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Ten Great Low-Cost Teaching Tools

There are certain teaching tools I just won't do without. I carry them with me every time I step into a classroom, no matter if I'm working with kids or training teachers. I always have my laptop and my ukulele (a Hawaiian guitar) and a burlap bag of teaching tools. Now, laptops are expensive, and ukuleles are specialized, but the contents of that teaching bag are cheap, portable, and generally available around the world.

So I thought it would be worthwhile to describe ten of my favorite tools and explain how they can be employed in various ways: to manage the classroom better, to jump into fun activities with little or no preparation, or to promote student-created art and materials. All of these teaching tools are affordable—even cheap. And in the event that some might not be available in your region, I have added a few do-it-yourself alternatives.

Tool 1: Scissors (and scratch paper)

As classroom tools, scissors are so common they are almost invisible.

If you have a regular classroom, you expect to find scissors there. But some teachers, like me, move from room to room, even from school to school, so I always carry my own scissors—and not just one pair, but several.

The dynamic power of scissors resides in how they can transform a single piece of scratch paper into 10, 20, and even 50 paper squares. These can be distributed to students for instant writing tasks that require just a few words or sentences from learners, such as short poems based on patterns (Holmes and Moulton 2001), lists, polls, pictures, maps, interview questions, charts, flashcards, and dictations. These pieces of papers can also be used to quickly generate describing and guessing games (McCaughey 2009). For instance, if everyone in the class writes the name of a famous person on his or her square of paper, or the names of three cities, or five types of fruit, we have, in minutes, a great deal of content for games. When these games are played in small groups, we are activating the class, with an emphasis on having students

"*doing* and *producing* rather than *passively receiving*" (Rosenberg 2009, 10).

With several pairs of scissors to go around, students can help cut handouts, thereby increasing classroom efficiency and saving the teacher time. (Who says teachers must do all the preparation work?) With one pair of scissors per group of students, groups can partake in craft-oriented tasks like cutting and splicing together various newspaper headlines to make poems, or magazine pictures to make stories. Very young learners can use plastic safety scissors, which are widely available.

Tool 2: Timers

Many teachers draw activities to a close in an artificial way by asking, "Is everyone done?" or "Do you need more time?" I say "artificial" because usually only a few students respond, and these responses may not accurately represent the group as a whole. Moreover, it is unlikely that such "yes/no" questions will elicit a true answer (Gabrielatos 1997).

From the beginning of a task, students should have an idea how much time they are allotted to complete it, whether working alone in the grammar workbook or in groups on some creative project. Get a *visible* countdown device—an hourglass, a wind-up egg timer, or some free software to display different types of clocks and timers on a computer screen (e.g., www.online-stopwatch.com/download-stopwatch). This will allow students to see how they are progressing and how much time remains. Now students—and not just the teacher—are engaged in time management and self-pacing, which are practices that will come in handy when they take those serious exams.

Providing time limits can change the mood of an activity too, and perhaps even how effectively students work. For fun activities—games, competitions, and such—students often enjoy the challenge and tension provided by a time constraint (Ur 1988, 1996). For young learners, time limits can help develop the idea of sharing and turn-taking (Corekin 2009). At any rate, with a time limit your students will probably worry less about grammar errors and more about finishing the task at hand.

The countdown timer on your cell phone will work fine, but I like to wear a digital stopwatch on a string around my neck. It makes me look like a coach, and it makes the timing of tasks somehow exciting and official. If you do not have a timer, you can make your own sand-timer hourglass from plastic bottles. Here's how: www.ehow.com/how_4450736_make-sand-hourglass-plastic-drink.html.

Tool 3: Call bell

Usually, the teacher relies on his or her voice to get attention. "Okay, everybody, let's stop. Put down your work. Look up here, everyone!" The problem is, the teacher's voice has many different functions, so learners are not guaranteed to immediately recognize a call for attention, or to start and stop an activity.

What I carry in my bag is a call bell. This is the dome-shaped bell you see on hotel desks or shop counters. It is rung with a slap of the palm and offers a single penetrating, but not unpleasant, ding that cuts through the loudest group work tasks. In my training sessions, teachers always ask where they can get one. The answer: stationery stores, office or restaurant supply stores, or through the Internet. However, any bell will work. Actually, you can use any sound device—a whistle, a buzzer, a horn from a bicycle shop, or a slide whistle with its cartoonish glissandos. You can even use specific musical themes recorded on your MP3 player, computer, or mobile phone. The trick is to have a distinct sound that signifies START and STOP. Start working. Stop working. You may decide that students should freeze when they hear the designated sound (Powell 2009) or that they should focus attention to the front of the room. For effective time management, we need students to react and transition smoothly and quickly.

Tool 4: Pizza box lids

Six months ago at a summer camp in Aqaba, Jordan, the kids had pizza for lunch. I ended up with 40 empty boxes to put in the garbage. It seemed a waste to throw them away, so I saved the lids of the boxes. Thus, the next day's English class featured Pizza Box Board Games. It took my teaching partner and me 45 minutes to design and draw five different board games on these pizza box lids. The games were based on speaking and critical-thinking tasks. For eight minutes, groups

of four or five learners played different games by taking turns, rolling dice, and moving their game pieces while speaking. Then we rotated game boards so that each group had an opportunity to play all five games. This resulted in more than 40 minutes of non-stop, student-centered English language involvement.

Now I always have four or five board games sticking out of my teacher's bag and ready to go. Even on recent trips to Yemen and India, I packed pizza boxes. Why not? They are light, durable, flattish, and easily fit into my suitcase. Half a dozen blank lids allow me to design new games, right before class, according to the interest and level of learners I encounter.

Once students get the hang of playing board games, they will have fun creating their own. Just hand them a blank box and colored markers. Pizza lids make great canvases for student-designed advertisements, posters, or sequential art or comic strips.

Of course, all sorts of cardboard boxes will work, including stiff paper that you dig out of the recycle bin. I use cereal boxes, drink cartons—anything I find, really. It's just that pizza is a worldwide commodity, and building a collection of boxes is easy. Keep your eyes open, or make friends with a delivery guy.

Tool 5: Dice

It's clear that I love getting students to play board games. To do that, I need dice. But dice can do so much more. With them you can create dozens—actually *hundreds*— of activities on the spot.

As a springboard for speaking or writing, for instance, you can present innumerable patterns on the board. Let's use the following paradigm for building sentences with the modal auxiliary *can* to show ability.

I — ghosts
dogs — my father
birds — presidents

Students in groups take turns rolling the dice. If a student rolls 4, he makes a "can" sentence with the word *ghosts*, such as "Ghosts

can walk through walls." If he rolls a six: "Presidents can do almost anything they want!" During the course of the activity, the teacher can—and should—erase and replace words every minute or so, changing, for example, *ghosts* to *rich people*, *presidents* to *fish*, and so on.

It is easy to see how this model can be used to write or talk about many subjects and to focus on different grammatical structures. In the following task, students talk about their own experiences, answering according to this model:

I have been…

I haven't been…

on holiday this year — in a courthouse in my life
on a picnic this week — on a ship in my life
in a bank today — to a country beginning with the letter M in my life

Students are encouraged to elaborate on their experiences wherever possible. Examples: "I haven't been to the bank today. But I went on Tuesday." "I have been to two countries that begin with the letter M: Moldova and Malta." These tasks last just five minutes or so, but the focus of practice is entirely on the learners.

With two or more dice per group or dice of different colors, you can make more advanced tasks. I always carry about ten dice in my bag: 6-sided, 10-sided, and 20-sided. They allow for a lot of invention. You can learn how to make your own dice from paper or cardboard at www.teach2theplanet.com/diceweb.html.

Tool 6: Colored markers

Markers may be just glorified pens, but it's worth calling attention to them because they are cheap enough to provide in bulk, and that's how they are most useful. I always carry about 100 markers in my teaching bag. With enough of them, you can plop down a handful on each desk or for each group of students. Having a selection of colors makes writing and artistic tasks more fun. Students can use markers to make decorative nametags,

posters, board games, birthday cards, or dice games based on the models that we saw above.

With nothing more than markers, papers, and creative planning, students can combine art and language in comic strips or sequential art. The finished pieces, which can be posted in a gallery or archived, can help offset a fundamental deficiency in many schools—the lack of current materials (Fay 2007).

Tool 7: Sticky putty

This clay-like adhesive sticks things together such as papers to walls, windows, or desks. You might know it by a trade name such as Blue-Tack, Sticky Tack, or Poster Putty. Although it is not the most glamorous or fun teaching tool, I still carry it with me all the time because I like students to engage in art and writing—sequential art, posters, illustrated poems, etc.—and I like to instantly create a gallery for the finished pieces.

With putty, I can post these creations on walls or windows seconds after they are finished. You could use cellophane tape for this too—it's a worthwhile substitute. But putty is always in my bag because it won't tear paper, discolor walls, or damage wallpaper. And it can be recycled, used again and again. My teaching bag currently has some putty from a package I opened eight months ago.

It is amazing the number of other ways a little sticky putty has helped in the past: to hold all those colored markers onto slanted desks, to post labels for learning areas within the classroom, to stick nametags to desks, or to hold down papers or posters when the air conditioning blows too hard or the windows are open.

Tool 8: Modeling clay

My main use of modeling clay is really simple: I use balls of different colors to function as tokens or game pieces. These I distribute to students, along with dice, when they play board games (which they do often).

Brave teachers can use clay—even in small amounts—for shaping and molding tasks. I say "brave" teachers because many will think, "I can't use clay in my class. I have 50 students." But you don't need a truckload of molding clay. Don't think Michelangelo or Rodin. Think mini. Balls the size of a fingernail can be shaped into basic forms: a smile, a

ball, a square, a hat. Ashworth and Wakefield (2004) remind us to capitalize on the skills young learners may already have, and one of these may indeed be modeling in clay.

Try a "dic-*clay*-tion," like a dictation, except instead of writing the word for the object that you say aloud (e.g., *house, glass, face, dog*) students are allowed 30 seconds (use your timer!) to mold a clay representation of the word. Perhaps this interaction with the object will help in retaining vocabulary; even if not, it's fun for a change of pace. With young learners, we sometimes forget to appeal to those skills they already have, even though focusing on those skills will encourage success.

More advanced learners and adults can do group projects with clay—for instance, they can make a basic schematic of their home or hometown or a topographical map of an island, while pointing out and explaining the various parts.

And who says—if indeed you have 50 students—that all of them need clay at the same time? One group of students may work on a clay project while another plays dice games and yet another makes posters with colored pens—and these sessions may be timed with your stopwatch and then rotated at the sound of your bell.

If you don't have modeling clay, here is a recipe to make some: Mix 3 parts flour, 1 cup salt, and 1 cup water; add food coloring; store in your refrigerator. A little oil will give it a smooth texture. Add lots of salt if you think young learners might be tempted to eat the clay. Another recipe is available at www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Make-Playdough-Play-doh.

Tool 9: Playing cards

Playing cards can be adapted for hundreds of efficient language learning games. However, their biggest value in the classroom, for me, is in forming groups. Cards can divide learners neatly into pairs, groups, or a number of other student formations.

You can deal out cards by color (red and black) to divide the class at random into two big teams. Or use suits (hearts, spades, diamonds, clubs) for groups. Deal out 20 pairs and your students will need to find their partners: red jack finds the other red jack, black 10 finds the other black 10, and so on.

Bournhonesque (2008) describes how the randomization of groups through the use of playing cards and mathematical set theory can reduce cliques, put to rest doubts about fairness, and alleviate some cultural barriers concerning mixing.

Table 1 shows a short, simple, action-packed way to work with vocabulary. This example, based on adjectives to describe personalities, is for more advanced groups. Choose 13 words or phrases and write a list so that each vocabulary item corresponds to a card in the deck. Put the deck in the middle of a desk. One card is turned over at a time. The first player to say (usually *shout* in this game) the corresponding word collects that card. The player with the most cards at the end of the game is the winner.

grumpy	ace
generous	2
stingy	3
eccentric	4
wild	5
lovable	6
wise	7
lazy	8
diligent	9
smart	10
moody	jack
energetic	king
trustworthy	queen

Table 1: Vocabulary card game

Tool 10: Javvy

Javvy (pronounced HAH-vee) is a small gray stuffed animal. He is my friend, and he comes with me everywhere. He has several roles and functions in the classroom. He likes to be tossed from student to student, designating who gets to speak (in the same way many teachers use a ball). He helps present new language, illustrating verbs like *flip, rotate,* or *pounce*. Students can address letters to him and post them in his personal mailbox. During activities and group work, Javvy likes to circulate with me and make comments, and these comments are always different from what I would say. So in essence, he is an extra native speaker. Teaching would be much less fun for me without Javvy's help and support.

Though Javvy speaks to students, puppets or stuffed animals can work especially well when they are silent. Or, more precisely, when they only speak to you, the teacher. Mary Slattery, author of *Teaching with Bear* (2008), says, "Bear doesn't speak. He listens, shows interest, understands and responds… He can also whisper to the teacher…. And since Bear never responds unless he's spoken to in English either by the children or by the teacher it creates a very motivating situation!"

You don't need a bear or Javvy; you can use any stuffed animal or soft toy. (See www.daniellesplace.com/HTML/puppets.html to learn how to make sock or bag puppets of your own.)

Conclusion

The ten tools I have described reflect my own teaching style. Perhaps some teachers won't want to stock up on pizza boxes or carry clay balls in a plastic peanut butter jar, as I do. We all have different teaching styles and learning climates. Playing cards and dice may be frowned upon in your culture. During a training session once, teachers told me that the bicycle horn I was honking to get groups to move from one learning station to another would not be popular with administrators at their school. That may be so.

Teachers need to adapt. But the point is that there are hundreds of great, inexpensive tools to make our jobs easier and our classes more efficient. I haven't even mentioned mini-whiteboards, paper clips, magnets, beads, beans, or popsicle sticks.

When we can apply these toys and tools to fit our own teaching needs, according to sound principles of classroom management and language learning, we promote variety. Our students will be grateful for that, and at the same time, we will make our teaching lives a little more fun, and a little easier.

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