

Go Cat GO!!

Demand High Grammar Teaching: Upgrade!

The last two years have seen two of the gurus of the past few ELT generations, Adrian Underhill and Jim Scrivener, proposing the concept of Demand High teaching. They have a blog and now a Facebook group where they explore this concept, and they have published articles and given talks all over the world. Have a look at the references at the end of this article to read much more. Oh, and if you were lucky enough to attend the last MATEFL shindig in November 2013, Matt Done gave a much appreciated workshop on Demand High.

Here's a very brief introduction from the Demand High blog <http://demandhighelt.wordpress.com> set up by Jim and Adrian:

What is Demand-High?

Demand High asks:

- Are our learners capable of more, much more?
- Have the tasks and techniques we use in class become rituals and ends in themselves?
- How can we stop “covering material” and start focusing on the potential for deep learning?
- What small tweaks and adjustments can we make to shift the whole focus of our teaching towards getting that engine of learning going?

What Demand-High is not

Demand High is not a method and it is not anti any method. We are not anti-Communicative Approach. We are not anti-dogme. We are not anti-Task Based Learning.

We are simply suggesting adjustments to *whatever* it is you are already doing in class – ways of getting much greater depth of tangible engagement and learning.

My own personal take on this is that in so many classes an emphasis is put on ‘communication’. Great, and I’m right up there on the front line, waving my ‘Communicate!’ banner. So communicative tasks and task-based learning feature prominently in my classes. But just occasionally I get the feeling that ‘Communicate’ is used as a kind of opt-out: an-opt out of an accuracy focus, an opt-out of any attempt to consciously upgrade learners’ English. It’s almost as if we think, as long as they communicate, their English will upgrade automatically, won’t it? Hmm, not so sure about this argument. Does Andy Murray get better at tennis only by playing? Or does he get specific coaching? When his game is good, does his coach suggest ways of making it even better? And does he practise particular shots and moves, repeatedly, in order to improve?

So communication and fluency by all means, but let’s give grammar (and pronunciation and vocabulary and functions and discourse features) a conscious focus. Let’s have lots of examples and lots of practice. And let’s make this practice really useful practice.

Well, this spring I was at the IATEFL Conference in the UK and attended Jim’s session on Demand High. If you want to see the talk for yourself, here’s the link:

<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2014/sessions/2014-04-03/upgrade-demand-high-bring-grammar-lesson-alive>

In this article, however, I'll be reporting –and interpreting – some of the 'stuff' (his word) that Jim Scrivener proposed at his session, where he looked at exercises and tasks you would readily recognise and use regularly in your average language lesson. But, (as the blogger Swandos points out), he took the tasks and upgraded them to **anything but average** in terms of what the students will get out of them. Again, it highlighted how often we get a great task, spend time introducing it, presenting students with the format, leading them to answer the task – and then leave it at that. Students repeat their answers, usually in plenary format, usually in 'reading out an answer' tone of voice, the teacher says yes, the next student repeats their answer....half of the students are not engaged because they have already given their answer, the other half are not engaged because it is not their turn yet, one student is a bit engaged for the 7 seconds it is their turn to give an answer. Jim takes typical classroom tasks and asks whether with just a little tweaking we can get maximum learning out of an exercise and really engage learners and help them to upgrade their English.

He suggests that there are things we can do that seem to help to learn things more. How can we help every student in the class to improve, he asks, instead of

- Praising weak production
- Just drilling through written exercises
- Checking an exercise and moving on
- Teaching one class as if it's all one level
- Using explanation as a key teacher grammar input

He adds, polemically: "You could not possibly learn the grammar items that the books are claiming to teach from the grammar presentation and practice in the course books alone." Many coursebooks have too few examples – because they need to pack in so many things and grammar is often pushed into a corner.

Examples are input! Examples are Practice!

Suggestion: Use examples to produce even more examples – Upgrade!

Whenever a language example is offered by a coursebook (or a teacher), it can be exploited. The idea is that there is limited input in the teeny language boxes offered by coursebooks (you know the ones, usually hidden in a corner of the page) but that, even so they are exploitable. And the teacher can offer more examples. And students can "play" with them – outside the familiar "exercise" structures.

- The teacher reads the example and makes it sound real, perhaps by adding intonational features, or adding an emotion, or in any other way which helps to make the utterance sound as if it's really being said by someone real.
- Students read the example
- Students read the example and make it sound real
- Substitute it
- Personalise it (something true about you-him-her-the teacher)
- Use it

Here's an example: the grammar box presents the sentence *I've never eaten broccoli* (where the focus is on the position of the adverb of frequency, *never*)

1 The student reads out the example.

2 The teacher or a recording then gives a model, making it sound real with intonation, stress and emotions.

3 Then students repeat several times, keeping the same emotions, intonation, etc.

4 Then words are substituted. This allows more practice of the same item with different vocabulary, or practice of different grammatical items. The teacher can say the words to substitute or else write each one up on the board. For example:

Student(s): *I've never eaten broccoli!* (with good stress and intonation etc)

Teacher: Good. *Snails*.

Student(s): *I've never eaten snails!* (keeping the same stress, intonation and emotions)

Teacher: Good. *Salami*

Student(s): *I've never eaten salami*

And so on.....

Alternatively

Student(s): *I've never eaten broccoli!* (with good stress and intonation etc)

Teacher: Good. *America*.

Student(s): *I've never been to America!* (keeping the same stress, intonation and emotions)

Teacher: Good. *A horse*.

Student(s): *I've never ridden a horse!*

Teacher: Good. *A mountain*

Student(s): *I've never climbed a mountain!*

And so on.....

Of course, if production is weak, then the teacher is not so quick to praise. S/he can look surprised, show the learner(s) where the problem lies, perhaps by using their fingers [finger correction] and/or perhaps by miming (e.g. the pronunciation of '/mauntin/') and then learners have another go and the teacher can give appropriate feedback. In this way the teacher is consciously working on upgrading learners' language.

5 The next stage is to personalise the grammar. Students say their own true sentences about themselves, each other or the teacher (or someone else they know). For example:

Student 1: *I've never eaten snails*

Student 2: *I've never written a book.*

Student 3: *(Student 1)'s never eaten snails.*

Student 4: *My dad's eaten snails.*

6 Finally, students use it meaningfully, in speaking. For example:

Teacher 1: what was your sentence (Student 1)? Tell us and give us a reason.

Student 1: *I've never eaten snails because they're .. they're .. what's the word for (mimes 'disgust')*

Teacher: Disgusting.

Student 1: *Yes, they're disgusting. Yuk!*

Teacher: What about you (Student 2)? Tell us about your sentence.

Student 2: *I've never written a book. But I want to.*

Teacher: Really? What about?

Student 2: (and so on)

So just a few examples, but playing with them brings the language given in these examples to life. It makes learning grammar more engaging and relevant: it brings the grammar alive.

PROUF

When students make a mistake or give a wrong answer (as in Stage 4 of the process above, or if they're reading out answers to a written grammar exercise, for example), instead of saying only *wrong/correct* think of upgrade steps – the next thing that will help them to move forward. When they say something, you can help them upgrade with these steps: PROUF

Playful challenge Repeated Opportunities Uppgrade Feedback

So irrespective of whether the student got it right or wrong, we as teachers might want to start thinking about how our students can improve, what they need to do to upgrade. Teachers can then provide students with upgrade steps, helping them to improve instead of just giving unpersonalised correct/incorrect feedback. There's nearly always something that can be upgraded by making one small step forward e.g. form, pronunciation of a sound, stress, intonation, pitch, meaning.

The step will make the learner tangibly, audibly better in the language they use. It's best done in a playful, light-hearted, fun way which makes the process of learning pleasant instead of making the learner feel embarrassed or confused.

Playful challenge. The first step is Playful challenge, for example a mock shocked expression, or a smile plus *Would you like to try that again?* (meaning 'I know that you know that you can make it better')

RO=Repeated Opportunities. The learner can be asked to repeat the utterance not just once but several times, each time with guidance and feedback, until they 'make it better'. Even if the playful challenge works well and the learner makes the utterance sound better first time, they could be asked to repeat it a couple of times, making it sound better and better. This can give a real sense of achievement.

UF=Upgrade Feedback. Just responding to the student's answer as "Perfect" or "Well done" does not give the student much information about which aspects of their performance could be improved. It's better to comment about one reachable, achievable step. Such feedback is possible in a number of ways. The teacher can say *Good* (if it is) or *Almost*. Then, *OK, let's upgrade* and then the teacher can:

- model the sentence for repetition
- indicate the place where upgrade is possible (by, for example, using their fingers to represent words in an utterance or syllables in a word)
- indicate what can be upgraded, for instance pronunciation of a sound, stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.
- ask a question which will lead to the right answer (e.g. *What about the auxiliary?*)
- use the imperative e.g. *Do this. / Try .../ Make it longer (louder, higher)*

A PROUF approach, then, will push students higher and higher up the stairs of learning. They will slowly but surely improve and their success will be tangible.

When students see that the idea is not to tell them merely whether they are right or wrong but to actually help them tangibly upgrade, they will be increasingly willing to participate. They will sense that they are being helped to improve, and their attitude will be positive.

1-1 Focus

All this means that it could well be that a teacher may need to spend some time with an individual learner in a class helping them to upgrade: a matter of anything between twenty seconds and two minutes perhaps. Once this is seen as normal, as part of a class in which individual upgrading is the norm, it will be accepted by all members of the class. Two provisos: firstly, that it should be done in a positive, helpful and perhaps even humorous way (when appropriate) and never in a way which might diminish the learner in any way; secondly, the teacher can spread the upgrade to other learners, encouraging them to have a go, for example by using the techniques above. Moral of the story: don't avoid a 1-1 focus in a whole class scenario if the outcome is helping a learner to upgrade a piece of their emerging English.

3XP

How can our students get more learning when checking exercises in class? How can we mine an exercise for the purpose of finding gold in it? Here comes 3XP = Three Times Practice.

Instead of doing an exercise once, try doing it three times. The first time, the exercise can be checked the usual way. Then instead of leaving it and moving on, students can work on it further. Maybe they can cover the words and test each other, for example (see the example below). The third time is to use the same material by adding information, using it in speech, practising.

Jim and Adrian changed the words of an Elvis Presley song to this version: "One for the exercise, two for the learning, three for the English – now go, cat, go!"- a bright, fun way of getting the idea across. The first time, then, an exercise is checked for the sake of checking, getting the right answers. The second time, it is done for the learning, in order to learn and remember some things. The third time, we add more reality to the exercise and do it for the English to be brought to reality.

And here's an example from Jim's session.....

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| a. I like strawberry milkshakes | So do I |
| b. I was really angry | |
| c. I loved the film | |
| d. I hated the film. | |
| e. I didn't like the film. | |
| f. I've been to London before. | |
| g. I'm not waiting here! | |
| h. I don't want to go, | |

- 1 Students do the exercise and answers are checked. And in the checking the teacher can provide individual upgrading as described above, including work on pronunciation, stress and intonation. A 1-1 focus might also be appropriate at several points.

- 2 Students work in A-B pairs. B turns their exercise over and A reads out the sentences. B responds (trying to maintain grammatical accuracy and intonation). They swap roles and now B reads out the sentences and A responds.
- 3 Students make up their own true sentences alone or use/adapt any of the sentences from the exercise. They then keep it going. For example:
 A: *I loved The Hobbit!*
 A: Oh yes, so did I. The second film was better, though.
 B: Yes, more exciting
 And so forth. Then they move on to another topic.

Here's another nice idea for putting 3XP into practice, with lower levels. I've slightly adapted it by adding other techniques described in this article. The original lesson comes from the CUP exam preparation book *Complete Key*. Alexandra Guzik watched the recording of the talk and tried 3XP with it. You can find it on the Demand High blog <http://demandhighelt.wordpress.com/2014/04/21/3xp-from-alex/>

Aim: to raise awareness and have practice using the affirmative, negative and interrogative of the verb 'be' and other verbs in the present simple

Introduction: Text familiarisation

Read the text ignoring the gaps. Choose the correct words in each pair.

England / USA

Sport / Music

Big family / Small family

Practice 1: Students fill the gaps and compare their answers in pairs. They read their answers out loud to each other. Teacher holds whole class feedback by asking two students to read their text out. Difficulties are cleared up. Attention is paid to pronunciation, especially of short forms. PROUF is used together with 1-1 focus. Perhaps some spontaneous drills e.g. *I don't like sport / maths/ geography at all*

Practice 2: Elicit structures of 'be'-questions and question forms that require the auxiliary 'do'. Students make questions for the gaps in the text, individually or in pairs. They come up with twelve questions. Teacher moves around the classroom, monitoring and helping where there are difficulties. When they finish, students check their answers with an answer sheet on the board/screen.

Practice 3: Books closed. Students look at the questions and retell the text. They work in pairs or groups of three.

Personalisation: Students work in pairs. They use the questions from Practice 2 to ask each other about their best friends.

Homework: Students write a similar text about their best friend.

Alexandra's reflection: *Before the lesson I thought that the teenagers would get bored and the lesson would get messed up. After the lesson, the students were enthusiastic about the work that they did. In fact, they were happy to have a lot of practice and it was easy for them to talk about*

their own friends. There were some inaccuracies but the students felt more confident about speaking and it was easier to correct them.

Complete the text with the correct present simple form of the verb in brackets. Use short forms when you can.



This (1) _____ (be) a picture of my best friend. His name (2) _____ (be) Dexter. He (3) _____ (not be) from England – he's from America. He (4) _____ (love) sport, especially football. I (5) _____ (not like) sport at all, but we (6) _____ (be) very good friends. We (7) _____ (live) in the same street. Sometimes I (8) _____ (go) to his house and watch DVDs. He (9) _____ (not have) any brothers or sisters, but his mum and dad (10) _____ (be) really nice. They both (11) _____ (work) at home. They (12) _____ (be) a very happy family. Have you got a friend?

Complete Key Unit 1 p 10 Ex 4 (slightly adapted).

So the message is: demand high when teaching grammar. Exploit materials more, provide more examples, more practice activities and provide upgrading steps to take your learners up the ladder of learning.

Alan Marsh

Thanks to the following blogs whose descriptions I've borrowed from in compiling this article.

<http://www.languageflame.com/2014/04/iatefl2014-jim-scrivener-teaching.html>

<http://swandos.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/iatefl-day-2-and-3-high-expectations-and-networking/>

The Demand High blog is: <http://demandhighelt.wordpress.com>

The Facebook page is [www.facebook.com.DemandHighELT](http://www.facebook.com/DemandHighELT)

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