

# Attention, everyone!

## Or: how to teach a much better lesson to teenagers.

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Grzegorz Śpiewak

With summer holidays irrevocably over, we all face yet another thirty or so weeks in front of our teenage classes. That's over 60 lessons, give or take. The reader may well be wondering about the use of the singular in the second line of the title above: should it really be about how to teach a *single* good lesson rather than a whole programme? But this is exactly my point in this article, and a piece of professional advice at the outset of the new school year: stop worrying about long-term planning and focus instead on what it is that makes a single lesson work – or flop. If you can get it right at a single-lesson level, chances are the whole year will go right, too.

And as for that single good lesson, one trick that I want to share with you is that it is in fact ... too long a stretch of time for anyone to pay attention throughout. Hence the first line of my title. And yes, I do mean attention rather than motivation. After years of research, motivation – particularly when it comes to a whole group of individuals – remains highly elusive. Just about the only thing we can be sure of is that it is unstable and as such relatively difficult to manage. In contrast, recent research into attention yields results that, once properly interpreted and applied to everyday teaching practice, can arguably do wonders for the teacher as well as her seemingly uncooperative teenage students. Intrigued? Read on and see why.

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### Attention analysed

The research into human attention patterns that I am referring to is beautifully summarized by John Medina in his *Brain rules* (Pear Press 2008). Among his twelve *rules* ("principles for surviving and thriving at work, home, and school") comes rule no.4 which, as we will see shortly, has profound implications for every lesson we teach. To put it very simply, the rule states that we have *no more than ten minutes* to keep anyone's attention. And that's quite independent of the quality of what we have to offer; human brain – whether infant, teenage or adult – is relatively attentive at the beginning but then loses interest within the next few minutes. Attention decreases steadily until



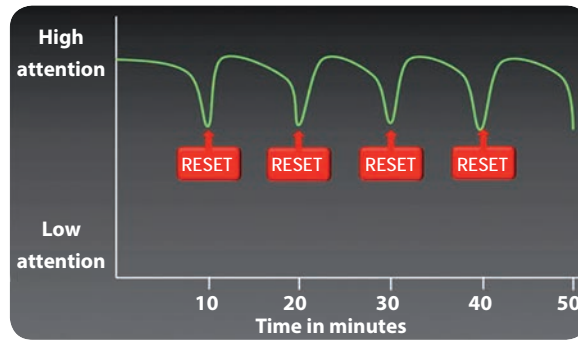
it plunges to its bottom level after about 10 minutes. And then? Crucially for us as teachers, it remains at this depressingly low level for the next thirty or so minutes – i.e. pretty much till the end of any 45-minute lesson! The graph below, adapted from Medina, illustrates this all too well:



Doesn't this remind you of a lot of lessons which you had spent a lot of time and effort planning carefully, and which somehow failed to take off...? In view of Medina's research, it is neither your fault nor a symptom of your students being uncooperative or unappreciative. Rather, it is an evolutionary phenomenon, one aspect of the biology of our brains, and as such part of us *all* being human. Attention is naturally at its highest for the first few minutes, but, sadly, they are typically spent in an average classroom on various administrative duties, including checking attendance, organizing class equipment, making sure everyone has got their books open on the appropriate page, and/or (at best) on checking homework. Even more sadly, it looks like most of us begin to teach almost exactly when our students' attention has already decreased dramatically... The careful reader has no doubt noticed a slight natural recovery of attention towards the end of the 50-minute period. That's when we typically negotiate homework, upcoming tests – in other words, *no longer teaching*... At this point we could easily throw up our hands in despair, seeing brain biology as a factor working fundamentally against our best pedagogical efforts. But I haven't yet given you my best news: attention patterns can in fact be modified to our advantage.

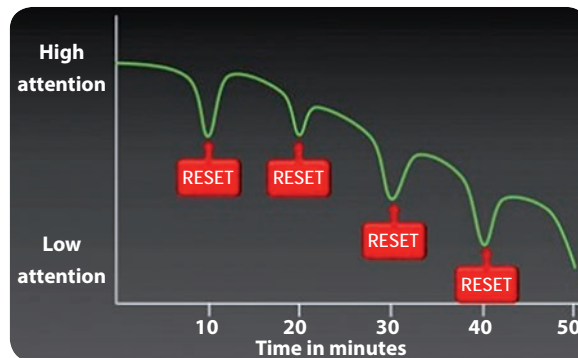
**Attention recycling**

As we have seen above, a 45-minute chunk is simply too long a period for human brain to stay attentive throughout. Unless we do something about it, attention level will drop after the first few minutes and will not recover for a long time, perhaps not till the end-of-lesson bell rings. Medina's solution is beautiful in its simplicity:



To counterbalance the natural cline of attention, we need to 'hit' when we know it is most likely very low, i.e. **about every ten minutes**. Medina calls this "resetting" attention, which amounts to jerking our students' brains back to activity. Olivia Mitchell argues that this applies to any type of human audience: 'Although our attention span is limited, we do have the ability to refocus on a task. When you push the Attention Reset Button you're giving your audience that opportunity to refocus.' ("What to do when you are losing your audience")

So, in order to have the biology of attention work to our favour, we need to [a] be smart about how we break down the 45-min period and [b] have a good, working strategy for how to re-attract attention and mental energy about every 10 minutes. In other words, the template for a great lesson – no matter what its overall content is – needs to include between 3 and 4 short attention-resetting activities. Are you thinking: *but what am I supposed to do to achieve this?!* The answer is quite straightforward: use them to do language recycling! If you do it right, i.e. in short bits about every 10 minutes, you will kill two birds with one stone: language revision and attention resetting. Just one word of warning, after Medina of course: those attention resets cannot themselves be monotonous lest their beneficial effect will wear off rather quickly:



Are you now thinking: *that's a lot of extra demands for my normal lesson plan!* Well, you do need a large

1 [www.speakingaboutpresenting.com](http://www.speakingaboutpresenting.com), last accessed on Aug 16 2013



number of **short, varied, fun revision activities**. But this is the best part of what I have for you in this article, at the beginning of the new school year: a selection of ready-made language recycling activities, based exclusively on a good coursebook. They are all meant to be short, no more than 5-6 minutes each. And, importantly, they are **absolutely preparation-free!** All you need is to choose a (section of) a page that you have crucially already covered with your students fairly recently, say within the last 2 weeks. None of the activities below is intended to introduce any new language material. Rather, they revisit and reactivate familiar vocabulary and structures. Note that, when choosing sample coursebook materials to illustrate the activity types below, I was very careful to draw on a *single unit* of *Interface 2*, in an attempt to persuade you that virtually any unit is a treasure trove of potential attention-resetting revision activities.

### Wacky categories

**Materials needed:** a fragment (c. 20 words) of any word list studied already earlier on in the year. No need to photocopy anything – just refer your students to the relevant page in their course book and tell them which section of the word list they should be looking at.

## Wordlist

### PODRÓŻOWANIE I TURYSTYKA – środki transportu, wycieczki

	arrive (v)	/ə'reɪv/	przyjeżdżać, przybywać
	drive (v)	/draɪv/	prowadzić (pojazd)
	driver (n)	/ˈdraɪvə(r)/	kierowca
	fly (v)	/flaɪ/	latać
	go (v)	/gəʊ/	chodzić, jeździć
	hot-air balloon (n)	/hɒt 'eə(r) ,bælu:n/	balon
	land (v)	/lənd/	lądować
	leave (v)	/li:v/	opuszczać, wyjeżdżać
	navigate (v)	/ˈnævɪgeɪt/	nawigować
	navigator (n)	/ˈnævɪgeɪtə(r)/	nawigator
	ride (v)	/raɪd/	jeździć
	sail (v)	/seɪl/	żeglować
	ship (n)	/ʃɪp/	statek
	take off (v)	/ˌteɪk 'ɒf/	startować (o samolocie)
	transport (n, v)	/ˈtræns'pɔ:(r)t/	transport; transportować
	travel (n, v)	/ˈtræv(ə)/	podróż; podróżować

### SPORT – sport wyczynowy

descent (n)	/dɪ'sent/	zejście, schodzenie
expedition (n)	/ˌɛkspə'dɪʃ(ə)n/	wyprawa
mountain guide (n)	/ˈmaʊntɪn ,ɡaɪd/	przewodnik górski
mountaineer (n)	/ˈmaʊntɪ'niə(r)/	alpinista
oxygen (n)	/ˈɒksɪdʒ(ə)n/	tlen
reach (v)	/ri:tʃ/	sięgać, docierać do
top (n)	/tɒp/	szczyt

Source: *Interface 2 Student's Book*, p.46, Macmillan Education 2012.

**Procedure:** ① Before they start looking at the word list, ask them to come up with three examples of a category that you select. The category could be just about anything: famous people, exotic holiday destinations, colours, landmarks in your town etc. The stranger the category (and students' examples of it, the better for the purpose of this activity).

Example 1: household objects (fridge, dustbin, suitcase)

Example 2: strange jobs (leech collector, cat hair stylist, dog psychiatrist)

② Once they have given their 3 examples (can be the same for the whole class or different for each group of students), ask them to look at the words in the word list and assign them to the three people, places, things or ideas that they have come up with. Get the stronger students to also think of the reason for their choice ...

Important notice: this is not about the category being related in meaning to a particular word list! In fact, the less obvious the connection, the better.

**Rationale:** Recent brain research and studies of memory suggest that it is highly beneficial for long-term retention of a group of items to classify them somehow – *anyhow*, in fact! The very act of classifying constitutes mental effort that helps memorize the items ☺



### Express dictation

**Materials needed:** a fragment of a *familiar* text that you studied in class. Required length: about 30-40 words. No need to photocopy anything or even prepare the activity in advance of the class – your coursebook is full of short texts which are waiting to be ‘recycled’ for the purpose of this activity.

Complete the text with the correct form of the verbs in brackets. Use the past simple affirmative.

#### The history of the potato

Europeans first *discovered* (discover) potatoes in Chile. Sailors (1) ... (take) the potatoes on their ships. They (2) ... (eat) them as they (3) ... (sail) across the ocean. They (4) ... (leave) the potatoes in Ireland. Then potatoes (5) ... (become) very popular in the rest of Europe.



Source: *Interface 2 Student's Book*, p.36, Macmillan Education 2012.

- Procedure:**
- 1 Ask your students to close their books and get their notebooks ready.
  - 2 Tell them that they are going to hear a short text that they already know – remind them what it is and when they studied it with you. Their task is to listen and try to remember as much as they can. Absolutely no note taking is allowed!
  - 3 Dictate the extract you have chosen once only. At normal speed. No mercy!
  - 4 As soon as you finish reading out the extract, ask them to write it in their notebooks. Books must remain closed while they are doing this. They are working *on their own* – absolutely no looking over their neighbour's shoulder.

- 5 When they finish, either ask them to compare their notes with a partner or – if you want to make it quick, let them compare what they've written on their own with the original text in their course book.

**Rationale:** This is a variation on the familiar dictogloss technique. It is crucial that students hear the extract only once at normal speed as this will inevitably produce gaps when they attempt to write it up from memory. And the best part is that each student will have a (slightly) different version of the text! Call it spontaneously produced, genuine information gaps 😊 Which is why dictogloss activities work so well as pairwork, or even groupwork. But then the (gradual) reconstruction will take considerably longer. In the version I suggest here it is reasonable to use the activity as a short attention-resetter.

### Lexical chunks chase

**Materials needed:** Any previously studied vocabulary activity that features a small collection of words, in a box, column or otherwise. As before, absolutely no need for you to photocopy anything, just refer your students to the relevant page in their course book.

**Write the past simple form of the verbs in the box. Check your answers on page 154.**

find   leave   sell   take   eat   become

Source: *Interface 2 Student's Book*, p.36, Macmillan Education 2012.

- Procedure:**
- 1 Ask your students to look at a given selection of words.
  - 2 They need to work in pairs and come up with one phrase or collocation involving each of the words.
  - 3 Run it as a race where the pair that finishes first wins (and gets a plus or some other bonus).

Alternatively, give them a short amount of time, e.g. 3 minutes and ask them

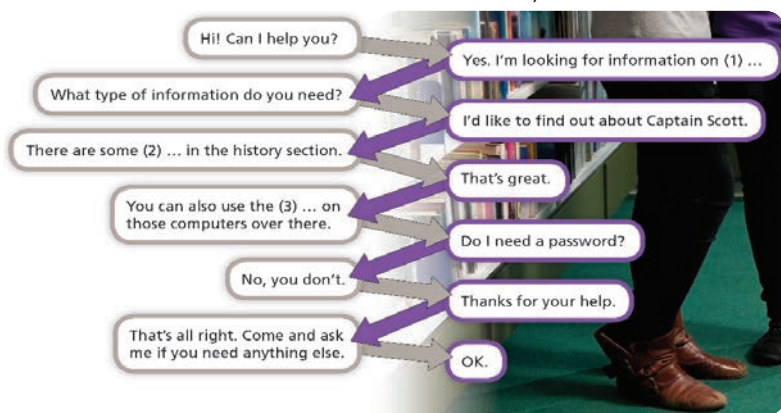


in pairs or groups of three to write as many different collocations or phrases for each of the items as they can. Stop after 3 minutes sharp, get them to count up their word combinations. The pair/group that claims they have got the most reads them out for the other students to check. Or if you want to save time, simply collect the phrases and check them yourself while they get on with another activity. You can announce the winner(s) at the end of the lesson.

**Rationale:** This is quite a self-explanatory activity so let me just point out that its chief value is the fact that it is completely preparation-free on your part, is fun, competitive and with no completely predictable result. In sum, a 100% winner, even with a relatively passive class 😊

### Dialogue de-construction

**Materials needed:** Any dialogue that students studied fairly recently. Preferably, it should be nicely laid out, like this one:



Source: *Interface 2 Student's Book*, p.38, Macmillan Education 2012.

**Procedure:** Students work in pairs, each one on one half of the dialogue. Their task is simply to copy their half of the dialogue into their notebooks and ...

**variation ①:** remove ALL grammatical words in the process. Then they close their books, swap their 'degrammatized'

dialogue halves, and try to reproduce the original dialogue *in speaking*, using the content words as scaffolding.

**variation ②:** scramble each of their lines in such a way that no two words remain in a grammatically possible sequence! Then they swap their halves (books closed of course) and the other student attempts to reproduce the original lines.

**variation ③:** remove every third word, leaving a gap. (With stronger students or when you repeat this activity on a different occasion, you can ask them NOT to mark the gaps – considerably more difficult!). Of course they need to swap their halves, keeping the books closed. And, as in variation 1, they attempt to reproduce the original lines *orally*.

**Rationale:** A great excuse to revisit a piece of spoken text that they originally studied for a different purpose. And, needless to add, a fantastic, fun, suspense-based attention-resetter 😊

### Summary:

All the activities outlined below have one underlying purpose: they are to act as pace-changers and attention-reset moments *to complement your main lesson sequence*. They are NOT a complete lesson plan as they stand. I do hope that they will give you enough to go on for the first few weeks at least, particularly with the variations that I have suggested. Once you discover the attention-resetting power of your coursebook, I am sure lots of other activity ideas will spring back to your memory as suitable for the purpose of this **vigorous, punctual, systematic recycling**. Not only as unquestionably beneficial revision of language content but, in equal measure, as reactivating students' attention about every 10 minutes and thus giving them a much better opportunity to benefit from the new language content which happens to be the objective of your main lesson plan. And, as I said at the outset, if you can get it right at a single-lesson level, chances are the whole year will go right, too. Good luck!