"Whack and Track"
A Learning Journey
Learner-led contents page creation

One of the main aims of our English teaching cooperative is to get learners to take on more and more responsibility for their learning – to understand deep down that when they come to us they are starting a relationship with an expert in language acquisition whose role is to act as a guide and mentor. It might sound obvious, but it's the learner who learns the language and no amount of teaching will guarantee progress if the learner doesn't actively study and practice in their own time and in the real world. Our role is to facilitate this work and to motivate the learner so that when the going gets tough they don't give up.

An important part of our approach is to take advantage of mobile screens (tablets+phones), apps, internet access, and concepts such as Flip Teaching to build a highly responsive ongoing relationship with our learners. At TESOL-Madrid in 2014 we gave a workshop about this approach. We call it Instant Response Learning. Our aim is to immediately respond to the questions and problems that come up in classes, and be able to prioritise them over the contents of a pre-designed course. We show learners how to use these tools and encourage them to find the answers to their queries, for them to find listening and reading resources online, for them to bring materials and ideas to class, essentially for them to take part in and take responsibility for the creation of their course.
https://www.youtube.com/englishcoachingcoop

We wanted to visualise this approach in a simple fashion and we think this video does a pretty good job. Have you every played 'Whack a Mole'? Players have to hit moles on the head as they pop up randomly – a bit like communicating in the real world. Who knows where your conversation and interactions will lead you?
We encourage learners to find the answers to their queries themselves, there and then. Because they can, they have the tools – internet and a screen plus their classmates and their teacher.
At this year's TESOL convention in Salamanca we want to share and exchange ideas about the implications of working in this way, as well as explain why & how we encourage students to track their own progress.

What are the disadvantages of adhering to a course book?

The debate that exists in TEFL about task-based learning, the use of course books, dogme and more recently Demand High teaching has lead us to reconsider what type of material we use in our courses and how we, and most importantly our students, use it.
Here we split into small groups to exchange views on this question: "What are the disadvantages of adhering to a course book?"
Here's our point of view on why we don't let a course book get in the way of a good conversation:
— a book assumes students have the same skills and know the same elements of English
— it assumes they need to acquire the same elements

When a student is slotted into a level (and timetable) they are trapped. Needs that arise can't be addressed by a single-level book. A book needs to be finished because it was bought, but real objective is to communicate and advance. Real life is mixed ability and goals are limited to the goals of the book.

What a student really needs is to be part of an effective team.
— common but flexible goals
— willingness to learn, teach, compromise
— goals and needs set at start will probably change
— flexible goals mean a fluid course, and a fluid class
— iRL means when something comes up in class we can choose to explore it right there and then, allowing students to talk about what interests them

LANGUAGE THAT COMES UP IS…

PERSONAL
➡ RELEVANT
➡ USEFUL
➡ MEMORABLE

The emergent language is relevant to the story or personal experience the student is talking about, which makes it immediately useful and easier to remember because it is tied in with the students needs, emotions and interests. Not just what's on the next page.
This brings us to our next question…

Again, we split into small groups to exchange views on this question:
"What are the obstacles to this approach?"
We had a defining moment a while back:
One day, while Alison was enjoying working with a group who had opted for a book-free course, a student suddenly made a face at her and said…..

"We never do any grammar."
It wasn't until Alison went through the register with the group that this person realised that a broad selection of grammar had in fact been covered. But as this person didn't have a table of contents at the front of a book to refer to she had simply assumed that not much had really been accomplished in her time in class.
We realised we had to sort out some kind of tracking system which would help motivate students and allow them to both plan and track the contents of their course.

A book can be seen as a trophy at times. And the table of contents is the obstacle course that students have to get through in order to get that trophy.
We know that a student's real, communicative English isn't that pile of English course books on their bookshelf (or stored nicely in a box somewhere). But how can we get students to visualise their learning journey in a clearer and more motivating way?
We came up with metaphors to help explain why we had chosen to do our classes in this way – from practicing yoga positions, making rugby tackles or catching waves while surfing, but our favourites where 'Whack a Mole' and bursting bubbles!

We decided to use the idea of popping bubbles as a way of allowing students to visualise their progress.
By giving students the class register you allow them to see what they have covered and they can use it to structure their revision. However, a register is passive, they're not participating. This is no different from handing them a pre-determined contents page. So we decided to give them something they can create themselves…
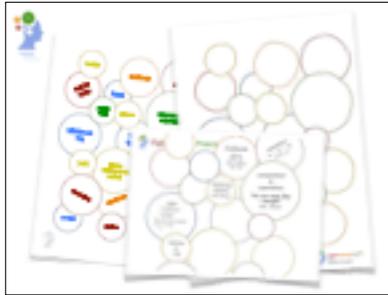
These are A4 pieces of paper which each student receives at the start of their course. We explain that English is made up of so many different elements, all of which they can work on at any given time. These 'filled-in' or planned bubbles and 'to be filled-in' or emergent language ones make us think about what we know, what we want to learn next, and what we have just done. They can use these bubbles to track their progress in class or at home, by ticking the planned ones and filling in the emergent language ones. We encourage them to write the date every time they see, hear, write, say or study something. These bubbles become the contents page of their course. One they participate in creating.

The small groups exchange views on this final question:
"To what extent might you implement this approach in your classes?"
This approach is not designed to substitute any particular methodology or class style. It's a layer or tool that can help create a more participative mentality in students. It provides courses that eschew text books with a proactive planning and tracking tool and gives those that do use books a simple way to introduce and record student led extra content.
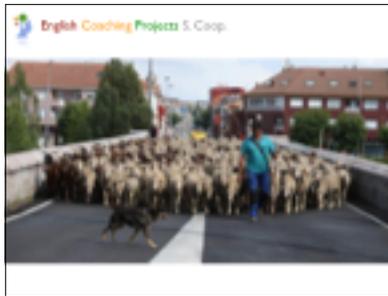
This **'WHACK & TRACK'** approach of Instant Response Learning means that neither the teacher nor the students have to go down the narrow lane that books and curriculums plan out for us.
Let's deal with the real communication issues as they come up and keep a good record of them so that learners feel that they are tackling their real needs and can visualise them in an attractive, positive way.