulfilled as a teacher.

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