MATEFL is an organisation run on a volunteer basis by teachers for teachers of English as a foreign language. It is dedicated to the professional development of its members by facilitating the sharing and exchanging of ideas and keeping abreast of new developments in the
The main contributors for this issue

**Matt Done**
Matt has been involved in ELT for 13 years. He enjoys working with students, writing lesson materials, and learning more about language, teaching, and learning.

**Natasha Fabri**
Natasha has been an ELT trainer for over 18 years. After teaching in Lisbon, Portugal for several years, she returned to Malta in 2012 working as teacher, teacher trainer and DOS.

**Roksana Krzyzanowska**
Roksana has been involved in EFL for 14 years as a teacher and teacher trainer. She is currently teaching ESP.

**Alan Marsh**
Alan has been involved full-time in English Language Teaching and Training for over 30 years. He is President of MATEFL, trains teachers all over Europe and loves Burnley F.C.

**Theo Navarro**
Theo is a CELTA and DELTA qualified TEFL Trainer, CPD Trainer and DOS. He has spent time working in Kazakhstan, where he represented CUP, Pearson ELT, providing training to state school teachers across the country. He specializes in exam preparation, designing material around authentic tasks.

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Cover photo: Participants at the MATEFL sessions in June 2018. Photo by Natasha Fabri
Hello TEFLers,

Welcome to the latest edition of the MATEFL newsletter! As always, we have plenty of interesting content lined up for you.

Alan Marsh kicks things off with the second instalment of ‘Words! Words! Words!’ , before Matt Done puts classroom practice under the microscope.

Roksana Krzyzanowska sheds light on language attrition, and Natasha Fabri gives us the lowdown on Padlet in this month’s Teacher 2.0.

Theo Navarro reflects on his teaching spell in Kazakhstan, and Matt Done finishes things off with another instalment of ‘Why not try…?’ about upgrading your vocabulary board work.

We hope you enjoy reading this month’s newsletter. We’ll see you again in 2019!

Matt & Tash

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- Matt Done (Newsletter Co-editor)

**Contacts**

www.matefl.org

PO Box 2 Gzira, Malta

info@matefl.org

@MATEFLmalta

MATEFL (Malta)
In our previous article, we wondered where all those words in English come from and we explored the linguistic phenomenon present in many children’s rhymes:

Georgy Porgy came out to play
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
Jack and Jill went up the hill
Eeny meeny miny moh
Hickory dickory dock
Incy wincy spider climbed up the waterspout

We saw that this taste for playing with sounds by repeating syllables, vowel sounds and/or consonants within and among words are clever uses of the technique known as ‘alliteration’.

The word is derived from the Latin word ‘latira’, meaning ‘the letters of the alphabet’ and examples have been around a long time. Shakespeare, for example, loved using it:

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life
(Romeo and Juliet)

And nowadays we see it everywhere, especially in the world of commerce and advertising:

Dunkin’ Donuts       PayPal
Coca-Cola      The Horse and Hound (pub)

Many of these words are compounds, where the second part repeats a sound in the first part. So we saw, for example, that a room that is in a mess can be topsy-turvy. Or a person who is decidedly old-fashioned can describe themselves as being a bit of a fuddy-duddy. And work that is boring and routine, with no creativity, can be described as humdrum.

‘alliteration’… is derived from the Latin word ‘latira’, meaning ‘the letters of the alphabet’

Over to you
Here are a few endings of such compounds: do you know or can you guess what the first part might be? Don’t peek at the answers below!

beaver  toity  hop  zag
knack  chat  trap  tube
weensy  wig  jeebies  bub

(You’ll find the answers at the end of this article.)

Here are some more concepts. Each blank can be filled by an alliterative compound from the answers to the previous task.

a. A bit arrogant and haughty; someone who thinks they are better or more important than others. The __________ girl walked by with her Prada bag and her nose in the air.

b. Small, tiny. She looked great in this __________ black dress.

c. The kind of rhythmic music that commonly accompanies rap. ________________

d. To move in a direction that has sharp alternate left and right changes in direction. ________________

e. A small, almost worthless object, often a souvenir or an ornament. The shelf was covered with ornaments and useless ____________.

f. An important, influential person in an institution or community. We went to a meeting addressed by lots of local ____________

g. A state of nervous fear or anxiety. It takes more than a poltergeist to give me the ________________.
h. Friendly conversation about things that aren’t very important. What did you talk about? Oh, nothing really. Just ____________.

i. A loud confused noise, caused by many voices. After the dramatic announcement. I tried to make myself heard above the ____________

j. A tight piece of women’s clothing that covers the chest but not the shoulders. ____________

k. Words or ideas that may sound serious but are really foolish, empty or stupid. Sometimes politicians talk a load of ____________

l. Someone who is extremely enthusiastic and enjoys working very hard. The new teacher works very hard: she comes to school early and leaves very late. She’s a real ____________

Consolidation

A Fill in the gaps

1. Seeing a cockroach, even on the TV, always gives me the heebie-__________

2. He’s a really keen student – an eager ____________ if ever I saw one!

3. I like Afro-American music, especially hip-__________

4. Are you angry? No? Not even a teensy ____________ bit?

5. It doesn’t surprise me the police stopped his car – it was zig ____________ all over the place.

6. When I’m on holiday I always like to buy some local knick-__________ as presents for people back home.

7. Don’t believe a word of what he says – it’s just a load of clap__________.

8. We were invited to a lunch with local big ________

9. Women often wear a boob ________ with a strapless dress.

10. Oh, we weren’t talking about anything serious – just a bit of chit__________.

11. We have had enough of her hoity-______ manner

12. I could hardly hear myself speak above all the hub-______ in the theatre bar.

B Discuss with your partner(s)

1. What gives you the heebie-jeebies? Is there a place or building near you that gives you the heebie-jeebies?

2. Do you like hip-hop? Why? / Why not?

3. Do you buy knick-knacks as souvenirs or presents when you go on holiday? Never? Always? Sometimes.....?

4. Do you personally know any local bigwigs? If so, what are they like? Are they a bit hoity-toity? Full of claptrap?

5. At work, are you an eager beaver?

I hope you’re working wonderfully, living lavishly and feeling fulfilled!

Ta-ra!
Alan Marsh

So here are the answers: do you know what they mean and how they’re used? Use a dictionary to check.

eager beaver  hoity-toity  hip-hop

zip-zag  knick-knack  chitchat

claptrap  boob-tube  teensy-weensy

bigwig  heebie-jeebies  hubbub

Many of these words are compounds, where the second part repeats a sound in the first part.
The Cambridge English dictionary defines an orthodoxy as “a belief, idea, or activity considered traditional, normal, and acceptable by most people.” In this article, I plan to challenge three orthodoxies in English language teaching – things we may have been trained to do on our TEFL and CELTA courses and which we may therefore think of as ‘the right way to teach.’ Please note that everything in this article is a matter of opinion, and that you’re more than welcome to disagree!

Orthodoxy one – the teacher is ‘just a guide’
Language teachers are often encouraged, particularly on pre-service courses, to try to steer clear of the spotlight, and to set up activities quickly before stepping aside and giving the students the floor. The message I’ve often heard is that the teacher is a guide, or facilitator, and that our job is to create the conditions in which learning can happen, rather than dominate the classroom time ourselves. One possible reason for this is that, while in the spotlight, some teachers tend to fall into ‘lecture’ mode - something many of us will agree is undesirable. Another reason is that it’s the students who need the practice, not us!

While I do think it’s undesirable for teachers to endlessly hog the spotlight and leave very little time for students to speak, I don’t really buy into the belief that our job is simply to guide and facilitate from the periphery of the classroom. I believe that this diminishes the considerable role that teachers can play in students’ development, and minimises the time in which teachers can do a number of extremely useful things. For example, teachers can provide good quality teacher talk and increase students’ exposure to high quality language graded at the right level, explain grammatical concepts and lexis clearly, give natural and clear examples of new language, give honest feedback on students’ output, answer questions about language, model new language clearly, and be interlocutors for our students when practicing speaking.

The above list (which is by no means comprehensive) includes teacher action that requires both classroom time and the spotlight. So if a teacher can do all these useful things, is it really desirable for us to be just a ‘guide on the side’? I feel our classrooms can still be student-centred and communicative, without having to relegate teachers to a peripheral role. I think what’s desirable is to scrutinise the quality, rather than the quantity, of our teacher talk. Good quality teacher talk, as outlined above, is surely a useful thing for students.

Orthodoxy two – peer-teaching
The kind of peer-teaching I’d like to look at here is when we refer a tricky question about grammar or vocabulary from one student to the other students in the class, rather than answering the question immediately ourselves. This is again something that many teachers have been encouraged to do on training courses, and it’s perhaps easy to see why. Giving students the chance to ‘teach’ each other makes the class more interactive, gives more responsibility to the students, and crucially, allows us time to think about our own answer.

However, I’ve come to believe that in the cases of genuinely tricky questions, particularly those concerning vocabulary, peer teaching can be a bit counterproductive. I think there are two reasons for this: Firstly, explaining a word clearly and efficiently can be a difficult thing to do – even for a native speaker trained in language teaching, and learning to do it well requires some practice and experience. So if this is the case for a trained teacher speaking her native language, it must be even more difficult for a learner, with (probably) no teaching experience, in a language that is not his own – even if that student is of a high level. The bottom line is that not all students are capable of answering complex questions about language.

The second reason why peer teaching may not always be a good idea stems from the first. If, as is often the
case, the explanation given by student X is unclear/confusing/incorrect, then the teacher is left with double the work: First, deal with the resulting confusion, and then provide the correct information.

An example of the confusion that can arise when asking students to peer-teach is when they provide synonyms as explanations.

For instance, if student A asks what trustworthy means, and student B says it’s like honest or reliable, then before moving on to the actual meaning of trustworthy, the teacher is faced with the added complication of dealing with these other words that, while similar in some way, don’t quite mean the same thing.

While it can be argued that this presents a new learning opportunity, it must also be said that explaining very subtle differences between closely related lexis is often even more difficult than explaining single items, and that unless the teacher has a good deal of confidence and experience, this could lead to further confusion. I feel that in many cases, it’s easier and more efficient to answer questions about lexis ourselves straight away, providing we feel confident enough to do so. If not, there’s always the option of getting back to students after having a good think about the question.

**Orthodoxy three – using ‘creative’ examples of language in class, such as songs**

Songs are a big part of language teaching these days. Indeed, plenty of well-known course books and websites base entire lessons around songs and pieces of music, and I’ve heard many teachers recount how well their song-based materials were received in class. Again, the appeal is understandable. People like music, and by getting people to engage with something they enjoy, language learning is made more pleasurable. Additionally, music can give the students a useful insight into culture and social issues.

While songs are fun for many people, I find that it’s important not to conflate fun with utility. My main argument against the use of songs in class is that sometimes, they’re not the best models of language, and that they may present a distorted picture of the way the language is really used.

Let’s look at an example: ‘Beautiful day’ by U2 is a great song, and I’ve seen quite a lot of teachers’ sites try to adapt it for classroom use. While it’s easy to
imagine classrooms captivated by Bono and co., the lyrics, on the whole, are not really a reflection of the way English is actually used and spoken. Here’s a selection of some of the lyrics: ‘The reason that you had to care’, ‘sky falls, you feel like it’s a beautiful day’, ‘you’re in the mud in the maze of her imagination.’

Now of course, songs and poems are allowed to play around and be creative with language like this – it’s part of what makes them interesting. Expert users of the language can recognise where the singers/authors are relaxing the rules and being playful with language, but our learners may not be able to make this distinction. Therefore, I feel there are ‘safer’ models of language out there that are more useful to expose our learners to. A carefully written dialogue, for instance, which is full of every day language and ready-to-use ‘chunks’ for the student to take away, may be a more practical alternative to a lovely song full of poetic/ungrammatical language. Of course, this criticism applies to some songs more than others.

The above ‘orthodoxies’ are just three of many things I have come to feel strongly about having taught for a few years. While we’re obviously trained to do certain things for a good reason, I think it’s important to constantly question everything we know, or think we know, about language teaching and learning.

Asking questions, debating, disagreeing, and experimenting are good ways for teachers to improve themselves, learn more, and become better teachers.

Matt Done
Mattdone8@gmail.com

Did you know?
Some English language trivia!

1. What is the shortest sentence in the English language?
2. Think of a word that doesn’t change if read upside down. No peeking!
3. Why is a pangram useful?
4. Do you ever overuse crutch words?
5. What was the original meaning of “a moment”?
6. Sometimes, we all need a growlery. What is it?
7. When was the word funk introduced, and what did it mean back then? Hint: it’s not the 1970s!
8. Around what time did people start using the word orange?
9. What’s the word with the largest number of definitions in the English language?
10. How many different pronunciations can “-ough” have?

Sources:
https://bit.ly/2qHmBFw
https://bit.ly/2PMW0VF

Answer Key:
1. “I am”
2. “Swims”
3. “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog”
4. “Owls”
5. “Knock knock, who’s there?”
6. 9.
7. “It was the Tudor word for the street small of
8. The word started being used around 550
9. “Set used to have that record, with 465 defini-
10. Apparently, there are no less than 10.

Sources:
https://bit.ly/2qHmBFw
https://bit.ly/2PMW0VF
Language Attrition, and why it matters
By Roksana Krzyzanowska

Nearly 12 million EU citizens of working age live in an EU country other than that of their origin these days. They work and go about their daily lives immersed in a second language. I am one of them. And some of them may be your students.

The longer and more intensive their exposure to L2 (in our Maltese context – English), the greater linguistic price they have to pay in terms of their L1 competence. And even though losing command of a mother tongue completely is rather unlikely, many of them will experience a very frustrating process. It manifests itself in having trouble recalling certain words or using odd grammar structures and as a result, not being able to express yourself with the same ease and accuracy as you used to. This is called language attrition.

Decline in the use of a language leads to its gradual loss, and the most natural context for this process is that typical of migrants and bilinguals. Lexis is the first linguistic system to be affected, but because language attrition is a wide topic, it may also take other forms. Becoming hesitant, speaking with frequent pauses, creating odd syntax, stressing words incorrectly and generally, feeling like a foreigner in your own native language are the most common complaints.

It is a fairly new field of research I was not aware of until recently. I learned about it only a few months ago at my high school reunion. The hard way… Although I have no difficulty holding a casual conversation in Polish (which I do regularly with my family), I was at a loss when asked to recount the last 20 years of my life. And even more so, when I tried to answer some more specific questions about my job.

Teaching English for Specific Purposes is currently the centre of my work life and yet, sadly, I did not know how to say it in my mother tongue in a conversation with my ex-classmates. Some of them did not actually hesitate to point out, that I sounded formal, hypercorrect and unnatural. I would go on to add one more adjective to this list: mortified. To describe the way I felt.

It shocked me to the core, but looking at it from the perspective of a language teacher it was a revelation. It made me think about some important aspects of language development I had never considered before.

Linguistic outcasts. Considering the number of people who spend extended periods abroad, language attrition is common. In spite of that, a first-hand experience of this process often comes as a surprise.

Also, it is not a new problem. Last century, a famous novelist Vladimir Nabokov, who spent most of his life in emigration and wrote in three languages, identified the same threat to his native tongue saying “My fear of losing or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing I had salvaged from Russia—her language—became positively morbid”.

And yet, attention and research dedicated to language attrition is very limited compared to that given to foreign language acquisition. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the ‘attrirers’ (Monika Schmid, Language Attrition) feel being left completely alone in their struggle, with very little understanding and sympathy from fully competent native speakers. And the situation may be aggravated following a return to their home country.

There might be some good news initially. Some of these returnees will quickly realise that re-immersion in their native language is the only remedy they need. There is, however, more trouble awaiting those who spent a longer time in a foreign country or migrated at a younger age. In their case, poorer linguistic performance links to overall cognitive functioning in the newly-found old reality. A situation not dissimilar to the unsettling Orwellian vision: “Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller” (1984). This may resurface in situations when we tend to get caught completely off-guard. Like
ordering a glass of wine in a restaurant... In English, it is perfectly OK to ask for a glass of water and a glass of wine. In Polish, you should ask for szklanka wody (=water), but kieliszek wina (=wine), and no, the words szklanka and kieliszek are not interchangeable, which I simply could not recall on the spot when placing my order in Warsaw a while ago.

Though, I can clearly recall the condescending look on the waiter’s face in the reaction to my mistake, showing me that I was clearly unworthy of his Polished (sic) service. I failed the name-various-liquid-containers test miserably.

More predictable contexts might turn out equally difficult to handle. Years back, I found it uncomfortably direct to use the English pronoun ‘you’ when addressing my boss. Now, hearing the formal form ‘Pani’ (and equivalent to Italian ‘Lei’), when somebody speaks to me back in my home town, seems very distant and strangely refined.

I have become more unsure than ever, if it is acceptable to use the familiar pronoun ‘ty’ when talking to a fellow train passenger of a similar age, or if it is a faux pas.

What people consider polite and appropriate in different countries not only varies considerably, but also changes over time. So what was unthinkable 20 years ago, might be the new norm now and vice versa. So in this case, rediscovering your native voice may take much longer than looking up a single forgotten word.

The issue of linguistic appropriacy has even wider implications. If a returnee affected by language attrition decides to write an application letter or go for a job interview, the stakes are raised much higher and the fear of failure, because of inadequate linguistic performance, becomes greater. At this point you might ask yourself why you, as a teacher of English as foreign language, should be concerned about it at all.

Apart from the fact that language attrition may be affecting you personally, it is good to keep in mind that our English classroom practice is/should be equipping our students with much more than vocabulary and grammar. Every lesson has the potential to show them universal methods, which apply to language learning in...
general, and tools they can use to help themselves master any language. Think of training them to ‘notice the gap’, to use drills and substitution tables, to self-correct and reflect on their own production or to use a dictionary effectively (not only rely on Google translation). All this can definitely guide them towards greater learner autonomy, be it in a foreign, or their native language.

And speaking of noticing the gap… Even though it was a little traumatic at first, I am extremely grateful that my language attrition experience has actually happened. It was the only way to learn about something that otherwise, I would have remained oblivious to. It helped me increase my awareness of both, my first and second language, and become a more sympathetic teacher. I hope.

Do you have a similar ‘language attrition story’ yourself? How did you ‘feel linguistically’ last time you visited your home town? Share your experiences.

Roksana Krzyzanowska
roksanatorun@yahoo.com

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Teacher 2.0: Exploring 21st century teaching. Natasha Fabri shares some practical tips about using Padlet in the classroom

What is Padlet?
Simply put, Padlet is a virtual corkboard to use in class. It is highly versatile and, if used correctly, can serve as a fantastic lesson planner as well as a hub for your class to use both in and outside of class.

Before I go any further, I must say that I have been using Padlet consistently for only a few weeks. I am by no means an expert, but I will focus on my user experience to give you some tips about making the most of it and getting around the trickier bits.

To provide some context, I also want to point out that I will be using 2 specific classes I’ve been teaching as my case studies for this article: an Advanced level General English class, and a low-level class with a focus on developing listening skills. This is not necessarily a representative sample, but I will generalise my tips to other levels/purposes.

Getting started
1. What you will need
In order to use Padlet, it is essential to have a good Wi-Fi connection in class and students will need to bring in their own devices (BYOD). I like to have students work in pairs/groups, so when that happens I will choose the ‘secretary’ who will input the information onto the padlet. I also make sure to rotate/alternate this role so everyone can get a chance to use it.

While it is certainly possible to use this tool without a larger display surface in class, it makes sense to also have an IWB (interactive white board) or smart TV. For the teacher, it is important to have a smaller secondary screen, such as a smartphone or, even better, a tablet so you can monitor class activity without moving the content on the large screen too much. The app or padlet page shows up better on portrait mode as opposed to landscape, so having a tablet really helped me. It is also a good idea to download the Padlet app rather than use the browser. It’ll simplify things as you gain confidence with the tool.

2. Setting up
As soon as you sign up, you’ll be directed to your dashboard. Free accounts can have a maximum of three active padlets at the same time, and you are given the option to upgrade for a monthly fee. You may like, join, and share padlets made by other users as long as they have given you their links. There’s also a gallery of pub-
lic padlets to inspire you before you starting your own.

**Starting a new padlet** is quite easy. Click on “Make a new Padlet” on your dashboard. You’ll need to decide on one of the 6 formats available.

Some examples:
The Canvas option can be good to create mind-maps; there’s also the Stream option to provide information in a sequential way; the Wall format is the one that can best be described as a corkboard because you can move things around quite freely.

I wanted to build my padlets over the course of a week, so I settled on the Shelf format – I was able to organise the work better with headers for specific days, sessions and functions. This helped me map out all of the week’s work onto the same space to give my students visible continuity.

You are given brilliant wallpapers to adorn your space, as well as a space to give your padlet a title and description. I used this section to set the weekly objectives for my class.

**Features and options**
You can change all the options below at any point, so if you’re not sure, you can stick to the default at first and make changes as you go along.

**Privacy:** You can decide on how much visibility you want your padlet to have. I normally go for Secret mode, so that only those who have the link can see and access it. This can be done by clicking on the Share tab on the top right side of the screen, select the desired option.

**Access:** As you’re setting up your padlet, you’ll notice that you can actually change the URL to something more simple, so that your students can find it more easily. This option is found at the very end of the settings tab menu.

Besides, you can quickly extract a QR directly from the page itself so users can get immediate access. Click on the ‘Share’ tab again and select your favourite option.

**Fun fact:** iPhones have built-in QR scanners in their cameras, and the Snapchat app has this option too. If all else fails, QR scanner apps can be downloaded to simplify the process.

**Moderation:** You can also add collaborators manually here on this tab and make sure participants can mod-
erate. This means they can edit/comment on posts. If you are concerned about content posted by students, you can choose to moderate each post before it is published. A nifty feature is the profanity filter, which will automatically replace any questionable text with funny emojis. However, be warned that it will also filter relatively tame words like “kill” as well!

Adding content:
As participants (both teacher and students) add posts, they have a variety of options at their disposal. You can add files and links to other websites. Links to videos and audio tracks are automatically embedded onto the padlet itself.

There’s a Google search utility that can embed photos and even GIFs directly onto a post. This really brings added pizzazz to the lesson content.

Participants can take photos directly from their device as well. This means you can take pictures of work done on the IWB, or student notebooks instead of typing things up again. You could even include photos of the groups doing activities in class as a nice reminder!

Exporting padlets:
When you’re done with your padlet, you can easily export the content in different formats. I think the PDF format works best, so that your students can have a clear record of what was covered during the week. Encouraging students to keep copies of each padlet will also help them see their own progress.

How I have used it in class
1. Brainstorming and collaborating in real time.
I immediately noticed that brainstorming tasks became far more immediate and productive since posts show up on the padlet in real time. This also gives everyone a chance to respond to student contributions more readily, thus encouraging self-/peer-correction. Users can also like and vote for their favourite posts (this is an option you can choose to include).

I used to be wary of asking multiple students to write on the IWB at times because I felt it was too time-consuming. Legibility of handwritten work was also an issue at times. If used carefully, you should notice an improvement in this aspect.

On the other hand, I don’t think you should use padlet for every activity in the course book/lesson. Limit it to just the ones where there is a tangible addition/upgrading of language.

2. Collect interesting language items from the course book or other material in class. I want my students to be active in collecting vocabulary they find interesting and/or useful, so I set up at least one themed ‘shelf’ for this purpose in each padlet. This was particularly important for my advanced class. Noticing new language, and recording it properly, is very important. In fact, I always encourage students to contextualise the language into sentences and find alternative uses.

3. Collaborative writing tasks to practise target language in groups/pairs worked well, especially when I assigned different items to each group.

4. Setting homework – I felt the biggest difference in the amount and quality of the homework delivered in my classes. Students felt more accountable for producing and handing in better written work especially since it was patently clear to everyone in class who was making an effort and who wasn’t! My students checked their own work more thoroughly before posting because they knew they would not only get feedback from the teacher, but also from their classmates.

I also learned that when setting homework that includes extended writing, adding a clear deadline (with day/time) is really important. This will give you time to check their work and print it for use in class (more on this later in the limitations section).

Some students were very self-conscious at the beginning, so I made it clear that this was an opportunity to really focus on what needed to be improved rather than catch them out. In a very short time, they formed little support systems in class. They actively sought each other’s help to get through tasks.
Weaker students benefitted from seeing the work of stronger students to model their own, and the stronger students were motivated to test out their knowledge and share what they knew or what they managed to figure out.

4. Set individual tasks during class
This became a very useful task type in my low-level listening skills class. I embedded audio links individual tasks from Breaking News English, which come in 5 different speeds for the same texts. Students were instructed to choose the speed they felt most comfortable with. I asked them to listen to the text twice to answer the set questions. Everyone put their headphones on and plugged them into their own devices. They worked independently at first and then compared their answers with their partners.

This was beneficial because I had some weak students within an already low level class. This eased some of the anxiety they felt about the tasks set and I got a clearer idea of what they had actually understood. I kept tabs on what speeds that had opted for and asked them what they had found challenging. This gave me some insight into what I needed to focus on in subsequent lessons.

5. Optional reading and listening outside of class related to the topics discussed in class.

Limitations and suggestions
1. Legibility/visibility of content: posts can be expanded to improve legibility but be aware that this will not include comments at the time of writing this article.

2. Limitations/bugs in access and commenting: make sure participants set up an account so they can edit and comment on posts.

3. Encourage students to write out their extended writing homework on a Word document first and then copy/paste it to the padlet. Some of my students lost their work due to lost Wi-Fi connections at times, unfortunately!

4. Correcting texts directly on padlet can be tricky. HTML, i.e. formatting text to show errors (e.g. underlining, highlighting, strikethrough), is only available when using a computer. I couldn’t do this on the Padlet app on my android devices, so I resorted to various methods to correct this: immediate feedback in the class to reword problem areas (I asked the students to edit their own work as often as possible); commenting below posts with the most salient points for improvement; copying/printing out longer texts on a Word document and correcting them directly; copying and editing the work using track changes/comments and re-uploading the documents for the students to re-edit. The latter was the most effective correction method for longer texts.

5. Heads-down time in class — be aware of this and try to minimize it whenever possible by having students work together rather than alone. You absolutely do not want your students looking down at their phones throughout the lesson! Apart from the obvious lack of verbal communication in class, you run the risk of giving students an excuse to use other apps while they should be working!

Please share your experiences with Padlet me on: nfabi@gmail.com

Natasha Fabri
10 things I learned Teaching English and Training Teachers in Kazakhstan
By Theo Navarro

For some reason, I decided that a Post-Soviet, Asian, Muslim country was the best place for me to live as a not-quite-21-year-old, gay teacher. I spent almost three years in Kazakhstan, the 8th largest country in the world, and I can honestly say that it was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made. Here’s what I learned there:

1. How to teach a variety of levels, courses, and ages at once.
One of the best things about teaching in a non-English-speaking country is that you get to teach students in the city and country they actually live in. Your students aren’t taking a short break from their lives to come learn English, learning English comfortably slots in to their existing lives.

This also means that you aren’t spending between 3 and 6 hours a day with the same students everyday. Most classes run three times a week, and as the Native Speaker Teacher, I only got to teach them once or twice a week myself (more on this below). Obviously, my full-time contract wasn’t there for me to teach one or two lessons a week, so I had to juggle lots of different classes at a time. For example, an average week would have me teaching at least three or four different groups of adults, three or four groups of teenagers, an IELTS Class, and likely one or two one-to-one students.

I found myself getting very good at distinguishing between levels without having to think too hard about it, because I would teach at least 4 of the 6 CEFR levels each week. I developed a much keener sense of how to help students get from one level to the next, as I had a much more immediate and concrete frame of reference.

2. How to share (classes)
As I said above, while students would typically have three lessons a week, I would generally only teach one lesson of those three, two at the most. This was because I shared all my classes with local teachers.

Teaching has often been described as a “lonely” job, as we don’t often really get to interact with our colleagues in the way that people doing other jobs can. However, when sharing classes, you HAVE to make the time to talk to your colleagues. You need to get on the same page, and when both teachers really care about doing a job, absolute magic happens!

Sharing classes with my colleagues forced me to make spending time with them a priority, and it was a great way to build solid professional relationships with pretty much every local teacher who was employed at the school.

It was also great in terms of teaming up with more experienced teachers who I could learn from, and less experienced teachers who I could help guide. Overall, it created a very supportive and connected work environment.

3. What it’s like to deal with students over several years as opposed to weeks
Working in a non-English speaking country is really different to working somewhere like Malta or the UK. For starters, courses are not roll-on-roll-off, but have specific start and end dates; students don’t take classes for three to six hours a day, but usually have three 90-minute classes a week; and you can have the

Image retrieved from: https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1362597 (CC0)
same students for years as they progress through CEFR levels.

For example, one of my first ever students in Kazakhstan was an 11 year old girl who had booked three one-to-one lessons a week. I was her teacher from October 2012 until May 2015, and got to see her improve and literally grow up before my eyes. I had a specific class of teenage students who started with me in Pre-Intermediate and eventually ended up progressing to Advanced, and even prepared for the CAE exam together.

The teacher-student relationships were very different there than in Malta, as while we spent less time per week with the students, we had the opportunity to really track their progress and become a part of their lives over a much longer period of time. It was a lot easier to make sure that they didn’t go from one level to the next with weird gaps in their knowledge, and we could build on lessons taught much earlier on.

The major downside, however, was coming up with new materials and lesson arrangements and activity types etc. It’s a lot easier for teachers in contexts like we have here in Malta to recycle materials as we tend to have fresh faces in our classes all the time. When you have students for two or three years, however, hunting for materials becomes a way of life.

4. Understanding the true value of non-native-speaker teachers
We’ve all heard of the native vs. non-native debate, and until I moved to Kazakhstan, I was pretty uninformed about the whole thing.

There’s a lot of misinformation surrounding the topic (from both sides!), with native speaker teachers being made to look like drunken nomads, and non-native speakers made to look like caricatures of ‘foreign’ people that you’d see in The Simpsons or Family Guy.

Our company worked on a very simple philosophy: different backgrounds had their own pros and cons. For example, our local teachers knew exactly what all our students were going through, because they had been there themselves and could predict the issues or roadblocks that could come up in each level; us native speaker teachers were more useful for things such as helping students sound more natural.

This didn’t mean that the native speaker teachers had no empathy for the struggles of learning English or that the local teachers couldn’t help anyone sound more natural, but it meant that we got to divide things between us, and we all had to recognise each others’ strengths. It was also a great way for us expat teachers to get insight into how our students felt about their language learning journey, as we benefited from the hindsight of our wonderful local colleagues.

I don’t honestly feel like it’s a case of one type of teacher being better than the other, my experiences taught me that we just have different experiences informing our practice. At the end of the day, our system worked, and we became one of the top-two language school chains in a country bigger than Europe.

5. Dealing with corporate clients
When you teach in non-English-speaking countries, corporate contracts can be the bread-and-butter of the leaner months (i.e. summer months, as the students all come to places like Malta!).

As a young teacher (I was basically a child in an adult body) I got to experience corporate environments that I had never had access to before. I got to spend time with CEOs, CFOs, surgeons, marketing executives, and a whole slew of people whom I probably wouldn’t have had the opportunity to speak to otherwise.

I didn’t just teach them English, but because of the positions that a lot of these people occupied, I had to read into a large number of topics in order to help them be able to communicate at their corporate levels with their peers. I had the opportunity to learn about surgical practices, neuroscience (even came close to being allowed to watch a life-saving actual brain surgery one time!), management, finance, and much more.

As the old cliché goes, I learned as much from teaching them as they learned from me, and it was a wonderful period of personal growth for me.
6. How to understand other teachers
While I was working in Kazakhstan I spent quite a bit of time working with both Cambridge University Press and Pearson ELT. I would be sent to cities and towns all over Kazakhstan to promote materials to state schools, colleges, and universities and I would promote materials, run teacher-training workshops, speak at state conferences, help with syllabus design, etc. I met and interacted with over a thousand different teachers while I held that role, which helped me develop a deeper understanding of different types of teachers, and that most of us all do this for the same reason: we like helping people.

I got to work with newly qualified teachers; teachers who were nearing retirement; teachers who had never been to an English-speaking country; teachers who poured blood, sweat, and tears into their lesson planning; teachers who spent large amounts of their own money on books and resources; technophile teachers, technophobe teachers, and lots more. It was honestly really wonderful to be surrounded by teachers almost all the time, because I always felt like I was surrounded by people from “my tribe”.

Doing all of this definitely helped me become a better teacher trainer, and the lessons I learned from interacting with all those teachers help me as a DOS. It’s a lot easier to manage a team of teachers when you can really understand where they’re coming from.

7. Becoming more open minded to other cultures
Kazakhstan is VERY different to Western Europe. Virtually every aspect of my life changed when I moved there, and in lots of ways I didn’t even think to prepare for. For example, growing up here in Malta in the 90s and early 2000s, I had never been exposed to people who were SUPER into their religious beliefs. Issues of ethnicity and race weren’t really a huge feature of my upbringing (other than the odd person having some reason or other for not liking that I’m half English, but that was never a serious thing). I wasn’t used to being surrounded by so many people whose views were so much more conservative than my own.

I’m not going to lie, after 3 years there I decided that I was culturally incompatible with living in Kazakhstan, but trying to integrate into a society like that taught me a lot about how people work, and how to deal with people who had fundamentally different upbringings to my own.

For example, as a gay man I had to exert a level of caution and discretion that I had just never really needed to think about while living in Malta. I also came to learn that if a person raised in a Muslim family in a Post-Soviet country has homophobic or transphobic views, that doesn’t mean they are “A Bad Person!” but just that they think in the ways they’ve been taught to think (just like we do!), and that many of them are happy to re-evaluate their views when provided with proof that “gays” aren’t evil.

In general, this makes it a lot easier for me as a teacher and as a DOS to deal with whoever walks through my door. Even if I’m dealing with someone who I don’t think I would like or would particularly like me, I know how to find some scrap of common ground to start from, and that makes moving forward and finding solutions to problems a lot easier.

8. The limitations of learning through partial immersion without a teacher
Confession time: I am a TERRIBLE language student. Always have been. This got even worse when I became a teacher, and reached its peak terribleness when I became a teacher trainer. As an English Speaker, it’s hard enough to find the real motivation to learn another language, let alone to put aside money and time for language lessons.

When I got to Kazakhstan, however, I quickly recognised a need to learn Russian, as no one spoke English and Russian is the lingua franca of the Post-Soviet States. I tried finding classes to join, but none were being offered. I then tried to find a teacher for one-to-one lessons, but that didn’t really work out either. Most teachers in Kazakhstan are taught a Grammar Translation style of teaching, and I just couldn’t study like that.

I ended up mostly being taught by taxi drivers, in all honesty. Taxis in Kazakhstan are about the same price
as the bus is here, and their busses are slow and even more packed than ours, so I mostly got around on foot and by cab. I would sit and try chat with taxi drivers, trying to pick up chunks of language that I could reuse and recycle. Between taxis, restaurants, bars, and shops, I ended up learning enough Russian for very basic survival within a few months. What I could never do, however, was have a regular conversation. My language skills were limited to solely transactional interactions due to the context in which I was learning the language. Whenever anyone asked me about things like what my hobbies were, or what I liked about Kazakhstan, I drew a blank. All my colleagues, obviously, spoke English, as did all of my friends; meaning that I very rarely had the opportunity (or felt the need, to be honest) to have more human conversations in Russian, as I always had enough English-speakers around me to satisfy my social needs.

9. How to be responsible for my own professional development

When I first arrived in Kazakhstan our school had no professional development programme in place. We didn’t have any sort of CPD sessions, or a lending library, or any sort of mentorship system, until I eventually set them up myself later on down the line.

At the beginning, though, I needed to take my professional development into my own hands. I started following a lot of ELT blogs (Sandy Millin’s blog was a regular stop for me), got involved in a lot of Facebook groups for Teachers and tried to actively get involved in discussions about materials, and different types of lessons, activities that teachers shared with each other, etc.

While I missed having a more structured direction to my CPD, I found that the wider ELT community across the world had a lot I could learn from, and it was great to be able to ask questions to a group of people and get tons of answers in response.

10. It’s a bad idea to try to teach someone you’re involved with.

Just to make this clear at the beginning of this section of the listicle, I didn’t meet my husband in class, as that’s a question I get asked a lot.

When I first met my husband he was just about at around an Elementary level of English. A few months into us dating, and I had the bright (read: moronic) idea to try and give him English lessons.

I have never in my life hated teaching, with the exception of those three ill-fated lessons I tried to give to my husband. My ‘teacher persona’ and my ‘real self’ are just too different to exist in the same space at the same time. I found myself losing my patience in ways that I never would in a real classroom, I found myself trying to balance this awkward combination of ‘Teacher’ and ‘Boyfriend’, and we both just hated it. Don’t do it! Don’t try teach anyone you’re dating, for both your sakes!

Theo Navarro
Imagine you’re teaching a group of pre-intermediate students, and one of them puts up their hand to ask you for a word they don’t know.

After some paraphrasing and hand gestures, you realise that the word the student wants is ‘tap’ (the kind you find just above the sink).

Most teachers will probably write ‘tap’ up on the board. You might write it wherever you have some space, or you might even have a special column down the side of the board for new vocabulary.

You might elicit that it’s a noun, and add a little (n) in brackets. For multi-syllabic words, you might also elicit where the stress falls, and indicate this with a little dot, or something similar.

While we’ve answered the student’s question and added a new word to their lexicon, I still feel there’s more we can do when similar situations come up. Imagine that instead of writing just ‘tap’, you wrote the following:

*Who left the tap on?*

*Turn the tap off.*

*The water coming out of the taps is brown!*

I think that this is an upgrade on just ‘tap’. There are two main reasons for this:

First of all, research indicates that when we want to produce language, our brain retrieves it in the form of chunks, rather than as a string of single words. Therefore, surely we’d be doing our students’ brains a favour by presenting this new word as part of chunks in which it typically occurs.

Additionally, by writing the new word in the form of a chunk or sentence, we’re also giving the students some crucial information about how that word works in context – what other words go with and around it, and what micro-grammatical patterns occur with it.

For instance, with ‘tap’, our example sentences show students that you can *leave* the tap on, you can *turn* the tap off, and water *comes out of* the tap. This is information that students can use to help them produce the word correctly – information that they don’t get if we only write ‘tap’.

Of course, with ‘tap’, it’s fairly straightforward to quickly come up with a couple of example sentences. With other vocabulary at higher levels, this is more difficult. A good idea, therefore, might be to keep a dictionary with you in class, and to refer to it for examples when new language comes up.

So, the next time you’re dealing with some new vocabulary in class, why not try and record it in the form of a chunk or full sentence?

To get you thinking along these lines, here are some words related to the topic of health and exercise. If you were teaching them to a B1 class, what example chunks/sentences would you put them in?

- cut down
- diet
- prescription
- supplements
- injury
- cough

Matt Done
mattdone8@gmail.com
Find 11 of the most common ELT course books in the grid below. Words in this puzzle can appear horizontal, vertical, diagonal as well as backwards!

ENGLISHFILE
ENGLISHUNLIMITED
FACETOFACE
HEADWAY
INNOVATIONS
INSIDEOUT
NAVIGATE
OUTCOMES
REWARD
SOLUTIONS
STRAIGHTFORWARD

Words in the grid:

ENGLISHFILE
ENGLISHUNLIMITED
FACETOFACE
HEADWAY
INNOVATIONS
INSIDEOUT
NAVIGATE
OUTCOMES
REWARD
SOLUTIONS
STRAIGHTFORWARD
The ELT Industry in Malta in a Nutshell (part 2)
Facts and figures about EFL students coming to Malta in 2017 by Matt Done

The first table published by the NSO, shows the number of males and females working in local ELT schools in 2017.

In 2017, the total number of teaching staff in licenced ELT schools was 1,225, the largest proportion of which (37.6%) was aged between 18 and 24. There were also considerably more female teachers than males, with females accounting for just over 70% of the total number.

There were also 759 members of non-teaching staff working in ELT schools, 405 of whom were female while 354 were male.

In total, there were just under 2,000 members of staff, both teaching and non-teaching, working in licensed ELT schools in 2017.

This second table published by the NSO shows that in 2017, language students spent a total of 244,202 weeks studying in licenced ELT schools in Malta, with the average student studying for 2.8 weeks. July was the month with the highest number of study weeks, with a total of 48,369, of which 30,021 were for female students. The month with the fewest study weeks was January, with just under 7,000 study weeks.
MATEFL events in pictures
Some images from the summer sessions held in June.

Norman Borg talks technology in his session 'The Bare Essentials' (left)

Participants enjoying Jean Theuma's session 'Game on' (below)

Pam Borg's session 'To App or not to App' (bottom)
MATEFL events in pictures
Some images from the summer sessions held in June.

Adrian Theuma's session on Word Dominoes (right)

Alan Marsh on how to 'Save the day with no materials' (below)

Natasha Fabri talks about presentation skills (bottom)

All photos by Natasha Fabri.