

Teaching strategies – 3

Different cultures of learning

These information sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with specific information on issues and strategies currently affecting their students. They provide background information as well as useful references.

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Context

Learning norms and expectations in Australia can differ, sometimes radically, from the practices current in the countries of origin of our client groups. This means that some learners in the AMEP may sometimes feel that they do not understand the roles of learner and teacher in Australia, and may also experience difficulties in adjusting to the unfamiliar classroom culture in Australia (see Yates and Williams 2003 in the 'Useful resources' section). In order for these students to derive maximum benefit from their classroom experiences, we need to help them adjust to the norms, values, practices, and expectations in Australian classrooms.

Issues

Many learners may be used to more teacher-centred approaches to learning that emphasise the teacher's role as the authority figure, and they may therefore expect the teacher to set and police clear rules for behaviour, and to closely prescribe all learning tasks and activities. Since many AMEP classrooms are more learner-centred and may include activities that are unfamiliar, learners may be doubtful of their educational value and may feel disoriented and confused. In summary, the goals, participation patterns and relative learner autonomy found in many Australian classrooms may be quite unfamiliar and disconcerting to students from societies where other approaches to learning are more highly valued (see Yates 2002).

Before looking at some of these issues in more detail, however, it is important to note that each individual – teacher or student – is likely to regard the teaching culture with which they are most familiar as being the 'best' one. In fact, of course, there are strengths and weaknesses in any approach to learning. The general issue here is that learners may have different assumptions and expectations about how to learn and conduct classes from those of their teachers, and if these differences are not made explicit, they

may become the cause of misunderstanding and resentment. Once learners understand the reason for a particular approach to learning, they are more likely to be able to make the most of their experiences in the AMEP.

1 Understanding teacher-student roles and responsibilities

In the relatively informal, learner-centred climate of many classrooms in Australia, the distance between learner and teacher and their respective roles may appear rather blurred to learners used to clearer hierarchical distinctions. This approach may seem chaotic to learners who are used to the teacher as an authority figure, resulting in a loss of confidence in what the teacher's role really is and the part they, themselves, should be playing in their language learning. They may not fully understand:

- the role of learners in taking responsibility for and managing their own learning;
- the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than the fount of all knowledge; and
- the apparent informality of relationships between teacher and students.

We therefore need to discuss explicitly the underlying cultural 'rules' that underpin our approach to teaching and learning, and this can be done even with CSWE I learners.

2 Management of learning

Managing time

If learners are not used to formal study or are familiar with a learning culture in which the teacher or the textbook regulates learning very closely, then they may find it difficult to make time to study any English at home. In any case, most adults have very busy lives, particularly if they have just arrived in a new country, and so they may need support and encouragement to make space for English language learning. Refer to strategy 3: *Helping learners managing their learning*.

Organising learning materials

If learners have been used to a single textbook or approaches to learning that do not make extensive use of paper handouts, then they may find it difficult to organise the worksheets and other loose-leaf material they acquire in classes. When learners are not able to organise their work, they cannot access it easily to go back over something or to work at home. They may also 'lose the plot' in understanding exactly where they are going with their learning and how far they have progressed.

Learners therefore may need some help in organising their work.

3 Understanding the aims and achievements of lessons

Learners who are used to an examination-oriented learning culture in which structural approaches and rote learning are highly valued may have very different expectations of what learning, teaching and assessment procedures are valuable. They may regard textbooks and examinations as signs of serious learning, and may expect the teacher to prescribe in detail the learning that will take place. They may therefore be unsure of the aims and value of unfamiliar activities, and may have difficulty fully appreciating the learning that they are actually doing.

For example, the following elements may not be obvious:

- the point of group work, dialogue, discussion, and learning activities such as songs, games and matching exercises;
- the usefulness of apparently unstructured, communicative spoken practice;
- the apparently lax attitude to 'correct' pronunciation and grammatical rules;
- the emphasis on listening and self-expression.

This means that teachers should be explicit about what they are doing and why.

4 Understanding expectations on attendance and punctuality

Attendance, punctuality and completion of work

Learners used to traditional learning cultures may expect close regulation in such matters as attendance, homework completion, and punctuality. They may have experienced severe penalties for failure to comply in the past, and so they may sometimes feel confused as to what is expected of them if they do not see the teacher paying attention to such matters. This may lead them to question the competence of their teachers and the seriousness of their classes, and to assume that their teacher does

not care about them and will not be able to help if there are any issues that interfere with their ability to study. Moreover, they may not realise how much time they 'lose' out of their total 510 hours entitlement when they are late or absent.

Although some teachers are anxious not to take on a policing role, learners will usually appreciate their teachers' concern because they see it as evidence of professionalism: that their teachers care about their learning. In fact, if a teacher does not seem to notice absenteeism or lateness, this can look like a dereliction of duty to students used to classrooms with a stricter regime!

Principles

Teachers therefore need to:

- take into account the kinds of expectations on language learning and the conduct of classrooms that their students might have about learning a language;
- sometimes use strategies in the classroom that are closer to what the students expect, at least early in their AMEP experience, so that they can earn their respect and lead them gently to a greater understanding of our learning culture;
- make explicit our understanding and assumptions about teaching and learning in the language classroom in Australia in order to help learners become more aware of any differences between these values and their own expectations; and
- encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning.

The strategies suggested below have been developed to help learners understand more about the teaching and learning culture in the AMEP. Most have been trialled successfully in a range of CSWE level I (beginner) classes, from beginners to students ready to enter CSWE II level, but they can readily be adapted to suit a particular purpose or learner group.

Strategies

1 Helping learners understand teacher-student roles and responsibilities

Mini-presentation on teacher-student relationships

A mini-presentation on learning cultures and the roles of teachers and learners, either as a first step or very early in the class, can provide students with an understanding of the conceptual building blocks for any later work on approaches to teaching and learning language. You can always refer back to this presentation when you want to remind students of

any particular point. Even students with limited English are able to discuss, ask questions, and conceptualise these new ways of teaching and learning. Teachers who have tried this type of activity report that students *do* take a greater responsibility for their learning and cooperate more freely afterwards, and that they themselves learn a great deal about the complex learning histories of their students.

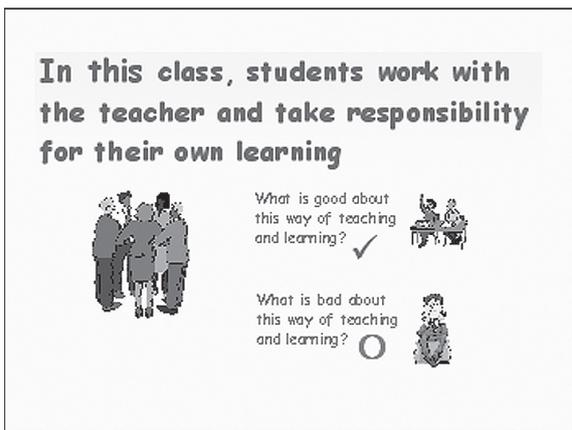
Suggested topics for a mini-presentation

Some of the topics below could be simply highlighted in a short series of PowerPoint slides, as shown in the examples below.

- How the teacher and students work together in this class.
- Contrast old way/new way of learning. For example:



- Expectations for cooperative learning. For example:



- Student responsibility for learning.
- Ask students to reflect on how they have learned before and what they expect in their language classrooms. For example, teachers can prepare a basic description and set simple discussion topics that help students to unpack their past experiences and to define their expectations.

Activity tips

- Placing beginners and advanced students from the same language background together in small

groups for support can help where English language proficiency is still very limited.

- Varying your position in the classroom, sometimes sitting among the students rather than out in front behind a desk, can help create a cooperative atmosphere.

Who is responsible, teacher or learner?

Although originally designed for learners at higher levels of proficiency, this activity (modelled on a design by Tony Wright, 1987) can be adapted for use with beginner learners. It involves creating a table with three columns. In the first column, under the heading 'Who is responsible?', you can list the responsibilities associated with teaching and learning such as those shown in the sample below. The other two columns provide a space for a tick under the headings 'Teacher' or 'Learners'.

Who is responsible for?	Teacher	Learners
Correcting mistakes		
Deciding what to learn		
Choosing homework topics		
Marking homework		
Keeping discipline		
Enforcing punctuality		

The first time you do this, almost everything gets ticked for the teacher. But as time goes by, the teacher can refer back to this list and show, not just tell, learners how they are taking on more and more responsibility for their learning. After a few such occasions, the teacher can then ask the learners to suggest how they could take on responsibility for one of the activities not yet ticked for them. One interesting point here is that this procedure does not necessarily involve taking responsibility *away* from the teacher, but it shows that students can *also* take responsibility and will be encouraged to do so. Of course, this activity will work best if the learners understand why it is important to take on more responsibility for their learning!

2 Helping learners understand the aims and achievements of lessons

Learner daily lesson record/evaluation

Some type of easy-to-use record or log of topics studied can give learners a sense of progress and encourage them to reflect on how lessons and different patterns of participation contribute to their learning. By actively keeping a record of what they do and reflecting on it, learners can become more aware of the practices and skills needed for the learning outcomes. Such a record can also provide

the teacher with feedback on the general mood and satisfaction of the class.

You can draw up any kind of worksheet to suit your purposes, and ask learners to write in it at the interval that is most suitable (that is, daily, weekly, monthly, or even as an overall course evaluation). The example below shows one way that you can organise this record.

Week Beginning:...					
Monday					
How do you feel about your progress today?					
	good	so so		not very good	bad
Tick one (✓)					

Activity tips

- Filling in the record on a *monthly* or *weekly* basis may help students to better track their progress, especially at lower learning levels, whereas *daily* records will give more writing practice and will encourage students to reflect on what they have covered more frequently.
- Learners may identify what they have learned and fill in the sheets individually, and/or through class discussion, or in groups, or for 'homework' for discussion in class the following day.
- You can direct learners to the different sections in their organised folders to help them fill in their record.
- Filling in the record can be used as an introduction to Learning Outcome B3: *Can write a short note or message*, or as a kind of diary.
- Try adding a column in which learners note why a particular task is being undertaken. This can help them to explicitly link class activities more closely with real-life goals.

Learner personal record of CSWE learning outcomes

Students can also keep a record of the results of the learning outcomes they have undertaken in the class. Teachers can use the personal record as a reference point when practising a learning outcome, and can validate learner achievement and boost students' self-esteem by initialling each learning outcome on the personal record. This kind of record can:

- help learners to identify and keep an account of learning outcomes;
- allow learners to monitor their progress;
- show learners the link between what they are doing in class and the learning outcomes they are achieving; and

- provide teacher and learner with a frame of reference during conferencing.

Activity tips

- An additional column for 'Partly achieved' or 'Material introduced' can be included to motivate low-level students unlikely to achieve many of the learning outcomes listed.
- Learners can use the worksheet as their own self-assessment checklist!

The learner personal record could look something like the example shown below:

Learner Personal Record: CSWE 1 LO Achievement		
To achieve CSWE I, learners must complete Modules A and B and 3 electives		
Module	Learning Outcome	Achieved
A1	Can learn English in different ways	
A2	Can understand instructions	
A3	Can find information alphabetically	
B1	Can give personal information	
B2	Can fill in a form	
B3	Can write a short note or message	
C1	Can participate in a short spoken transaction	
C2	Can speak on the telephone	
D1	Can give a spoken description	
D2	Can tell a short recount	
E1	Can give spoken instructions	
E2	Can read short instructions	

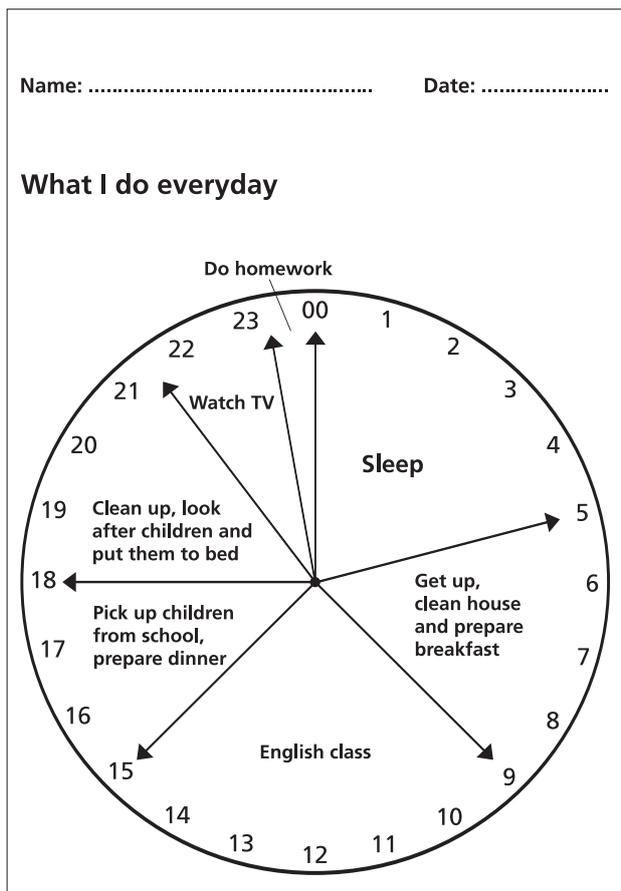
3 Helping learners manage their learning

Since learners may be unfamiliar with a culture of learning in which they must take responsibility for managing and organising their own learning, it is particularly important to make sure that they have strategies for organising both their time and their work.

Managing time: Reflection on 'What I do everyday'

A visual record of how they spend their day may help learners see how much time is available for study and the commitments they must juggle. Once there is a record of the way in which they spend their time, this can serve as the basis for a time-management plan that the teacher and learners can work out together. For example, the teacher can help the learners to address any problem areas highlighted in this way, such as '*very little sleep*', and so on.

An activity like this can help learners to set priorities and allocate their time more efficiently, as well as providing teachers with a reminder of just how stretched some of their students can be for time! Some teachers have found that using a clockface on which learners mark the activities of their day in segments (see example below) can be a very useful graphic way of illustrating these time-management issues.



Activity tips

- Use coloured lines, shading or even pictures for the segments.
- Use this activity to highlight uses of the present tense, and as the basis for practice in both writing and speaking.
- Done as a whole-class activity, this worksheet can help develop cooperative learning habits and foster understanding.
- It would be possible to link this activity with the attendance sheet activity, so that teachers could ask students who have lost an hour's class time when they might make up the work they have missed.

*Organising learner folders:
Coloured dividers*

Helping students to organise their folders and workbooks more effectively from the very beginning of their learning can help them to develop their organisational skills and take greater responsibility for their own learning. It also can assist students to:

- see more clearly what they learn each week;
- recognise the content of different lessons; and
- locate previous lessons that could help them complete activities in class.

One way to do this is to have them use coloured dividers or paper to divide their folders into a number of sections, for example:

- weekly evaluation
- weekly lesson worksheets/homework
- information sheets
- conferencing/additional work done by learners on their own.

Sign In/Out Attendance Sheet

Start: _____ Finish: _____ Date: _____

Name	Time In	Time Out	Time Lost
1.			_____minutes.
2.			_____minutes.
3.			_____minutes.
4.			_____minutes.

Activity tips

- If your students do not use folders, use plastic envelopes or pockets instead.
- For the first few lessons, ask students each time where they are filing their handouts, notes, homework, etc. Make this a class activity. As time passes, lengthen the time interval at which you check where they filed certain items.
- Keep a sample folder at the front of the class where *you* file a set of paperwork away, so that students can check if they have lost, misunderstood or misfiled anything.

4 Helping learners understand expectations on attendance and punctuality

Late and absence notes

Having the students sign in and out of the class can be an effective way of showing them how easily and quickly their class hours can slip away. You could use an attendance sheet that records name, time in, time out, and how much time is lost, as shown in the first example below. A class absence note, as shown in the second example below, can be used to record absenteeism. This strategy can also help to highlight for class discussion expectations on punctuality and attendance in both the classroom and the job market. Teachers who have tried using such a system with their class report that careful explanation of the purpose and goals of the exercise can allay any student concerns about these activities. They also have found that class attendance and arrival times improve quite quickly. You should try to introduce an attendance system early in the term in order to establish norms and routines, and then use it only intermittently if lateness/absenteeism becomes an issue.

Class Absence Note



To: _____

From: _____

Date Absent: _____

Message:

Signature: _____

Yates, L. (2003). The influence of prior learning. In Wigglesworth, G. (Ed.). *The kaleidoscope of adult second language learning: Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*. Sydney, NCELTR.

Yates, L., & Williams, A. (2003). Turning the kaleidoscope: Perceptions of learning and teaching in the AMEP. In Wigglesworth, G. (Ed.). *The kaleidoscope of adult second language learning: Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*. Sydney: NCELTR.

Compiled by
Lynda Yates
AMEP Research Centre
and
Sat Devi
AMES Victoria

Contributions by
Tina Androitis and Terese Kozar
AMES Victoria
and
Julie Deblaquiere, Gillian Schofield and Juliann Edge
AMEP Research Centre

Activity tips

- Copies of the attendance sheets and absence notes can be kept in a designated place, to be filled out by learners if they are late or absent.
- The attendance sheets and absence notes can then be used in feedback sessions or discussions about cultures of learning, and so on.
- You can use the notes to practise specific learning outcomes – for example, Learning Outcome B3: *Can write a short note or message in a real-life situation*.
- You can integrate the writing of notes with the practice of computer literacy skills.

Useful resources

Nicholas, H., & Williams, A. (2003). AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 2: *Teaching spoken and written language*. Sydney: NCELTR. Professional development resource downloadable from:

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep>

Williams, A. (2004). AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 3: *Enhancing language teaching with content*. Sydney: NCELTR. Professional development resource downloadable from:

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep>

Wright, T. (1987). *Roles of teachers and learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yates, L. (2002). AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 1: *The influences of prior learning*. Sydney: NCELTR. Professional development resource downloadable from:

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep>