

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS - Matching solutions

Task 2 Match these commentaries to their appropriate potential problem and compare with your solution.

- A) Even the clearest instructions can be hard to grasp – so, after you’ve given them it’s well worth checking that they have been understood. A simple way is to ask a student or two to repeat them back to you: *So Jose, what are you going to do?* In this way you satisfy yourself that the task has been understood.
- B) In an active, forward-moving class the learners will constantly be giving their teacher feedback on what they have understood, what they think, what they need, how they feel, etc. Many teachers believe in the importance of open, honest feedback, but find that in practice it can be hard to get. This is partly to do with the classroom atmosphere, partly to do with the questions asked, and mainly to do with the teacher’s attitude and response to feedback received. The more you see feedback as a threat to you and to your position and your confidence then you will attempt to avoid feedback. If you can open yourself up to the possibilities of really listening to what students have to say with a view to simply hearing them – without self-defence, justifications or arguments – then you may find that you can start to find out what they are really thinking, and that you can work on responding to that.
- C) When you want to check a learners’ understanding, questions such as *‘Do you understand?’* are often useless. If you get a *‘Yes’* reply, it could mean *‘I’m nervous about seeming stupid’* or *‘I don’t want to waste the class’ time any more’* or *‘I think I understand, but...’*. Teachers often need to get clear information about what students have taken in. The best way to do this is to get students to demonstrate their understanding, for example by using a language item in a sentence, or by repeating an instruction, or by explaining their interpretation of an idea. This provides real evidence, rather than vague, possibly untrue, information.
- D) This kind of pussyfooting is a common way in which teachers undermine themselves. Be clear. Say what you need to say without hiding it in wrappings. If you want to stop an activity –say *‘Stop now, please’*. Feel your own natural authority and let it speak clearly.
- E) Often a teacher is so desperate for a student to say what she wants them to say (so that lessons can move onto the next stage) that she is already predicting the words the student will produce and eagerly wishing for them to be said – so much so that teachers often find themselves adding tails to sentence after sentence. But this kind of *‘doing the hard work for them’* is often counter-productive. People need to finish their own sentences. If students can’t complete the sentence themselves they need help – but help to produce their own sentence, using their own words and their own ideas. By letting students finish what they are saying, the teacher also allows herself more time to really listen to the student and what he is saying.
- F) If rapport seems to be a problem – then plan work specifically designed to focus on improving the relationships and interaction within the class (rather than on activities with mainly a language aim). Until the relationships are good within a class the learning is likely to be of a lower quality – so it’s worth spending time on this. Bear in mind the three teacher qualities that help to enable a good working environment – authenticity, respect and empathy.
- G) Because we are dealing in language as the subject matter of our courses it’s very easy to become over concerned about the accuracy of what is said and to fail to

hear the person behind the words. The example above is an extreme one, but on a minute-by-minute basis in class, teachers frequently fail to hear what learners say. The only point in learning language is to be able to communicate or receive communication – it is vital that work on the mechanical production of correct English does not blind us to the messages conveyed. Check yourself occasionally – are you really listening to your students – or only to their words?

- H) A common cause of boredom in classrooms is when material used is too difficult or too easy. The former isn't hard to recognise – the learners can't do the work. A more difficult problem is when work is simply not challenging enough. Teachers often have rather limited expectations about what people can do – and keep their class on a rather predictable straight line through activities that are safe and routine. Try to keep the level of challenge high. Be demanding. Believe that they can do more than they are aware of being able to do – and then help them do it.
- I) When you give students a task to do in a group, it's often best to let them get on with it. A lot of 'teacher help', although well intentioned, is actually 'teacher interference' and gets in the way of students working on their own. As long as you are around they will look to you for guidance, control and help. Go away – and they are forced to do the work themselves. That is when learning might happen. For teachers it can be a difficult lesson to learn – but sometimes our students will do much better without us, if only we have the courage to trust them.
- J) If you only listen to the first people who speak, it's very easy to get a false impression of how difficult or easy something is. You may find that the strongest and fastest students dominate and you get little idea of how the majority of the class finds the work. This can lead you to fly at the speed of the top 2 or 3 students and to lose the rest completely. Make sure you get constant answers and feedback from many students. Try directing at individuals – '*What do you think Dominic?*' – and sometimes actively '*shh*' the loud ones – or simply 'don't hear' them.
- K) The more a teacher talks – the less opportunity there is for the learners. They need time to think, to prepare what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. Allow them the time and the quiet they need. Don't feel the need to fill every gap in a lesson. Explore the possibilities of silence.
- L) Who gets more language practice here – the student or the teacher? If you become aware of your echoing – and then start to control it – you will find that learners get more talking time and that they start to listen to each other more. When you echo they soon learn that they don't need to listen to anyone except the teacher – because they know that you'll repeat everything! That has a dramatically negative effect on interaction patterns within the classroom.
- M) Unplanned, unstructured instructions are extremely confusing to students. They probably understand only a small percentage of what you say – and guess what you want them to do from one or two key words they did catch. Work out what is essential for them to know – and tell them that – without wrapping it up in babble.
- N) Don't give a running commentary about the mechanics of past, present and future activities – it's boring, hard to follow and unnecessary. Tell students what they need to know and stop.

