

Let's get physical: Focus on focus

As part of the first IP&SEN SIG PCE I had the pleasure of giving a workshop on how to use yoga, brain breaks and autogenic training in teaching EFL. I have used these techniques successfully with young learners, teenagers and older students, carefully matching the most appropriate technique to the group I was working with. Most important when choosing an activity is to keep the group of learners in mind:

Will they enjoy it?

Would they like to take part in it?

Another important consideration is the amount of space needed – the more physical the activity the larger the space requirement. Sometimes it needs a bit of trial and error, and feedback from the learners is the key in selecting the right activity. A lot depends on the atmosphere and the rapport you have with your class. And, as with all teaching and learning, it is important that you as the teacher enjoy what you are doing as that spark helps to get your learners enthused.

But why should we incorporate these activities and techniques into our lessons?

Most learners have at one time or other problems to concentrate on a task or get the focus right. The brain disconnects from the task, and daydreaming starts. This being true for all learners it is even a bigger issue for learners with specific learning differences (SpLD). Learners who have, for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD or are on the autism spectrum have one thing in common - their concentration span and the ability to focus on a task they are not interested in are both even lower than of those learners without SpLD.

Maintaining focus is imperative to learning, so how can we help learners especially with SpLD to become more focused and learn in a relaxed atmosphere, so they can realise and reach their potential.

And what does that look like in practice?

Let's look at one of the yoga exercises which I have chosen as it can be done while the learners stay in their seats. This way can even be done if there is no space for moving around. I have combined the cat and the cow pose.

- Sit at the front of your chair, feet on the ground, put your hands on your knees, look down and let your chin touch your chest, bend your back and stretch it.
- Breathe in and out three times.
- Then go back into an upright position, hands on your thighs, straighten your back, lift your head and look up.
- While stretching your back, breathe in three times.
- This can be repeated three times as part of one, continuous exercise.

There's a lot to be found on brain breaks on the internet. Some more ideas for yoga exercises for young learners in the classroom can be found under:

<http://www.kidsyogastories.com/chair-yoga-poses/>

What other techniques can be used to improve focus?

Autogenic training is another technique for focussing on relaxation and calming down, and to get the learners to regain focus.

It was developed in the late 1920s by the German psychiatrist Johannes H. Schultz who published 'Autogenic Therapy' in 1932. It is based on the idea of self-hypnosis and used to release stress and to reach an all round well being, but it can also be used to improve concentration.

How it can be used in an adapted form in the EFL classroom?

- The first, very important part is to breathe in deeply and slowly at least three times with your eyes closed and to feel where your breath goes.
- This can then be extended to sending your breath into different parts of your body.

Guide your students by using a calm and rather low pitched voice to give the instructions which are repeated in the same way several times:

- Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly. Feel your breath, feel how it goes into your belly. Breathe out.
- Feel your right arm. Your right arm is getting heavy, very heavy.
- Feel your left arm. Your left arm is getting heavy, very heavy.
- Feel your right leg. Your right leg is getting very heavy.
- Feel your left leg. Your left leg is getting very heavy.
- Imagine the sun is shining on your belly. It feels warm and nice.
- A soft wind is cooling your head. Your head is cool and calm.
- Breathe in and out. Count down from 5-0 and open your eyes. 5,4,3,...

The important thing here is that this needs repetition some learners need more time to relax, and need more training. Some will relax very easily, but in all the groups I have tried this out with there was an immediate effect:

The learners calmed down and most of them were ready again to focus on a task. As previously mentioned, some learners need more time but it is at least worth a try and it needn't take much longer than 5 minutes though this can be extended into dream stories, which is another topic ...