Evidence-based teaching:
Ideas to apply in the classroom

What is evidence-based teaching?

Evidence-based teaching refers to teaching strategies that are derived from or informed by objective evidence such as educational research and performance metrics.

Adopting evidence-based teaching strategies has shown noticeable 'effect size' improvements in students' performance. The bigger the effect size the greater the improvements in performance.

This resource offers ideas for evidence-based teaching activities that create the highest effect size. For more information about this useful area, read research by John Hattie and other evidence-based teaching practitioners.
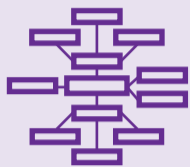
Graphical Representations

Graphical representations are a very effective way of improving teaching and learning. Research shows that using graphical representations can improve the rate of learning by over 50%, which can equate to more than a two-grade improvement in performance.

The key to getting the most out of graphical representations is to not just give students a graphical representation they can refer to, but to get them to produce their own. The act of making a graphical representation helps students process information in different ways, making learning 'deeper'.

TRY IT

Ask students to produce their own mind maps of a lexical set they have studied, using only visuals of the words. Then on the back, or on a different piece of paper, ask them to write the words in the same position as their visual equivalent.

Students can use these mind maps as a way to revise vocabulary. When they can name all the visuals on their mind map, the students are ready to move on to the next lexical set.

Creating pie charts and graphs is also a great way for students to learn and remember information.

Note-making

While note-taking (writing what someone says) is generally a passive process, note-making is an active skill where you assimilate information and draw out key points, for example when making notes from an academic text. Effective note-making has been shown to contribute to an increase in student performance by up to two grades.

Teachers should not assume that all their students can make clear, concise notes. Not all students are taught how to do this in their first language so some may find note-making difficult in a second language.

TRY IT

First, it's a good idea to teach students some tips on note-making, for example, commonly used abbreviations such as three dots ∴ for 'therefore' or the same three dots upside down ∵ for 'because'.

Once students have been taught some of the key note-making skills, provide them with an opportunity to practise them. The 'cheat sheet' is one way to do this. Before a test, give students a sheet of paper and allow them two minutes to make notes on the areas that are going to be tested. Tell students they will be allowed to use this during the test. After two minutes, students should close all books and then start the test with the help of their cheat sheet.

Feedback

Good, clear feedback not only helps students know what they specifically need to work on but it can also act as an effective motivational tool. If you invest the time, you should see improvements in students' work and their attitude to study – the latter can be particularly important when teaching young students.

Feedback should include comments not just on the areas to improve but also on the areas in which the student has done well.

Rather than teachers telling their students exactly what they need to do, they could also encourage students to reflect on their own work. This can help raise awareness about the quality of their work.

TRY IT

One really effective way of giving feedback is to use questions. This is sometimes known as 'dialogic feedback', as the teacher and student enter into a dialogue about the work.

When the student submits a piece of written work, the teacher does not correct or make any changes to it. Instead, they write questions for the student to reflect on, for example:

▶ How well does the title attract the reader's attention?
▶ How well does the introduction tell the reader what is going to be covered?

The student answers the questions and makes any changes they feel are necessary based on the questions they were asked.

Review

It is important to regularly review language skills as this will help students to retain what was covered in the lesson and encourage 'deeper' learning. Not reviewing learning on a regular basis will mean it's forgotten more quickly.

Reviews can take place at the end of a lesson or lesson stage, or they can be at the beginning of a lesson, revising what was learnt in a previous lesson. It helps students even more if you link learning from one lesson to another, building connections between learning.

TRY IT

One way to review language is to use a one-minute paper. An example of this is to ask students to close their books and make as many notes as they can about the lesson in one minute. While they're doing this, monitor and check that students have understood everything correctly. After a minute, ask two or three students to use their notes to tell the class what they remember from the lesson.

A variation of this is to ask more personalised questions, for example:

▶ What did you enjoy most about the lesson?
▶ What did you find most difficult about the lesson?
▶ What would you like to do in the next lesson?

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Peer Assessment

Peer assessment can improve the performance of students by a whole grade. It also promotes higher order cognitive skills, as students are required to analyse and evaluate each other's work.

The key to peer assessment is giving a clear task and not asking students to assess too much. Keep tasks focused by asking them to correct just one area, for example for written work, spelling or the use of cohesive devices, or for presentations, eye contact or use of questioning an audience.

TRY IT

Before a writing task, let students know their work will be read by a peer. After they have completed the task, give out little pink and yellow pieces of paper (or other colours). On the pink paper they should write points they like about the student's writing. On the yellow paper they should write an area the student could improve on. There should only be one point on each piece of paper.

You can structure the amount of feedback and make it more positive by giving more pink than yellow pieces of paper. Seeing more positive comments than areas for improvement should help inspire confidence.

Co-operative Learning

Encouraging students to work together is an effective way to consolidate learning. Providing students with opportunities to discuss what they have learnt also allows the teacher to identify any misunderstandings and check that students have remembered the key points.

Significant improvements in grade have been seen in classes where teachers have incorporated lots of pair and group work in lessons. Opportunities to discuss the language and experiment with it in authentic contexts can be much more effective than getting students to do controlled practice exercises.

TRY IT

The two-part quiz: In groups, ask students to come up with questions based on the lesson. They should do this without looking at their lesson notes. Encourage them to come up with questions that will challenge their peers. Monitor and make sure groups have not written the same questions.

Make a note of the best questions – ideally one or two from each group. Then, read these out, getting the students to answer the questions in their groups. Keeping group scores can turn this into a fun and engaging activity.

For the second part, tell students to write one or two more questions for homework. This time they can refer to their class notes.

Problem Solving

For successful 'deep learning' to take place, the teacher needs to provide students with a task that is interesting, requires students to interact with each other and that builds on previous learning.

Deep learning promotes higher order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and creation (see Bloom's Taxonomy for more information). As a result, it makes the learning more memorable and improves students' performance in tests.

Although tasks to promote deep learning can be done with students of all levels, they tend to work better with those at higher levels as they have more language with which to discuss the problems that have been posed.

TRY IT

Instead of telling students rules, why not give them some sentences to analyse and ask for the reasons that certain structures are used? These types of activities are known as consciousness-raising activities, and they are excellent at promoting deep learning.

When working with conditional structures, you could give students examples of the different conditionals and ask them questions like 'When the speaker is talking about the present, do they use *will* or *would*?'

With present perfect sentences, you could ask students to identify key words used with the present perfect, for example, *yet*, *already*, *since*, *for* and *just*. You could also include some sentences with the past simple and get students to do a contrastive analysis.

Interactive Learning and Teaching

Some students are used to having teachers and books as their only sources of information, encouraging passive roles in the classroom.

In order to make learning effective, teachers must make the experience more interactive and engaging. They shouldn't see students as empty buckets in need of filling, but as sources of explanations and definitions different to their own. The sharing of such knowledge can make understanding clearer for students, and, more importantly, can help consolidate that of the student sharing it.

TRY IT

Peer-teaching: Ask each student to identify a language area they know well. Then, sit four student 'experts' on separate tables at the front of the classroom, with the other students rotating between them. As each expert explains their area of expertise, the other students should make notes under the following headings:

- What I learnt
- What I liked about the way I was taught
- What could be improved

The first columns should have positive comments. The last column should have comments about points that might not be correct or could have been explained more clearly, without being too harsh.

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