

TEACHING ADVANCED STUDENTS WHO HAVE REACHED A PLATEAU – CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Summary: Many teachers of advanced university students find that their students have reached a plateau, which means progress is not easily seen. The problem can pose significant challenges for both interested parties. There are, however, methods to combat it and in this article I would like to share some of my own observations and ways of tackling the problem.

Keywords: advanced students, plateau, solutions, challenges, academic English

Streszczenie: Wielu nauczycieli studentów uniwersytetu na poziomie zaawansowanym (*advanced* i *proficiency*) odkrywa, że osiągnęli oni pewien poziom stagnacji, który oznacza brak zauważalnych postępów. To może stanowić poważne wyzwanie dla obu zainteresowanych stron. Istnieją jednak metody na walkę z tym problemem i w niniejszym artykule chciałabym podzielić się kilkoma własnymi obserwacjami i zaproponować pewne rozwiązania.

Słowa kluczowe: advanced students, plateau, solutions, challenges, academic English

Introduction

I have been teaching English to university students, with most of them qualifying at C1 and C2 levels, for a number of years now. Having gathered some observations on the challenges that the teacher faces as well as some possible solutions, I would like to discuss the issue in this article.

In part one I would like to share some reflections on the topic. Very advanced students can pose significant problems for the teacher. Many of them feel comfortable with their level of English and may even feel that they have nothing more to learn. Some might consider studying for an exam e.g. Cambridge Proficiency or LCCI. Others may veer towards more specialised varieties of language, like ESP or EAP. Even though it is not my aim to provide them with tools to reach these

goals in a standard general English university course, I do incorporate elements of ESP or EAP and occasionally use resources designed for learners taking proficiency-style exams. But my main focus is to ensure that all of the students in my class make progress.

Naturally, as teachers, we know that there is always room for improvement. However, raising the challenge level by offering advanced students dry and formal academic texts to pore over or advancing complex issues that would baffle and discourage even the most motivated can only go so far. The question is: how can we address the problem of advanced students on reaching a plateau?

In part two I offer some tried and tested ideas that might aid other teachers in their struggles. It is worth adding that my teaching experience is with humanities students, mostly reading Asian Studies.

PART ONE

Diagnosis

What are the challenges that the teacher faces with very advanced students? In my experience they can be generally categorized as follows:

1. Progress is not seen easily since these learners come to class with very good English already.
2. They may lack the motivation to make more of an effort so they can notice progress.
3. They may experience boredom resulting from overfamiliarity with coursebook tasks and topics. They have literally seen it all before.
4. As I have observed, some of them may have a sort of attitude resulting from all of the above.

At this point, I would like to mention one more serious problem connected with the challenges resulting from living in our modern, fast and busy world: technology. We are all surrounded, or rather, overloaded with e-mails, instant messages, updates, notifications, etc., which play havoc with our focus and attention span. Let's bear in mind that every university class lasts for ninety minutes. Ninety minutes is a very long time for the average young person's brain today. Keeping focused attention is becoming more and more challenging for young people and yet, without it, the learning process cannot take place. Close to every teacher's heart is the question of how to engage students so they stay focused and maybe even enjoy themselves in the process without reaching for their phones. As Daniel Goleman in his excellent *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* claims: "Full absorption in what we do feels good, and pleasure is the emotional marker for flow" (Goleman, 2013: 22). We all want our students to be fully immersed in the activities that we offer them. So how can we do that? Let's look at the issue from the perspective of skills.

Skills

It is probably best to analyse the problem from the perspective of skills because it is skills – listening, reading, speaking and writing – that constitute the core of our work during each and every class.

It comes as no surprise that when we talk about advanced students' listening skills they are on a very high level indeed. This is a generation of people who have always had free and easy access to online videos, films, podcasts and streaming platforms like Netflix. As I have heard, they can spend many hours binge-watching their favourite TV series. An additional benefit of that kind of exposure to, mostly, colloquial language, is that many of them demonstrate a high level of ease and fluency while speaking, especially using informal, everyday register.

As far as reading is concerned, a lot of advanced students can cope well with longer texts found in daily newspapers, like *The Guardian*, or weekly magazines, like *Time*. They find academic texts much more difficult, though. And that leaves something for the teacher to exploit, which I will address in the next part of this article.

Writing is probably the least practiced skill since in our overloaded curricula teachers may find it hard to give it the time and effort that the skill deserves. At the tertiary level, however, it offers an excellent opportunity for the teacher to create space for some fresh, varied and creative writing tasks that can be done both in class and outside.

As I have mentioned, all the skills are practiced regularly since all the classes are practical in their nature. The crux of the matter, however, lies in *the how*. And what may be helpful to bear in mind here is the rule of *interleaving* – a cognitive concept which refers to “mixing related but distinct material during study” (Carey, 2014: 97). Adapted to language teaching, it means mixing the practice of all the skills in one class as much as possible. It ensures variety, helps combat boredom and fosters good focus and student engagement.

General guidelines

I have gathered my reflections on coping with advanced students' plateau in the form of some practical guidelines for the teacher.

1. **Insist on their autonomy.** Have students understand that it is their responsibility to learn and make progress. This can be aided by putting them in the right frame of mind, preferably at the very start of the course, by giving them a needs analysis form that leads to some kind of reflection on e.g. areas of the language they feel a little more insecure about. Another way of encouraging reflection is a learning styles questionnaire, whose main role, in my opinion, is for students to think about how they learn and how they can become better learners. It can also be a useful ice-breaker with a new group at the beginning of the academic year. You will find my handout in the second part of the article (pp. 16–18).

2. **Challenge them.** It is extremely important to offer these students tasks that will be relatively difficult and creative. How can we do that? By moving them out of their comfort zone, which fosters engagement and, hopefully, helps them make progress. These can be impromptu mini-presentations in class, peer-review of speaking and writing tasks, running an in-class “book club” every now and then, or debates on complex issues.
3. **Keep them engaged.** This is extremely important and yet so difficult to achieve. I am certain every teacher has her own tried and tested repertoire of methods and techniques on how to maintain the required level of concentration. Some ideas that I can share here are: surprise them and offer something they have not done much of before (e.g. pronunciation practice is traditionally the most neglected), interleave different skills practice in the same class (as I have mentioned before), keep to strict time limits for tasks, require collaborative problem solving.
4. **Modify the coursebook.** If you are using one. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find e.g. a C2 coursebook that is a truly C2 coursebook. Do not follow everything in your coursebook to the letter, change the order or content, add more on the topic using outside resources and authentic materials, omit, adapt and be flexible.
5. **Follow their interests.** Young people can surprise us with original ideas and interesting or controversial opinions. Some are very willing to share their interests e.g. during in-class presentations, which can be inspiring for others to watch. Additionally, I tap into this potential by asking them to write an op-ed on any topic they feel strongly about. I enjoy reading these essays as each one is different and, most importantly, I do learn a lot about how they see the world.

Some practical solutions

I would like to share some techniques that may be helpful in our attempts to cope with advanced students’ plateau. I have used all of them repeatedly over the years.

1. How can we challenge students using a coursebook? I often make coursebook listening tasks more difficult by picking out a few items of vocabulary that I suspect students might not know and presenting them to the class before they listen. Next, they try to predict what they are going to listen to. As they listen they figure out or guess the meanings from the context and finally discuss their guesses with a classmate before checking with the teacher. Guessing is a powerful tool because it “engages the mind in a different and more demanding way [...] deepening the imprint of the correct answer” (Carey, 2014: 163).
2. I like adding some pronunciation practice on a regular basis. The golden rule here is to keep these tasks short. Even the most advanced students make pronunciation mistakes. Some of the words commonly mispronounced

by Polish speakers, as I am sure many teachers know, are e.g. *oven*, *gaol*, *thorough*, *iron*, *technique*, *draught* and many more. Below you will find examples of such short tasks. I have based these exercises on my favourite coursebook on British English pronunciation, an absolute classic, Mimi Ponsonby's *How Now, Brown Cow? A Course in the Pronunciation of English* (1998). They force students to look at words from a completely new perspective since they must focus on sounds and ignore spelling.

Examples of short pronunciation exercises:

a) circle words with the same sounding parts:

finger danger hunger warn farm part

b) find words that rhyme:

beat great heat sit face raise maze pass

c) find [aʊ] in these sets of words:

mound rouse rough blouse

mould rows bough browse

d) minimal pairs – listen and repeat, then come up with more pairs like these: [ɪ] & [i:]

bit – beat hill – heel hip – heap still – steal fit – feet sit – seat

e) find the odd one out:

oven song money wonder

3. It is a good idea to enrich coursebook grammar or vocabulary practice time with some fun videos. Many of them can be found on <https://ed.ted.com/> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021]. See below for some of my favourites:
 - a) a follow-up to formal register writing practice: *Beware of nominalizations (AKA zombie nouns)*, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/beware-of-nominalizations-aka-zombie-nouns-helen-sword> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021],
 - b) tense revision: *How many verb tenses are there in English?*, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-many-verb-tenses-are-there-in-english-anna-ananichuk> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021],
 - c) punctuation practice: *How to use a semi-colon?*, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-use-a-semi-colon-emma-bryce> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021],

- d) impromptu mini-presentations in groups of three on the origin of certain words based on short videos, <https://ed.ted.com/mysteries-of-vernacular> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021].
4. Critical thinking skills and debating language practice may be enhanced with a carefully selected Oxford Union debate. Students can watch one or two speakers in class (and then, perhaps, some others out of class) to familiarize themselves with the whole culture of debating. Exposure to a more formal register is an added asset. Here you will find the official channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/OxfordUnion> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021].
 5. Regular recycling of vocabulary is a prerequisite if we are thinking seriously of fostering our students' progress. We can make our life a little easier and challenge our advanced students by having each create their own handout with a variety of exercises which we can then use as a resource. Naturally, we should prepare them so they know what is expected. I have included my own handout with careful instructions in Part Two.
 6. People will only learn if they can focus and we, teachers, can foster that by following their interests or fields of study. Choosing a lecture, speech or talk and having students take notes does not sound particularly original, even though it definitely constitutes good language practice. However, we can kill two birds with one stone by exploring a topic that stimulates interest and, at the same time, developing students' academic skills by means of the Cornell method of note-taking. It is a tried and tested, widely recognized method, which additionally fosters critical thinking skills. The template and some teacher's notes (explaining the method in detail) are included in Part Two.
 7. Students at advanced, and especially proficiency, levels can manage to read almost any book or short story. The question remains whether they would be willing to do so. I usually offer my students a reading list, with my suggestions, which we can adapt and modify as we progress into the academic year. Some are pleasantly surprised and join enthusiastically; some need more coaching and encouragement; others will not read anything. What is important is to create an easy and friendly atmosphere around the issue of reading, give students choice, treat it as a reward in itself and discuss a given story in a non-threatening, student-friendly way (Bamford, Day, 2008).

These are the ideas I have managed to implement regularly in my day-to-day teaching of advanced students. I do realise that they represent a small and subjective selection of the total resources available to university language teachers nowadays. It is also worth adding that not all of them will work with all groups. Students will differ widely across faculties and institutes so modifications will be necessary.

Conclusion

Coping with advanced students' plateau can be a daunting task for the teacher but we should bear in mind that exploring areas of language that may still pose significant challenges to such students coupled with adding as much variety as possible on a regular basis equips the teacher with possible solutions to the problem. And there is help particularly in the form of authentic materials that the teacher does not even have to adapt that much, given the level of her students.

Bibliography

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- Goleman, D. (2013). *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*. Harper. Kindle Edition.
- How Now, Brown Cow? A Course in the Pronunciation of English* (1998). Prentice Hall: Mimi Ponsonby.
- Reszkiewicz, A. (1984). *Correct Your English Pronunciation*. Warszawa: PWN.

PART TWO

Handouts for the teacher to be handed in, or sent to, her students.

1. Learning styles.
2. Cornell note-taking template.
3. Vocabulary revision assignment instructions.

LEARNING STYLES

Warm-up

Try to complete the following paragraph about learning styles.

Students learn in many different (1) w..... Some students are visual learners, while others are auditory or kinaesthetic learners. Visual learners learn visually by means of charts, graphs, and (2) p.....; they think and learn best in visual images. Auditory learners learn by listening to (3) l..... and reading out loud. Kinaesthetic learners learn by (4) d.....; they learn best with an active “hands-on” approach. Learning styles may be defined in multiple ways, depending upon one’s perspective e.g. they can be defined as the (5) m..... in which individuals perceive and (6) p..... information in learning situations or as the general (7) a – for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual—that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject.

Adapted from: <http://brainbutter.com.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Visual-Auditory-Kinaesthetic-.pdf> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021].

QUESTIONNAIRE

A. Write the score that most applies to you next to each sentence below:

- 5 – almost always
- 4 – fairly often
- 3 – sometimes
- 2 – rarely
- 1 – almost never

Score Statement

- ___ 1. It helps me understand if I discuss things with other people.
- ___ 2. When learning, I watch the teacher’s face a lot.
- ___ 3. I use colours when I take down notes or read (e.g. highlighter pens).
- ___ 4. I get good ideas while I do some kind of physical activity.
- ___ 5. I prefer spoken to written instructions.
- ___ 6. I’d rather listen than read about a topic.
- ___ 7. I prefer someone to draw me a map to tell me directions to somewhere.
- ___ 8. I do less well on written tests than on oral tests.
- ___ 9. I don’t like sitting at a desk, but study, for example, on the floor, on the bed, in all kinds of places.
- ___ 10. I take notes but they are a bit of a mess.
- ___ 11. I can easily understand maps, charts, graphs, etc.
- ___ 12. I can’t sit still for very long.

- ___ 13. I like making things with my hands.
 ___ 14. If I am doing some work, having some music on annoys me.
 ___ 15. I like to take a lot of breaks when I study.
 ___ 16. I use a lot of body language (e.g. gestures) when talking.
 ___ 17. I can't picture things in my head very well.
 ___ 18. I would rather start doing an activity instead of listening to instructions about how to do it.
 ___ 19. I like telling jokes and can remember them well.
 ___ 20. I take lots of notes when I read or listen to a lecture.
 ___ 21. I doodle when I listen to a lecture.
 ___ 22. If I don't look at a speaker, I can still follow well what they are saying.
 ___ 23. I like creating models of what I am learning.
 ___ 24. In a test, I can visualize the place on the page where I learnt something.
 ___ 25. I like project work better than writing reports.
 ___ 26. I like to talk when I write.
 ___ 27. If I read, I "listen" to the words in my head.
 ___ 28. If I write something down, I remember it better.
 ___ 29. I can't remember what people look like very well; I remember better what they say.
 ___ 30. If I want to remember something, for example someone's telephone number, it helps if I make a picture of it in my head.
 ___ 31. If I study aloud, I can remember better.
 ___ 32. I can see pictures in my head.
 ___ 33. I would rather read than be read to.

B. Transfer your scores and add them up:

2 ___

3 ___

7 ___

11 ___

14 ___

20 ___

24 ___

28 ___

30 ___

32 ___

33 ___

**Visual
learner**

Total score:

4 ___

9 ___

10 ___

12 ___

13 ___

15 ___

16 ___

18 ___

21 ___

23 ___

25 ___

**Visual
learner**

Total score:

1 ___

5 ___

6 ___

8 ___

17 ___

19 ___

22 ___

26 ___

27 ___

29 ___

31 ___

**Auditory
learner**

Total score:

Your highest score indicates which your stronger learning style is, your lowest score shows your weakest. There is no right, or perfect, learning style: everyone is, to some degree, a mixture of all three learning styles, but most people may have one learning style which is dominant. A score of more than 40 indicates a particularly strong style; a score of under 20 indicates quite a weak style.

Adapted from: *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, ed. H. Brown, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994.

Pair-work

- A. Compare your score with another person. Do you agree with the results?
- B. Look at different techniques and methods of teaching.

verbal instructions flashcards presentations lists of words songs
drawing as memory aid discussions videos making diagrams while reading
role plays case studies writing new words on the board storytelling board
games rhythm and sound as memory aid dialogues graphic organizers
filling a form memorization and drills competitions audio materials
movement as memory aid

- C. Discuss which of the techniques above work/would work/have worked best for you. Give examples.

Cornell Note-taking Template

Subject/Title: _____

<p>Step 2: CUES (Reduce/Recite)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Main ideas/questions· Important phrases	<p>Step 1: NOTES (Record)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Use as few words as possible.· Indent so that supporting details are underneath the main points.· Use lots of space.
<p>Step 3: SUMMARY (Reflect and Review)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Main ideas in complete sentences· Answer: Why is this important? What conclusions can I draw from this information?	

Adapted by D. Lubińska-Pyla from: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/note-taking/supplement/RycdL/resources-on-note-taking> [accessed: 15 Nov 2021].

Teacher's notes to the Cornell note-taking template:

This is an idea I have found on one of the *Coursera* courses called *Academic Listening and Note-Taking*. It's a Cornell note-taking method (around since the 1950s). This template is not needed; just a regular piece of paper can be divided into three parts.

Step one is taking notes while listening – should not be written in full sentences, students leave some space and/or indents for supporting details.

Step two – cues (main ideas, study questions, key vocabulary) created by students to help them review the most important things. Students should be able to cover the notes in Step one and recite them from memory (this part can be done in pairs).

Step three – writing a summary (should be written in full sentences) – should encourage reflection. Students should also try to summarize the material in their own words (paraphrase practice!).

It can be called a 5Rs method:

1. Record.
2. Reduce.
3. Recite (good for pair-work).
4. Reflect.
5. Review.

I have used it with students watching these two lectures:

- https://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_what_explains_the_rise_of_humans [accessed: 17 May 2021] (good for B2–C1 students, preferably psychology, history, philology, etc.),
- https://www.ted.com/talks/martin_jacques_understanding_the_rise_of_china [accessed: 17 May 2021] (for C1 students of Asian Studies, International Affairs, etc.).

VOCABULARY REVISION ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

Vocabulary revision exercises assignment

1. Compile a list of words (60–70 items) – started below.
2. Make your own four different exercises (including at least 8 different vocabulary items each) using your list of words. Remember to include the answer key (at the end of the handout).

Choose from the types of exercises:

1. paraphrase of a phrase underlined in a sentence,
2. answer a question (e.g. “If you are crying wolf, what exactly are you doing?”),
3. fill in a gap (also as a multiple choice),
4. give synonyms,
5. give antonyms,
6. match words with their definitions,
7. match words to form collocations,
8. crosswords, word clouds (<https://tools.atozteacherstuff.com/free-printable-crossword-puzzle-maker/>, <https://www.wordclouds.com/> [accessed: 17 May 2021]),
9. find the odd word out in a line of words,
10. categorize a larger, random collection of words into word families,
11. word sets (complete sentences using words from one-word family).

You may find the following resources useful:

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/> [accessed: 17 May 2021]

<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/> [accessed: 17 May 2021]

<https://netspeak.org/> [accessed: 17 May 2021]

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