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## **What's a Cake without the Icing?**

### **[Social Psychology and ELT – The importance of Endings]**

Never mind the icing for the moment, just think about the cake – or the pudding or whatever the dessert happens to be. Have you ever wondered why it comes at the end of the meal? Why should we not start with the chocolate soufflé and finish with the salad? But that would be an anti-climax, wouldn't it? As Ariely points out endings are disproportionately important when we evaluate the overall experience (Ariely 2010). Smart guys know this and a romantic dinner is never without dessert!

**From the dinner table to the dentist's chair:** Picture the scene: you are at the dentist's and he has been torturing you for the past hour or so. Then he puts away his drill and says: 'Ok, we are done now, but if you want – as a favour to you – I could top you off with some mild pain...' ☺ This is how the brilliant Paul Bloom introduces a fascinating discovery by Daniel Kahneman (Bloom, Lecture 20 – 39:00)

In an experiment conducted by the latter, subjects were paid to keep their hands in icy cold water. In the first stage one hand was immersed and held there for 60 seconds. In the second stage the process was repeated with the other hand, but this time the hand was kept there for an extra 30 seconds. During these 30 seconds the temperature rose gradually so that the water turned from totally freezing to (just) bitterly cold. Then the subjects were asked which of the two experiences they would prefer to repeat for a third session. So – what would you choose? Excruciating pain for a minute or the same thing plus an extra 30 seconds of less intense pain?!? It looks like a no-brainer, doesn't it? Incredibly however, the vast majority of the subjects chose the latter option!! (Burnham & Phelan 2000)

Why does this happen? The answer is that nature works with imperfect mechanisms. It is simply too much for our brain to remember each and every aspect of what has happened. Instead, it is far more economical to focus on the ‘peaks’ of experiences and on how they end! (Nettle 2005) Remember Ariely? Endings matter! *The way something ends colours our perception of the entire experience!*

**Applications in the field of ELT:** It is incredible how big a difference an awareness of this fact can make to our lessons. Here are some practical tips:

***Avoid setting H/W at the end:*** For starters, H/W is too important to be left at the end when ss may be too busy packing their bags. You want to make sure they have understood what they have to do and perhaps clarify any points they may be uncertain of. More importantly however, H/W has negative associations (Painter 2004) and it would be unwise for us to allow this to influence the way they recall the entire lesson!

***Do not exceed the time limits:*** Unlike many of us, our ss actually do have a life! ☺ Even the most motivated of them have things to do after class and many times they resent being kept for longer than they expect (Lewis & Hill 1995). You may be thinking you give them better value for their money, but this is not how they see it. Finishing a lot earlier does not cut it either, as ss often feel short-changed. In my experience it is best to finish 2-3 minutes ‘before the bell goes off’ – then ss feel relaxed and they can ‘savour the aftertaste’ of your lesson better!

***Save a flexible activity for the end:*** Time and again I have caught myself starting a 20-min task 10 min before the end of the lesson. This is asking for trouble (see previous point). Alas however, we often do not know how long an activity will take! Therefore it is best to save a flexible activity for the end – one which you can cut short (or extend!), such as a quiz for instance! Even if you had planned to ask your class 40 questions for instance, you can always cut the number down to 20.

***Summarise:*** Finishing by going through the main stages of the lessons (together with the rationale!) gives the lesson a sense of purpose and structure. It is true that the lesson is a dynamic reality in which a T will often stray from the original plan. Nevertheless, a good lesson always has some coherence and deviations are often dictated by sound pedagogical reasons. Make sure your ss can see that (Harmer 2007). Remember – what is obvious to you, may not be obvious to them!

**Avoid ‘fading out’:** Having given an excellent lesson, many colleagues ‘run out of steam’ at the end, as in ‘Well, I hope you’ve learned something today – see you again on Wednesday’. But if the lesson was truly brilliant, this limp way of ending is disastrous! Why this is so can better be seen in presentations; speakers who end like this fail to even get an applause sometimes! The moral here is: You cannot afford to relax - even a ‘won’ game can still be ‘lost’!

**End with a bang!:** Having recapitulated, you can then give your ss a little treat (Dornyei 2001). This can be a short, fast quiz (if they like games) or a short poem, or a memorable anecdote or a quotation that will set them thinking or a song. For me, humour is the perfect dessert! You can tell your ss a joke, show them a funny video clip or even a funny commercial related to the lesson. The possibilities are endless – and it is worth it! If they are talking about it as they are leaving the room, you have won!

**Away from ELT – Guys take heed!:** Naturally, the more highly evolved of the two human subspecies (women! ☺) have known about the importance of endings all along. In a memorable scene from ‘Friends’, Chandler expresses male frustration over the female desire for (post-coital) ‘afterplay’: ‘For guys’ he says, ‘foreplay is like the comedian before the main show; once the show is over they want to leave but the women want to see the comedian again!’ Then Rachel comes up with the inimitable: ‘Guys – all I can tell you is this: you’d better bring the comedian back or you’ll be watching the show by yourselves!’ ☺

## References

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