

Third Edition

A Course in English Language Teaching

Penny Ur

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A Course in English Language Teaching

Third Edition

Penny Ur

Consultant and editor:
Scott Thornbury





Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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Penny Ur

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Key: C = Chapter.

Text

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Introduction

The first edition of this book, entitled *A Course in Language Teaching*, was published in 1991. It has since been replaced by *A Course in English Language Teaching* in the 2012 second edition. This edition includes much of the content of the previous one, but has been thoroughly rewritten and updated, taking into account recent research and thinking in the field and developments in digital technology, as well as changes in my own thinking.

At the same time, the same basic rationale underlying the first two editions: that good teaching is that which results in significant learning outcomes. A good teacher is not simply someone who is charismatic, or memorable, or loved, or who uses the latest teaching methods. A good teacher is defined first and foremost by results: first, how well their students learn the subject being taught, and second, how motivated they are to learn and continue learning.

The main criterion for my choice of methods or procedures recommended in this book, therefore, is how likely they are, as far as I can judge, to lead to good language learning outcomes and motivation, rather than whether they accord with a particular currently fashionable approach or method.

The book is appropriate for the needs of students in a teacher-preparation course, or for teacher educators in their first year(s) of teaching. It can be used, therefore, as the basis for a training text course, or as a self-study text. Its goal is to equip the beginner teacher with the knowledge and skills needed to perform competently in the classroom: to plan and run interesting and learning-rich lessons, use texts and tasks effectively, and more.

Each chapter is framed by introductory and concluding summaries of content. The introductory Overview gives brief descriptions of the topic(s) treated in each section of the chapter; the concluding Review: Check yourself consists of a list of questions which may be used to help recall of the content of the chapter, and/or to test understanding.

Following the review there are annotated suggestions for Further reading, and a references list, which provides details of publications mentioned in the course of the chapter.

Chapter content

The main sections within each chapter provide:

- Evidence-based information on the theory and practice of English language teaching;
- Practical guidelines on how to teach the different aspects of the language in a variety of contexts;
- Samples of classroom procedures or teaching strategies;
- 'Pause for thought': Reflection and discussion tasks with following commentary.

Organization of content

The chapters may be studied in the order in which they are laid out in the book, or in a different order, or selectively, according to the preferences of the user.

- 1 **The English language and how it may be taught/learned**
 - 1 Teaching English today
- 2 **Basic processes and components used in English language teaching**
 - 2 The lesson; 3 Classroom interaction; 4 Tasks; 5 Texts
- 3 **Language components and skills**
 - 6 Teaching vocabulary; 7 Teaching grammar; 8 Teaching listening; 9 Teaching speaking; 10 Teaching reading; 11 Teaching writing
- 4 **Response to learner performance**
 - 12 Feedback and error correction; 13 Assessment and testing
- 5 **Resources for organization of course content**
 - 14 The syllabus; 15 Teaching/learning materials; 16 Teaching content
- 6 **Specific pedagogical issues**
 - 17 Classroom discipline; 18 Digital technology and online teaching; 19 Learner differences 1: age; 20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion
- 7 **Continuing professional development**
 - 21 Teacher development
- 8 **Endmatter**
 - A Glossary of terminology and abbreviations used in the book
 - A cumulative list of References
 - A comprehensive Index

Teaching English today

- 1.1 **English for purposes of international communication.** The variety of English (usually taught) that which is likely to be understood and used internationally including different modes, registers and domains of use: English for specific purposes.
- 1.2 **Other basic implications for teaching.** The teacher's knowledge of English; language and culture; the place of the first language (L1) in the teaching/learning process.
- 1.3 **Second language acquisition (SLA) and English-teaching approaches and methods.** A brief overview of SLA theories; twentieth-century approaches and methods; the communicative approach and associated methods.
- 1.4 **Standards of proficiency.** The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptions of levels of language proficiency.
- 1.5 **Online English teaching.** A brief discussion of the rapid increase in online teaching resulting largely from the ban on face-to-face teaching during the COVID pandemic.

English for purposes of international communication

Perhaps the most dramatic development that has taken place in the field of English language teaching in my lifetime has been the shift in its primary function: from being mainly the language of nations such as the UK or USA or an intra-national means of communication in countries that were formerly colonies of English-speaking countries, such as India or the Philippines, to being mainly a means of international communication. English today is primarily used worldwide in a variety of spheres of activity: professional or business interactions, study and research, travel and tourism, entertainment, personal relationships, and more. The number of speakers of English whose first language (L1) is another language already vastly exceeds that of those whose L1 is English, and the gap will only widen in the foreseeable future. For most of its learners, English is therefore no longer a foreign language (i.e., one that is owned by a particular 'other' nation or community) but first and foremost an international language: one that has no particular national owner. This development has brought with it a number of changes in the principles and practice of English language teaching.

Pause for thought

How many of the people you have spoken or written to in English recently spoke the language as their L1, and how many were speakers of other languages, using English as a means of communication?

Comment

The answer to this will depend of course on where you are living as you read this; but unless you live in an English-speaking country, it is likely that most people you interact with in English are bi- or multilingual speakers using it as an additional language.

There are several implications of this development.

The variety of English to be taught

A question which many teachers used to ask was: 'Which English should I teach: British or American?' This is no longer a relevant question, unless the students are learning the language specifically in order to study, work or live within one of the (American or British) English-speaking communities. In the vast majority of situations, this is not so: English is being taught instead for purposes of international communication.

An additional complication is the existence of multiple Englishes in the world. Some varieties, such as British or American English, are the first languages of English-speaking communities; in other cases, English is the official language (or one of the official languages) of a multilingual country such as India; elsewhere it may be learned, but has no official status (as in mainland European countries or Latin America). These are the three contexts famously defined by Kachru as the 'three circles' of world Englishes (Kachru, 1985). In any of these, the language may develop its own specific forms or meanings: in pronunciation (for example, the pronunciation of the word *my* as /ma:/ in Black English); in vocabulary (the words *lukh* and *crore* in Indian English); or in grammar (the use of *ain't* for *isn't*, *aren't* and *am not* in some American and British spoken varieties).

Some would suggest that we need, therefore, to teach a flexible model of the language, allowing for different varieties. This is not, however, a very practical option. Teaching different varieties of pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary or grammar is, first of all, very time-consuming. Second, many of these are not very useful: it is not likely that students will in fact encounter them, still less need to use them.

We cannot avoid the conclusion that there has to be a standard basic variety of English variously termed *English as a global language*, *English as an international language* (EIL) and *English as a lingua franca*, whose forms, meaning and uses can be understood and produced by speakers of English engaged in communication worldwide for purposes such as those listed above (McArthur, 2006). I shall refer to this variety as *EPIC*: English for purposes of international communication. EPIC forms and usages, I would suggest, need to be related to as standard by teachers and learners. This is not because they are those used by speakers of English as their L1, but because they are the ones used by the vast majority of

English speakers who employ the language for various purposes in international contexts, and of at least their first language is, or was.

There is one more point, of course, that we should ban from the classroom variant forms such as *two* and *three*. It does mean that such forms do not need to be part of the basic language features that we teach our students to use, but rather only taught if we encounter them incidentally in a text or talk. In such cases, we need to make it clear to students that these are features that *may* come across, but should not normally be part of their own speech or writing.

The choice of language features to teach will be based on the criterion: is this likely to be easily understood and even as acceptable worldwide? For example, it is better to teach *two* than *fortnight*, as many English speakers would not understand *fortnight*. It is useful to encourage, or at least allow, students to pronounce the /t/ in words like *girl*, *teacher*, as *ch* (pronunciation is probably more widely used, easier to understand and corresponds well closely with the written form). And it is likely to be more useful to teach the spelling *organize* than *organise* – again for reasons of clarity, frequency and general acceptability.

Pause for thought

Of the following pairs of items, which do you think we should prioritize in teaching for EIL? (i.e. the more likely to be understood and used by English speakers worldwide)?

lift or (inform)

lift or (inform)

do you have or have you got

program or programme

elevator or lift

Comment

Many would respond: 'Can't we teach both?' Yes, of course you can, and more experienced learners will eventually learn both, as they encounter more varied types of input. But it's useful to know which is more likely to be familiar to an international audience, and if you are teaching a class of beginners or elementary learners (A1–A2), it's best to teach the more widely used form first. Why overload them with unnecessary synonyms? You can always add the other later. My choices would be: *inform* (*call* is only used in informal American English, and is potentially ambiguous; *inform* is used worldwide); *truck* (far more used worldwide than the British English *lorry*); *do you have* (again, more widely used; *have you got* is mainly confined to British English, and even there only in informal interaction; and it can't readily be used in the future or past); *program* (more common worldwide, and why use a longer spelling when a shorter will do?); *elevator* (understood worldwide, whereas

¹ It is interesting that the suffix *-ize* in words like *organize*, *recognize*, though often thought of as a feature of American English, has always been the default spelling in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

III' is confined to British English, and possibly ambiguous). A useful and easy-to-use online tool that will help you decide which of two or more items is most common is the Google NGram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>), based on a corpus of published books. If you enter items with a comma between them, you will be shown the relative frequencies over time of the two items.

Different language modes, registers and domains

We need to be aware that even within EPIC, there are different kinds of language use. The most obvious is the *mode*: speech or writing. In speech, students need to learn not only the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but also how these are expressed through pronunciation, stress, intonation and so on. In writing, they need to know how to form the letters, spell, punctuate and more.

Then there are differences between formality levels, or *registers*, which only partially overlap with the distinctions between speech and writing. Informal language is likely to be used in conversations or texting; formal language in essay-writing or academic lectures. A parallel distinction between the kind of language knowledge needed for each has been defined by Cummins (2008) as BICS and CALP: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills as contrasted with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Finally, there are the different kinds of language that are likely to be used depending on the subject matter, or domain, that is the subject of the discourse. This, of course, can vary from lesson to lesson, or even within lessons; but increasingly we find entire courses that are dedicated to teaching a particular subject, academic field, or profession, as discussed in the following section.

English for Specific Purposes

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of courses that teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Perhaps the two types of ESP most in demand are Business English (BE), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

More and more businesses are going international, opening branches in different countries or performing transactions with companies abroad, and requiring easy and fluent communication between branches and between individual employees. Some businesses run their own English courses; others send employees to language schools that specialize in this area. The number of coursebooks specifically targeting BE, or 'English in the workplace', is huge and increasing daily.

EAP is at least equally in demand: a large number of students every year travel abroad to study or register for international online courses. Even if the institutions of higher education that they attend are not located in an English-speaking country, many teach specific courses, or even complete programmes, in English, and therefore demand a knowledge of that language to at least B2 level. EAP courses may be divided into two types: those that teach general academic English; and those that teach specific discipline-oriented English (mainly vocabulary). Some important work has been done in drawing up lists of vocabulary items that could be the basis of a general academic lexical syllabus

three types of non-academic ESP courses include those oriented towards particular professions or occupations: English for tourism, for example, or English for nursing. But in these areas, learners need first to raise their general proficiency in English to at least a B2 level before starting to learn the domain-specific vocabulary.

What are some implications for teaching

The teacher's knowledge of English

The majority of English teachers today have as their L1 a language other than English. They learned English, like their students, as an additional language. The English spoken by such teachers, if they are (as they should be) fully competent and fluent in the language, is likely to be a better model of international English for their students than any variety of English perceived as 'native'. In addition, they have been through the same learning process as their students, and therefore have insights into the kinds of problems that are likely to come up and how to deal with them. Finally, they can function as role models: 'If I can do it, so can you!'

This is not to say that L1 English-speaker teachers cannot be effective teachers. Many teach successfully in schools in non-English speaking countries of the world: this is, indeed, my own professional background and that of many of my colleagues. L1 English speakers are particularly in demand, obviously, in situations where the language is taught as a preparation for study or work in an English-speaking country.

The bottom line is that in the majority of teaching situations, it doesn't matter very much what language the teachers originally spoke as their L1. What matters is that they have a high level mastery of English – usually EPIC – and know how to teach it.

Language and culture

In most English-teaching contexts, it is inappropriate to talk about a 'target' culture, meaning one belonging to a nation of L1 English speakers. Learners of EPIC need to become aware of a diverse, international set of cultural customs, social conventions, literature, art forms and so on, rather than those of a single community. It is, therefore, important these days to foster multicultural awareness on the part of our students. We cannot, obviously, teach them all the cultures of the world. However, we can expose them to samples through our materials, make them sensitive to the kinds of cultural differences that they may come across, raise awareness of characteristics of their own home culture that other people may find strange or difficult to cope with, and foster the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to different cultural conventions: what is known as *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram and Wagner, 2018).

Pause for thought

Can you think of an example of how your own culture differs from that of another speech community? Has this difference ever produced difficulties or embarrassments which, with hindsight, you could have avoided if you had known about it?

Comment

When I first came to my country, I used to go straight into the 'business of the day' when meeting someone or starting a phone call, like: 'Hi, do you know ...?' I should have started with 'Good morning' or similar courteous preliminaries, and was even reprimanded on one occasion for my 'rudeness'.

The place of the first language (L1)

For most learners today English is a tool, like basic arithmetic, literacy or computer skills: an ability they need to master in order to function effectively in the modern world. They do not need to be like L1 English speakers; they need to be bi- or multilingual: what Cook (1999) has called *multicompetent language users*. The L1 remains the learner's primary, and usually dominant, language. What we as teachers are aiming for is to enable our students to function in English side by side with their L1. If we discourage or even ban the L1 from the classroom, we risk implying that it is in some way irrelevant, inferior, or to be marginalized. In most instructional situations, moreover, the L1 is likely to play a valuable role in the acquisition of English. Translation – at least at word or sentence level – is a useful ability in itself as well as a facilitator of learning, to be promoted rather than discouraged. Clearly if most of the English lesson is in fact conducted in another language, then the students will not learn very much English, but to ban the L1 completely from the classroom may result in negative implications as to the value of the first language, and neglect of valuable learning opportunities.

Pause for thought

Thinking back to your own school lessons in English or another additional language: do you think the teacher used the L1 enough? Not enough? Too much?

Comment

I was taught French in school by very traditional methods, with a lot of translation, and most of the lesson was in English: definitely too much. It wasn't until I went to stay with a family in France for a while that I was exposed to an enormous amount of comprehensible input in that language and learned to communicate (relatively) fluently.

Second language acquisition (SLA) and English-teaching approaches and methods

An approach can be defined as a principled model of language teaching/learning, based on theories of language and language acquisition. A *method* is a collection of teaching practices that accord with and apply a particular approach. A wide variety of approaches and methods have been used for language teaching in the last century, often based on research or thinking on second language acquisition.

Second language acquisition (SLA) research and theory

The importance of SLA research and theory lies in its contribution to an understanding of how languages are best learned; such insights may in turn contribute to the design of effective language-teaching approaches and methods.

Early SLA work focused mainly on the acquisition of grammar. Behaviourists believed that language is a set of habits, and that grammatical patterns are therefore acquired by a process of habit-formation. According to the linguist Noam Chomsky (1969), on the other hand, humans have an inbuilt language acquisition device which enables them to acquire basic awareness of the grammatical structures of a language, from which they can invent an infinite number of actual sentences. Both behaviourist and Chomskian theories were assumed to apply both to first and second language learning.

With hindsight, neither of the above viewpoints have been very influential in SLA theory. Behaviourism has been largely discredited as being too simplistic, and unable to account for language creativity, and the Chomskian language acquisition device is too vague to provide a useful model of acquisition.

The issue of how the language will best be learned within instructional settings – in a course of lessons rather than through total immersion in a naturalistic immigrant situation – has in recent years focused on a key controversy relating to *implicit* and *explicit* processes. Implicit processes take place where the language is learned through exposure and use, as we acquired our L1; explicit ones occur when the learner pays conscious attention to the learning of the features and rules of the target language. On the whole, current research is in favour of explicit teaching/learning in the context of instructional settings (e.g., Akakura, 2012), while not, of course, denying the value of the inclusion of implicit processes as well. One example of an explicit teaching/learning model is that based on skill theory, which claims that language is learnt in the same way as other skills like playing a musical instrument or driving a car: features are explained by the teacher (the 'declarative' stage), then practised (the 'proceduralization' stage) until their use becomes automatized (DeKeyser, 2007).

While not necessarily accepting a linear skill-theory based process, other thinkers have also included conscious cognitive processes in theories of SLA: Richard Schmidt (1990), for example, claims that there is no such thing as 'subliminal' absorption of language features, and that these must be consciously noticed in order for learning to take place. All this is not to deny that implicit processes – learning incidentally through reading and listening – do not have an important role in language learning within instructional settings, particularly with younger learners. For an overview of these and other SLA issues, see Ellis (2021).

Language-teaching approaches and methods in the twentieth century

The dominant approach for much of the twentieth century (and, indeed, before it) was that language is composed of grammar, vocabulary, phonology and orthography, and that effective language teaching should aim to enable learners to understand and produce correct combinations of these components. The traditional *grammar translation method* for example, dominant until the mid-twentieth century, involved a lot of grammar rules, reading and writing exercises, and translation. It is still used today in some places. *Audiolingualism*, popular in the 1950s to the late 1960s, was based on an approach that saw the language primarily as a set of grammatical patterns, and learning as primarily behavioristic habit-forming: hence teaching should be based on drilling and getting students to automatize grammatical patterns through mimicry and memorization. The *direct method*, introduced in the late nineteenth century, prioritizes the oral skills, and lessons are conducted entirely in the target language; it is in use in Berlitz schools to this day. And there were various other minor 'boutique' methods briefly fashionable in the second half of the twentieth century (for a more detailed summary, see Richards and Rodgers under **Further Reading** below).

The communicative approach

The methods summarized above, however, have been largely superseded by those based on, or fundamentally influenced by, the *communicative approach*, which has dominated the scene from the 1980s. According to this approach, language is seen essentially as a means of communication, and language learning should therefore be based on the gradual acquisition of language forms and uses through meaningful, communicative activity, rather than the same way as children acquire their first language. Classroom procedures should thus prioritize the understanding and conveying of meanings over the production of correct sentences (Widdowson, 1978). Stephen Krashen's *input hypothesis* (1981) posits the comprehensible input (of either spoken or written language) at a level just beyond the present level of the learner is a necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition to take place. This, however, has been controversial: Swain (2005), for example, claims that there is an essential place for what she calls 'pushed output' in instructed language learning; and as discussed above, there is today general acceptance of the value of explicit language-teaching and -learning processes within instructional settings.

Task-based instruction, or *task-based language teaching* (TBLT), is perhaps the most well-known (though not necessarily the most used in practice) of the methods based on the communicative approach, and is widely promoted in the professional literature today (Ellis et al., 2019). In TBLT, learners are required to perform tasks whose goals can only be achieved through communicating or understanding content expressed in English. Such tasks frequently involve interaction between students in pair and group work. Most models of TBLT today include some explicit language teaching components through a procedure called *focus on form*: attention is temporarily drawn to formal aspects of a language feature which has come up in the course of a communicative task or text, or in which students have made errors (Ellis, 2015).

It is also true that in English teaching linked to the communicative approach is *content-based learning*, the increasing use of English as a medium to teach other subjects. This is often called CLIL (content and language-based learning) where it refers to its use in subjects other than English as a medium of instruction), in the context of university education. It is very demanding of the teacher, since it requires both knowledge of the subject content and how to teach it, and a high level of English – as well as awareness of content-based language-teaching procedures.

One opinion is that the choice of which method, or combination of methods, is used in any particular classroom is likely to be primarily based on the *culture of learning* of any particular student and teacher population (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999): their traditions and expectations as to what effective language teaching should look like. Only secondarily will it be influenced by methods currently promoted in the professional literature or in teacher conferences. Sometimes current trends will fit the local culture of learning well; sometimes not. In most places, the result is a compromise between the traditional and the new: grammar explanations and practice, for example, side by side with communicative classroom tasks and comprehensible input in the form of extensive reading.

Points for thought

Think of a course in a foreign or second language – not necessarily English – that you are familiar with, either as teacher or as student. Does it correspond with any of the approaches and methods described above? Or is it a mixture? If you are working in a group, compare the different courses described by participants. Can you draw any general conclusions about a predominant trend (at least in the experience of your group members)? Or are there very wide differences?

Comment

It helps a lot to understand the rather abstract models presented above if you can identify how, or if, they are implemented in teaching/learning situations you have experienced yourself. When I started teaching, for example, the textbooks I had to use were largely composed of a series of drills, as well as dialogues students had to learn by heart and recite. Only later did I realize that this was in fact a systematic implementation of the audio-lingual approach, as presented in Wilga Rivers' book *Teaching Foreign Language Skills* (1980).

Standards of proficiency

In most places today in the world, target standards of language acquisition and the definition of the different levels of proficiency in the learning of any language are defined by the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). The CEFR defines levels not in terms of specific language exponents, but in terms of what the learner 'can do' at any particular level, based mainly on reception (listening

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The lesson

- 1.1 The lesson: different perspectives.** A general definition of 'the lesson' followed by a discussion of some different ways of looking at it.
- 1.2 Functions of the teacher in the English language lesson.** The varied roles a teacher may play during a lesson.
- 1.3 Classroom organization.** Different patterns of classroom organization during a lesson.
- 1.4 Lesson planning.** Guidance on lesson components and their combination in a lesson and balanced lesson plan: some practical tips.
- 1.5 Written lesson plans.** The importance of written lesson plans and a suggested format.

The lesson: different perspectives

The lesson is a type of organized goal-oriented social event that occurs in most, if not all, cultures. And although lessons in different places may vary in topic, atmosphere, technology and materials, they all have several basic elements in common:

1. Their main objective is learning;
2. They are attended by a predetermined population of learner(s) and teacher(s);
3. They are held at a preset time and place (except for asynchronous online lessons: see 10 Digital technology and online teaching).

There are additional aspects of a lesson which may be less obvious. It is useful to consider these through the medium of metaphor, as suggested in **Pause for thought** below.

Pause for thought

Which of the following metaphors captures the essence of a lesson, in your opinion? You can choose more than one, or invent a new one of your own.

climbing a mountain	consulting a doctor	a conversation	eating a meal
a football game	a menu	a television show	a wedding

Optionally, discuss your choices with a partner, and your reasons for them. Then read on.

Comment

It is interesting that in any given group of people, there will be a wide variety of different selections, because of the different ways individuals interpret reality (see 20 Learner differences 2: **diversity and inclusion**). The main aspects of a lesson which are foregrounded in the different interpretations are the following:

Cooperative interaction. This is most obvious in the metaphor of conversation, but is also represented by the wedding, the television show and, in perhaps a rather different way, the football game. The focus here is on the dynamic relationship among students, or between students and teacher. A lesson essentially involves cooperative social interaction, and should promote the participation of all members of the class.

Goal-oriented effort, involving hard work. Here, climbing a mountain might be an appropriate metaphor, or perhaps a football game. This image suggests the existence of a clear, worthwhile objective, the necessity of effort to attain it and a resulting sense of satisfaction and triumph if it is achieved, or of failure and disappointment if it is not.

An interesting or enjoyable experience. Enjoyment may be based on interest and entertainment (television show), challenge and fun (football game), or the satisfaction of a need or desire (eating a meal). The main point is that participants should enjoy it and therefore be motivated to attend while it is going on – and to come back for more!

Preset roles. The role of the teacher typically involves responsibility and activity, and that of the students, responsiveness and receptivity (though of course in specific procedures the roles may temporarily be reversed). The consultation with a doctor, or the wedding, would represent a role-based culture of this kind. Participants in such events know and accept in advance the demands that will be made on them and their expected behaviours.

A social event with elements of ritual. Examples here would be a wedding or a television show. Certain set behaviours occur every time: for example, there may be a certain kind of introduction or ending, certain pre-determined exchanges or sequences, and the components of the overall event may be selected from a limited set of possibilities.

A series of free choices. Occasionally, it may happen that participants are free to do their own thing within a set of choices (a menu) or a relatively loose structure (a conversation). They construct the event as it progresses, by making their own decisions. The teacher is less of an authority figure than a facilitator, participating with the students in the teaching/learning process.

Each of the interpretations described above – and you may well have discovered others – represents one aspect of the whole picture. It is helpful in your planning and teaching of specific lessons if you are aware of these different possible perspectives: a lesson is not just a type of interaction, for example, or a goal-oriented process, or a ritual social event. It is all of these, and more.

Functions of the teacher in the English language lesson

In the latter part of the twentieth century, there was a strong reaction against the traditional image of the teacher as 'master/mistress' and lecturer. As a result, teachers have been encouraged to see themselves mainly as supporting learning rather than causing it. Teachers who help students acquire knowledge or skills, rather than 'tellers' who cause it. There is a general condemnation of the 'mug and jug' model (the student as a mug and the teacher as a jug pouring information into it) and of teacher talk in favour of a preference for eliciting ideas from students, rather than instructing them.

In principle, of course, most teachers would like to see themselves as supportive rather than as traditional, and to encourage learner independence and autonomy. A strong element of student initiative and responsibility, however, can sometimes interfere with learning, particularly in language courses. Language is composed of a collection of many sounds, vocabulary and conventions of grammar and syntax: there is no way in which students can discover these without substantial exposure to information and/or an explicit instruction. If substantial exposure is not available – and sometimes even when it is – the student needs to be proactive in order to enable students to learn. Effective language learning, therefore, needs to be based on a substantial amount of teacher-initiated instruction, as well as student-centred activation.

Expect for thought

How many different kinds of functions does the English teacher have during a lesson? Make a list, and then compare it with the list below. You've probably used different terminology, but will have some similar items. Check to see what your list has left out – or added.

Argument

The list you make, and the order in which you list the functions, will clearly be based on your own learning experiences, as well as your beliefs about how a teacher should function. In any case, the teacher fulfils a number of different roles during any lesson: I've seen lists that run to 30 or 40 different possibilities! My own is shorter, but still very varied.

Teacher functions

The teacher, together with the teaching materials, provides information about the language: its sounds, letters, words, grammar and communicative use. The most essential teaching skills here are the ability to provide clear explanations and appropriate samples of spoken and written language.

Activator. Getting the students to use English themselves is essential for acquisition to take place. 'Using English' does not necessarily mean getting them to speak or write; it may involve only listening or reading. So the teacher needs to provide tasks that activate the

Pause for thought

Look at the following teaching objectives, as expressed by the teacher, and suggest which patterns of classroom organization might facilitate their achievement most successfully. Then read on.

- 1 **Comprehension check:** 'We've just finished reading a story. I want to make sure the class has understood it, using the comprehension questions in the book.'
- 2 **Familiarization with text:** 'We've just finished reading a story. I'm fairly sure they've understood the basic plot, but I want them to get really familiar with the text through reading, as they're going to have to pass an exam on it.'
- 3 **Oral fluency:** 'I have a small [15] class of businesspeople, who need more practice in talking. I want them to do a discussion task where they have to decide which qualities are most important for a manager.'
- 4 **Grammar check:** 'We've been working on the distinction between two similar verb constructions. I want to find out how far they've grasped it, using an exercise in the book where they have to choose the right construction for the context.'
- 5 **Writing:** 'They need to improve their writing. I want to ask them to write for a few minutes in class, but am worried they might just make a lot of mistakes and not learn anything.'
- 6 **Grammar practice:** 'They need to practise asking questions. I thought of using an interview situation where they might interview me or each other.'
- 7 **New vocabulary:** 'I want to draw their attention to some new vocabulary we've met in a text.'

Comment

There may, of course, be more than one way of achieving any particular objective having made your own selections, compare them with my own suggestions below.

- 1 **Comprehension check.** Usually this is done through teacher-led question-answer sessions based on the textbook questions, but individual work is probably more effective. In full-class questioning, only a minority of the class answers; more students participate if you let all of them try to answer the question individually in writing, while you move around the class to help and monitor. You can always check their answers later by a quick full-class review or by taking in notebooks.
- 2 **Familiarization with text.** It is probably best to use individual work here, in the form of silent reading. Or, if the students have already read the text on their own, it can be helpful to read it aloud yourself (teacher-led) while they follow, in order to recycle it in a slightly different way. Another possibility is to ask different students to study different sections of the story in depth, and then get together to teach each other what they have studied (individual and group work).

the English lesson work is based in this case, certainly much better than full-class work. A class of 16 may seem small, but even so, dividing it into a lot of times (plus each participant, on average, five times as much as a teacher (see 3 Classroom interaction). Even if some of the time is spent supporting the students' 11, they are likely to spend more time speaking than even they would have done in a full-class discussion.

Comprehension check. This teacher's clear objective is to assess ('I want to find out if they've understood it'), though they do not actually use the word. It seems to suit the comprehension check, it would be best to use individual work to ensure that each student has the chance to answer the questions. Even if some of the time is spent supporting the students' 11, they are likely to spend more time speaking than even they would have done in a full-class discussion.

Oral fluency. Study next writing is done individually, so it makes sense to start with individual work. A collaborative stage can follow, as students help each other correct and polish their texts. Teacher monitoring can take place during the writing, if there are not too many students in the class, or later.

Grammar practice. In order to make the interview produce as much practice of questions as possible, it is a good idea to let students prepare at least some of those in advance, individually, in pairs, or through full-class interaction (brainstorming suggestions). Students may then interview the teacher or each other.

New vocabulary. In general, the most efficient way to deal with new vocabulary is to present and explain it (teacher talk). If, however, you think that some of your class know some of the items, ask them, and give them the opportunity to teach them for you (closed- or open-ended teacher questioning).

Lesson planning

Most English lessons in schools are about 45 minutes long, though sometimes, particularly where the students are adults, they may be as much as 90 minutes. For the purposes of this chapter, I am assuming that the lesson takes between 45 and 60 minutes.

Components

A typical English lesson is likely to include a selection of the following components:

- 1 reading of a written text, with associated comprehension tasks
- 2 a listening comprehension activity
- 3 an oral communicative task, such as discussion of a topic
- 4 a writing task
- 5 presentation and explanation of a grammatical point
- 6 presentation and explanation of vocabulary

- presentation and explanation of other linguistic features (e.g., pronunciation, spelling, punctuation, aspects of language use)
- exercises on linguistic usages, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling or punctuation
- silent reading (e.g., using simplified readers)
- review of homework
- preparation for a test
- a test

Pause for thought

Have a look at a unit from an English coursebook you are familiar with. Which of the components listed above can you identify?

Comment

The last four items above are not of course, normally included in a coursebook unit. You are, however, likely to have found most of the others. Typically, a unit will include substantial work on grammar and vocabulary, and tasks activating students in all four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing). Which of them is emphasized more and which less will depend on the type of course and the target student population. In a book for a CLIL course, for example, the focus is likely to be on content-based reading or listening material; in a course focusing on conversational English, there are more likely to be oral tasks and a lot of vocabulary rather than grammar.

Variation

In a lesson which is entirely taken up with one kind of activity, interest is likely to flag. Students will find it more difficult to concentrate and learn, and boredom may, in some classes, result in discipline problems. A varied lesson is likely to produce better learning, to be more engaging and enjoyable for both teacher and students, and to cater for a wider range of learning styles (see 20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion). It may also prolong energy levels by providing regular refreshing changes in the type of mental or physical activity demanded.

Lessons may vary in a number of ways:

- **Tempo.** Activities may be brisk and fast-moving (such as guessing games) or slower and reflective (such as reading literature or writing brief compositions).
- **Organization.** The students may work individually, in pairs, in groups, or as a full class interacting with the teacher, as described in the previous section.

Material. A lot of your lesson may be based on the coursebook, but it is good to spend at least some of the time working on teacher- or student-initiated tasks or digital materials (see 18 Teaching/learning materials).

Mode and skill. Activities may be based on the written or the spoken language; and without these, they may vary as to whether the students are asked to produce (speak, write) or receive (listen, read).

Difficulty. Activities may be easy and non-demanding, or difficult, requiring concentration and effort.

Topic. Both the language-teaching point and the (non-linguistic) topic may change from one activity to another.

Mood. Activities vary also in mood: light and fun-based versus serious and profound, busy versus relaxed and so on.

Stimulus. Some activities enliven and excite students (such as controversial discussions, or activities that involve physical movement). Others, like dictations, have the effect of calming them down (MacLennan, 1987).

Active/passive. Students may be activated in a way that encourages their own initiative, or they may only be required to do as they are told.

Obviously, when planning a lesson, you cannot go through each of the items above and tick out your plan to make sure you are covering them all! But hopefully reading through them will raise your general awareness of the various possibilities. Note that lessons with younger learners should, on the whole, be made up of shorter and more varied components than those planned for older ones. But even adults, in my experience, double spending a whole period on the same task and appreciate a shift of focus and activity type during the lesson.

All of this applies also to a sequence of lessons. Make sure you don't get into a dull routine of doing the same sort of thing every lesson, and that you cover, over time, a variety of tasks, texts and materials.

Some practical tips on lesson-planning

- 1 **Put the harder tasks earlier.** On the whole, students are fresher and more energetic earlier in the lesson and get progressively less so as it goes on, particularly if the lesson is a long one. So it makes sense to put the tasks that demand more effort and concentration earlier on (learning new material, or tackling a difficult text, for example) and the lighter ones later.
- 2 **Do quieter activities before lively ones.** It can be quite difficult to calm down a class – particularly of children or adolescents – who have been participating in a lively, exciting activity. So if one of your lesson components is quiet and reflective, it is generally better to plan it before a lively one, not after. The exception to this is when you have a rather lethargic or tired class of adults. In such cases, 'stirring' activities towards the beginning of the class can be refreshing and help students get into the right frame of mind for learning.

- 3 **Pull the class together at the beginning and end of the lesson.** We usually start with a general activity like greetings, attendance-taking and so on; but remember that it's a good idea to have some kind of rounding-off procedure at the end of the lesson as well (see the next tip). So activities which tend to fragment the class – group or pair work or individual work on digital materials, for example – are best done in the middle of the lesson, framed by full-class interaction before and after. Teachers of younger classes often find that set rituals are useful for this: routine greetings and information about the date and weather at the beginning, for example, songs and farewells at the end.
- 4 **End on a positive note.** This does not necessarily mean ending with a joke or a fun activity. For some classes, it could be something quite serious, like a summary of what we have achieved today, or a positive evaluation of something the class has done. Another possibility is to give a short task which the class is very likely to succeed in and which will generate feelings of satisfaction. The point is to have students leave the classroom feeling good.
- 5 **Don't leave homework-giving to the end.** Give homework in the course of the lesson, and simply remind the students what it was at the end. If you leave it to the end, then you may find that you don't have enough time to explain it properly (see the section on Homework in 4 Tasks). In any case, it is better to round off the lesson with some kind of planned ending, as noted in tip 3 above.
- 6 **Prepare a reserve.** Have an extra activity ready to include if you find you have time on your hands (see Ur and Wright (1992), for some ideas for short activities). Similarly, note down in advance which components of your lesson you will cancel or postpone if you are running late, or if you've added something unplanned which took up a lot of time.

2.5 Written lesson plans

It's important to write down in advance what you plan to do in the lesson – not just to think about it and put a bookmark at the relevant page of the textbook! This is particularly true for inexperienced teachers, but even many experienced ones – myself included – prepare written plans for every lesson, though they vary a lot in how they format them. The function of such plans is not, or not mainly, as instructions to be referred to constantly during the lesson itself. In practice, I usually look through my lesson plan just before the lesson begins, and then rarely need to glance at it while teaching, except to check specific information like page numbers or vocabulary I want to cover. A more important reason is that writing makes you think concretely and practically. It ensures that you haven't forgotten anything and that you have planned and ordered all the components and materials appropriately. Knowing what is planned also contributes to your confidence when entering the classroom: a confidence which communicates itself to the students. Having a lesson plan does not, of course, mean that you can't diverge from it. You may want to add extra, unplanned activities, initiated by you or the students in the course of the lesson and that you feel are valuable and worth adding. Alternatively, you may find the lesson proceeds that something you planned is unnecessary or inappropriate (or you

simply don't have time for it), and you need to skip it. It's a good idea, therefore, to glance through your original lesson plan after the lesson, and note anything you omitted and what you need to cover, perhaps in the next lesson.

The lesson plan format

Each teacher has their own preferred layout for a lesson plan. However you display it, I want you to include the following information:

- 1 How you will open the lesson
- 2 A brief description of each component, in the order in which you want to use them (adding any you may omit if you run out of time)
- 3 The classroom organization (e.g., 'group work') you plan to use for each
- 4 Page numbers of any coursebook feature you want to use
- 5 List of any vocabulary you want to teach or review
- 6 Homework (if planned)
- 7 How you will close the lesson
- 8 A reserve activity for inclusion if you have time.

You will also need to prepare, of course, any supplementary materials you are using: copies of texts or other material for distribution; links to websites you intend to use; pictures, texts or graphics for display, either digitally or on paper.

Pause for thought

If you are already teaching, have a look at a recent lesson plan of your own. Does it include the components above? Does it also include the desired learning outcomes (goals) of each component?

Comment

It's important for the teacher to be aware of the learning goals of each lesson component: there's a tendency for some teachers to include activities simply because they keep the students busy, or because they seem nice. This is why novice teachers are often encouraged to write explicitly what the learning goal is for each lesson component. More experienced teachers usually skip the explicit writing of such goals, but can easily, if challenged, identify them. Occasionally, of course, you may include activities that have goals other than language learning (such as improving classroom climate or group solidarity, for example, or simply as motivating time-fillers for a difficult class in a lesson at the end of the day. But even in such cases, it's important to be aware why you are doing them, whether or not you actually write the aims into the lesson plan.

Other uses for the lesson plan

In addition to using the written lesson plan to guide your own lesson, there are two further major uses for it.

Share with the class. At the beginning of a lesson, many teachers like to write up on the board the main 'agenda' – a shortened version of their lesson plan – so that the students are also aware of what the lesson is to include and have a sense of structure and achievement. In general, sharing your plans and objectives with the students can contribute to a pleasant and cooperative relationship with the class, and this is one simple and practical way of doing so. You can then tick off the components as you cover them.

Reflection. It's useful to use your lesson plan later as a basis for reflection. By each component, note briefly how it went, and then think about what you can learn for future action from successes or failures or interesting developments.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What are the key characteristics of a lesson (in any subject)?
- 2 How many different ways of perceiving the English language lesson can you recall (for example, 'cooperative interaction')?
- 3 Can you recall at least five different functions of the teacher in the lesson?
- 4 Why is group work appropriate for practising oral fluency?
- 5 Why should a lesson include a variety of different components?
- 6 In what ways may these components be varied? Can you recall at least three?
- 7 Can you recall at least three practical tips about lesson planning?
- 8 Why is it important to write down your lesson plan?

Further reading

- Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (5th Edition). (pp. 214–224), Pearson (Further useful guidance on various aspects of lesson planning)
- Woodward, T. (2001). *Planning Lessons and Courses*. Cambridge University Press. (An extended treatment of various aspects of advance planning, both at lesson- and at full-course level, with practical suggestions)

References

- Maclean, S. (1987). Integrating lesson planning and class management. *ELT Journal*, 41(3), 193–197.
- Ur, P. and Wright, A. (1992). *Five-Minute Activities: A Resource Book of Short Activities*. Cambridge University Press.

3 Classroom interaction

Overview

- 3.1 **Teacher-led interaction.** Teacher elicitation through questioning; evaluating teacher questions; different student responses to teacher elicitation.
- 3.2 **Group and pair work.** Advantages and disadvantages of group and pair work; guidelines on optimal use.
- 3.3 **Individual work.** Ways of providing students with opportunities to work individually.
- 3.4 **Varied interactions.** Different combinations of group, individual and teacher-led interactions, with examples of tasks that use them.

Teacher-led interaction

Most classroom interaction is teacher-led (see 2 The lesson). And of all the types of teacher-led interaction, the most common is questioning, which has the aim of eliciting responses from students.

Questioning with individual oral responses

Questioning usually takes place within the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) pattern: the teacher initiates the interaction through a question; a nominated student responds; the teacher gives feedback, in the form of confirmation and approval, correction, or rejection.

Teacher: What's the past simple of give?

Student: Gave.

Teacher: Good.

Note that the question may not be a grammatical interrogative: it may, for example, be an imperative (e.g., 'Tell me ...') or just a declarative sentence (e.g., 'You're going to describe ...'). The point is that it has the goal of eliciting response(s) from the students.

Pause for thought

What purpose do teacher questions serve in the classroom? Try to think of as many as you can, and then compare your list with the one on the next page. Was there anything you had forgotten? Is there anything you can add?

Nomination of student. How does the teacher choose who answers? Sometimes they may nominate the student in advance:

‘Pedro, what is another word for *far*?’

Sometimes there is no advance nomination:

‘What is another word for *far*?’ (pause, followed by nomination of one of the students who raised their hand).

In principle, the second type of nomination is better: the first puts a lot of pressure on the nominated student, who has not volunteered to answer, and discourages other students from participating.

Length of expected response. Do the questions elicit short responses (a word, phrase or short sentence) or extended ones? In most cases, questions that require longer responses (a sentence or more) are better, because they create more student activation and more learning opportunities. However, there is also a place for short ones where, for example, the aim is only to find out if a student has understood or not.

Number of expected responses. Are the questions closed-ended (with a single, right answer) or open-ended (with many possible answers)? Closed-ended questions usually have short responses and are useful for quick checks of knowledge or comprehension, or for testing. Open-ended ones may have short or long answers, but there are lots of them: each question leads to a number of responses. So they are good for situations where you want to get plenty of practice of a particular language point, or to stimulate fluent speech or writing. They also are more likely to elicit interesting responses (see 4 Tasks, Section 1).

Level of thinking required. Do the questions stimulate lower-order or higher-order thinking? Lower-order thinking is simple recall or basic factual information; for example: ‘What is the opposite of *white*?’ Higher-order thinking involves deeper understanding, application, analysis, criticism, evaluation or creativity; for example: ‘What do you think about the way X behaved in this story?’

Note that you cannot really manage without questions based on lower-order thinking for initial teaching and reviewing new material, whereas you can do without those based on higher. As a result, sometimes the latter are neglected. They are important, at all levels, for the cultivation of critical and creative thinking, and arguably lead to more challenging, interesting and richer language-learning procedures.

Pause for thought

The next time you observe or participate in a lesson, choose one or two of the criteria above, and note down how many questions of each kind you hear: for example, how many display questions and how many genuine? Or how many short responses and how many long responses? Which kinds were most common? Do you have any comments or criticisms? If you are working in a group, each observer/participant may focus on a different criterion, and then pool results later.

Comment

Purposes of teacher questions

- To provide a model for language or thinking
- To find out something from the students (e.g., facts, ideas, opinions)
- To check or test understanding, knowledge or skill
- To get students to be active in their learning
- To direct attention or provide a warm-up to the topic which is about to be studied
- To inform the class through students' answers rather than through the teacher's input
- To provide weaker students with an opportunity to participate
- To stimulate thinking (logical, critical or imaginative)
- To probe more deeply into issues
- To get students to relate personally to an issue
- To get students to review and practise previously taught material
- To encourage self-expression
- To communicate to students that the teacher is genuinely interested in what they think

Any specific question is likely to involve more than one of these: for example, it might review and practise while simultaneously encouraging self-expression.

Types of questions

We can classify teacher questions according to various criteria:

Communicative authenticity. Are they genuine or display questions? Does the teacher really want to find out the answer, or are they simply checking if the student knows it? An example of a genuine question might be: ‘What do you enjoy doing in your free time?’ A display question is like the one shown at the beginning of this section: the teacher knows the answer, but wants to check if the student knows it. Since we want to give students experience of using English for communication, there should be a place for genuine teacher questions in classroom interaction. Display questions are, however, also important: indeed, they are essential, for the teaching of any subject. There are many occasions where we need to get students to demonstrate what they know, practise something, or speak or write in order to increase fluency, and display questions are often the most effective way of achieving such aims.

Comment

Most questions in most English language lessons tend to be display, eliciting one short response each, and based on lower-order thinking. In my experience, both teachers and course materials tend to under-use genuine questions, those eliciting multiple or longer responses, and those based on higher-order thinking. This is partly because such questions are harder to formulate, and their responses are more difficult to monitor and correct. I am not claiming that all, or even most, questions should be from these under-used categories, but you should make sure that there are at least some of them in every lesson: they lead to good learning, and are likely to be more interesting for students. They can be adapted to different levels, so can be used from the most elementary and youngest classes up to the most academic adult ones.

Effective questioning

An effective questioning technique is one that elicits prompt and appropriate responses. Most of our questions result in long silences, are only answered by the strongest students, obviously bore the class, or consistently elicit only very brief or unsuccessful answers, then there is something wrong. In such cases, the following checklist can help.

1. **Clarity.** Do the students immediately understand not only what the question means but also what kind of an answer is required? Often it can help a lot if the teacher first provides a sample acceptable answer or two as a model.
2. **Interest.** Do the students find the question interesting, challenging, stimulating?
3. **Level of answer.** Are the answers demanded appropriate to the students' level, both cognitively and linguistically?
4. **Learning value.** Is the question likely to lead to, or check, learning?
5. **Teacher reaction.** Are the students sure that the feedback to their responses will be respectful, that they will not be put down or ridiculed if they say something inappropriate?

Pause for thought

Below are some samples of actual classroom exchanges between teacher and students, showing different kinds of teacher questions. Think about them, or discuss with others, and make any observations or criticisms you feel relevant. Then look at my comment on pages 31–32.

Exchange 1: Discussing circuses

T: Now today we are going to discuss circuses. Have you ever been to a circus?

Ss: (immediately) Yes, yes.

T: Yes. Where you see clowns and horses and elephants and acrobats. Our reading today is about a circus ...

Exchange 2: The word relief

1 Yesterday we learned various words that express feelings. Let's review them. Can you tell me ... What does 'relief' mean? (pause) Well, when might you feel relief? (pause) Can you remember a time when you felt relief? Yes, Maria?

01 When my friend was late, I thought she wasn't coming and in the end she came.

1 Right, a nice example. When Maria's friend was late, she thought she wasn't coming, but in the end she came. Good ... (pause) Fran?

02 I thought I will fail the exam, and then in the end I pass.

1 Good ...

Exchange 3: What was the story about?

1 Now: what was the story about? Can anyone tell me? (pause) Claire?

0 Man.

1 Yes, a man. What did this man do? Can you tell me anything about him?

0 He ... married.

Exchange 4: Describe a picture

1 Here's a picture, with lots of things going on. Tell me some of them. For example: the policeman is talking to the driver, perhaps he's telling him where to go. What else? (pause)

01 The little girl is buying an ice cream.

02 There's a woman, old woman, in the middle, she's crossing the road.

03 A man ... sitting ... on chair ...

1 OK, a man is sitting on a chair, there in the corner ... What else?

Comment

Exchange 1: Discussing circuses. A basic problem here is that the declared objective is contradicted by the questioning technique. The teacher says that the intention is to discuss: but the introductory question, though clear, actually discourages discussion. It is a Yes/No question inviting a single, brief answer.

Following. In many cases, it's a good idea to 'echo' student answers. This is a confirmation of the response, and an indirect compliment to the student who made it. It also makes sure that the rest of the class hears the response, as not all students speak clearly or loudly enough to be heard by everyone. Echoing is also an opportunity to correct and extend the student's response for the benefit of the rest of the class, as provided by the teacher at the end of Exchange 4. But it needs to be done meaningfully, where needed, not just as an inevitable automatic response.

Function of other types of responses

Sometimes the goal of the teacher in questioning is not to get individual students to answer, but to respond in other ways: by choral speech, by physical movement, by drawing, or by writing. The advantage of any of these is that the entire class is activated simultaneously rather than just one student at a time. Some useful elicitation techniques activating the full class follow.

Repeat all together. Particularly at the earlier stages of language learning, choral repetition of sounds, words, phrases, sentences, chants or dialogues can be very helpful, particularly for students who would not open their mouths to speak solo, but are happy to do so under the shelter of choral speech (see 9 Teaching speaking).

Answers all together. This only works, clearly, for short, closed-ended questions, and is appropriate mainly for younger beginners. Again, it helps shyer students to participate.

For as I say. These activities are based on questions or instructions that lead to physical movement. 'Simon says' for example. They can also include mime: the teacher says a sentence like, 'You are drinking a glass of water' and the students indicate their understanding by miming drinking from a glass (see 8 Teaching listening).

True or false. The teacher says a sentence which is true or false, and students indicate their answers either by physical movement (nodding or shaking of head, for example), or by writing a tick or a cross (or a question mark if they don't know) on paper or on a digital device.

Picture dictation. The teacher describes a picture, map or other graphic display, and students draw it. Alternatively, students already have a graphic display, the teacher dictates alterations they are asked to make to it (e.g., additions or colours).

Dictation. The teacher dictates a letter, word, sentence or entire paragraph, and the students write it down. A variation of this is translation dictation, where the teacher says a word or phrase in the students' L1, and they write it down in English (or vice versa). For more varied ideas on dictations, see Davis and Rinvolucri (1988).

Group and pair work

Whole group (three or more students working together) and pair work involve collaborative activity, but may be used for slightly different purposes and in different situations. Group work is more difficult to organize in a conventional classroom, because it usually involves moving students, and sometimes their chairs and tables. Pair work is simpler, because students are often sitting in pairs anyway, and simply turn towards each other. Also, group work is often more difficult to control with an undisciplined class. In online teaching,

However, it is both interesting and accessible to students. The fact that the students answer immediately and apparently enthusiastically indicates that they probably have something to say. However, they are given no opportunity to do so. The teacher gives information that could, and should, have been elicited from them and then moves on to the reading passage. The teacher either did not really intend to discuss all and prefers to hold the stage, or was not aware of the inappropriate form of their questions; perhaps a combination of the two.

Exchange 2: The word relief. The aim is to review vocabulary learnt the day before, and it is clear from what they say later that the students do in fact know the meaning of the word. The obvious question – *What does X mean?* – though apparently clear, is unsuccessful in eliciting answers. This is probably because it is too abstract and difficult. Even an advanced English speaker might find it hard to give a definition. This teacher, however, quickly realizes their mistake and rephrases twice. The question that demands a concrete example from experience is much better, and predictably receives immediate and full responses. Note that the teacher does not, at this stage, correct the grammatical errors made by students, as the focus is on the communication of ideas.

Exchange 3: What was the story about? There do not seem to be any pauses after the questions, and the answers are basically correct in content; the questions also seem fairly clear, interesting and available to most of the class. But their learning value is lowered because of the difficulty the students have in expressing their answers. The teacher might have been able to help by giving some hints or modelling answers in their questions: *Was it about a man, a woman, an animal ...?* *It was ... Yes, Claire?*

Exchange 4: Describe a picture. Here, the teacher makes it very clear what kinds of responses are required by providing examples, and also indicates that a number of different answers are expected. The combination of these two strategies makes the question far more accessible and easier to answer than something like *What can you see in the picture?* (Compare this exchange to the previous one.) The number of student responses to the single cue looks as if it will be relatively large, and S3, who is more hesitant and sounds as if they are not as good at English as the others, attempts a response based on the examples (of the teacher and of previous speakers) which they might not have done without these models.

You may have noticed a couple of useful strategies associated with teacher questioning in these exchanges: *wait-time* (indicated by 'pause' in the samples), and *echoing*.

Wait-time. When asking questions in class, it's good to wait a little before nominating a student to answer. This increases the number of students who might be able to answer. Some teachers even say things like: 'I'm waiting to see at least five students raise their hands ...', and wait for five volunteers before nominating one. But don't overdo it: too much wait-time slows down the process, and might lead to boredom and lack of attention.

on the other hand, group or pair work is easy to set up – you simply send the students to breakout rooms. However, it is much more difficult to monitor, since you cannot scan all groups simultaneously, and cannot keep an eye on other groups when helping one of them.

Group work has some advantages over pair work. More students can contribute ideas to discussion task; there are more participants if the activity is a game; groups can often work as teams in a competition; and the mere fact that students get up and move in order to form, or re-form, groups can provide a welcome break from the routine of sitting in the same place all the time. Pair work is useful for things like comparing answers to a written exercise or peer-editing of written compositions.

Let us look first at some advantages and disadvantages of using group (including pair) work.

Advantages

Group work:

- is essential in order to provide opportunities for practising oral fluency. Students in a class that is divided into five groups get five times as many opportunities to talk as in a full-class discussion (see 9 Teaching speaking, Section 1).
- can provide opportunities for language learning, as students negotiate meanings and help each other formulate and understand spoken messages.
- fosters learner autonomy. Students working in groups are not directly controlled by the teacher, and they make their own choices about how they do the group task. If they are collaborating on gapfill grammar exercises, then such choices will be limited to the pace at which they work, the amount of work they do, and perhaps the order in which they do different items. If they are discussing something, then the language they are using will be determined by them, not by the teacher. If they are working together on a project, then the content itself may depend on their own decisions.
- can be enjoyable and motivating for many students. It is easier and less scary to interact with peers within a group sitting close to one another than to contribute responses in the full-class forum to a larger group, many of whom are physically distant. It can be pleasant to cooperate with others to produce a joint result, and students enjoy the sense of group solidarity and warmth that often results.

Disadvantages

Group work:

- may lead to discipline problems. Some teachers fear that by moving out of the role of manager and leader, and fragmenting the class, they will lose control, particularly with young or adolescent groups in schools. Students might start using the L1 too much, make a lot of noise, and may not in fact be engaged in the task at all. The problem of going off-task and using L1 is even more acute if you are teaching online, since you cannot monitor more than one group at a time. For these reasons, many teachers – particularly novices, or ones who are coping with an unruly class – avoid group work completely, in spite of its advantages.

It may not lead to much learning. Interaction within a group, even if based on exchanging information, may lead to minimum actual speech in English, limited to words or phrases that convey essential information, and not giving much opportunity for substantial language use (Seedhouse, 1999). And if the task is such that it could have been done by an individual, many of the members of the group may not participate at all.

It may not suit some learners. Some students do not like it because it simply does not fit their individual learning style: they prefer a teacher-led classroom, or working on their own. Some may simply not be used to it if it is not part of their 'culture of learning'. Others think that working with other students does not result in serious learning: they feel they should be learning from the teacher, not from each other.

Is that's the answer?

The situation of students going off-task, over-using the L1, making a lot of noise, and so on during group work is a very real one in some classes. There are two points to be made here.

First, some of these events may not be as negative as they seem. If the task involves talking, then in a conventional classroom there will be a lot of noise – which is not necessarily a bad thing! And using L1 is not necessarily counterproductive either. In many cases, some L1 use can help students perform the task more effectively, while leaving plenty of time for use of English. It is true that L1 use can get out of hand, so you need as far as you can (very difficult, of course, particularly if you are teaching online) to keep an eye on what is happening and limit it as you feel necessary. Student monitors within the group whose job it is to make sure students are speaking English most of the time can be useful here.

Second, you can often prevent clearly counterproductive developments, such as students misinterpreting the task or failing to do it altogether, through the design of the task. For example, if the groups have been set the goal of reaching a decision on a controversial topic in order to get practice in talking, you need to make sure that both objectives are achieved, and that they do not just all agree with the first person who suggests a decision! You could, for example, make it a rule that everyone has to express an opinion, or give each member of the group a role to play. Efficient management of process is also crucial: how to present, manage and close group activities (this is discussed in detail in 4 Tasks).

Even with the best task design and organization, some classes may not like group work, for any of the reasons listed earlier. In such cases, it might help to explain to the class why it is important to do occasional group tasks, give them opportunities to express how they feel about it, and agree together with them how much, or how little, you will do it.

Conclusion

Group work is only valuable when it enables good learning and/or helps motivation. In some classes it may be really difficult to do successfully, so you don't need to feel guilty if you use it only rarely. A lot of good classroom learning is based on full-class work led by the teacher, and individual work is also important, as discussed below. However, do try to include some group work, even if only occasionally. It adds variation, it provides

opportunities for students to talk in English, it suits the learning style of many students and helps to build relationships between students and promotes learner autonomy.

3.3 Individual work

In individual work, each student works on their own. All the students may be doing the same task, in which case the fact that they are working alone means that they can do the task at their own pace. In some cases, they may be able to decide how much of the task they do, or even choose which to do of a set of different tasks.

Self-access centres

The concept of *individualized learning* in education is sometimes identified with the provision of a self-access centre. In a self-access centre, different materials may be made available: audio and video equipment, computers or other digital devices with language learning software and internet access, a library of books, worksheets, games and puzzles in areas where people can simply sit and chat in English and so on. In principle, the students themselves choose where to work and how to engage with the tasks they have selected.

Such centres still exist, but are less popular than they used to be, and mostly limited to well-endowed institutions of higher education. A major issue is expense. Self-access centres cost a lot to set up, in terms of both money and work; they also need constant maintenance and replenishing. Another problem is the fact that most students need a structure to their learning: without a clear programme, deadlines, goals and set tasks, many students feel uncomfortable, lose motivation and find it difficult to concentrate and get things done. To address this, the teacher can provide a preset plan which provides a clear structure for student work. For example, each student has to work on a certain number of specific topics and keep a record of what they have done. The downside of this is, of course, that the teacher needs to monitor who does what, make sure that not too many students are trying to use the same resource at the same time, and check task completion. With a large class, this can be very demanding.

Individualization within a conventional classroom

A measure of individualization can, however, be provided within a conventional classroom. The teacher can provide a limited number of tasks and invite students to choose what they want to do from the range provided, or leave each student the freedom to choose how much of a set task they wish to do. Such strategies provide a useful alternative to the conventional lockstep learning, where everyone in the class is expected to do the same thing at the same time.

Below is a list of classroom procedures that allow for varying degrees of individual learner choice within a regular classroom.

- **Individualized teacher questioning.** The teacher invites students to volunteer oral answers to a conventional exercise. However, instead of initiating the question, the teacher invites each student to choose any question from the exercise to which they think they know the answer and raise their hands to volunteer a response. The

tasks are thus covered in an order determined by the students, and the teacher does not have to wait for any that remain at the end.

• **Individual textbook exercises.** The teacher tells the student which textbook exercise(s) they are going to work on – grammar, vocabulary, comprehension or any other type – and asks them to find all the questions they know they can answer and do them in their own time. Later, answers can be checked by the teacher, and students can get together in pairs to check answers, calling the teacher over if there are any uncertainties.

• **Homework assignments.** All the class are given the same assignment, but told to spend as much time as they can (or however much time the teacher feels appropriate) to do as much of it as they can. They work at their own speed and are not necessarily expected to complete the task.

• **Individual worksheets.** The teacher distributes print worksheets, or directs students to digital ones, that include a variety of language tasks at an appropriate level. Students are invited to choose sections they want to do and to complete as much as they can in the time given. In a conventional classroom, a pile of worksheets each with a different task can be placed on the teacher's desk: each student takes one, does the task, returns it and takes another.

• **Digital tasks.** If each student has access to an individual digital device, the teacher prepares links to a number of different websites with different tasks: reading texts with comprehension work, grammar exercises, tasks based on online searches, vocabulary work, dictionary work and so on, and displays these on the board. Students choose which to do.

• **Extensive reading.** Students choose individual simplified readers, of varied level and topic, from a school library, or download to a digital device, and read at their own pace for a set time, either at home or in the lesson (see 10 Teaching reading, Section 6).

• **Writing.** Students are given five or ten minutes to write as much as they can on a given topic.

These activities are individualized to different extents and in different ways, depending on what aspect of the task can be varied. The main such aspects are the following, listed in order of amount of individualization and personal choice available to the student.

• **Speed.** Each student works at their own pace at a single assignment given to all the class and does as much as they can in the time given.

• **Quantity.** Each student may choose how much or how little of the given task to complete and how much time they spend on it.

• **Level.** A number of tasks, or questions within a single exercise, all on the same topic, or targeting the same language point but at different levels of difficulty, are available, so each student can choose the one(s) they can do.

• **Task.** Students can choose what they do from a wide variety of tasks selected and made available by the teacher, which focus on different aspects of fluency or accuracy in English.

Pause for thought

Look at the list of individualized procedures shown on page 37. Have you experienced any of them, as teacher or as student? Which can you imagine yourself, as a teacher, using in class?

Comment

Note that the formats that afford most differentiation and individualization are those which also demand most investment on the part of the teacher in preparation, monitoring and post-task feedback. On the other hand, some simple alterations in instructions as to how to approach a conventional exercise (as in 'individualized teacher questioning', for example) can provide students with substantial individual choice as to how much of a task they decide to do or how fast they feel they need to work.

3.4 Varied interactions

Many useful tasks used in the classroom involve a combination of teacher-led, group and individual work, or fluid groups.

First, there are those activities which involve different stages. A teacher may ask students to do a task individually or in groups, and then come together to check results in a teacher-led process. Alternatively, a teacher-led preparatory stage – for example, brainstorming ideas or preparing vocabulary for a writing assignment – can precede individual work on written composition.

Some classic language-learning procedures, such as 'dictogloss', are based on more extended combinations.

Dictogloss. This begins with the teacher reading aloud a text while students take notes. Students then come together in small groups to try to reconstruct the original text as nearly as they can based on their notes. Next, the teacher reads the text again, and students return to groups to polish their versions. Finally, the teacher leads a full-class final session comparing the original text with students' versions.

Second, there is fluid interaction between groups, where individuals move between groups or exchange partners.

Jigsaw. In jigsaw activities, each group works on understanding a part of a story. They then break up, and new groups are formed, each composed of one member from each of the parent groups. The new groups then pool the information each member has from the parent group in order to reconstruct the full story. The same can be done based on other kinds of text, or on discussion of topics or questions.

Mingling. In a mingling process, students move around the classroom, meeting classmates for brief conversations before breaking off and meeting others. 'Find someone who...' is one example of this. Each student has a worksheet with a list of kinds of people to find (e.g., 'Find someone who has a dog', 'Find someone who likes chewing gum') and goes around meeting classmates and asking and answering in order to fill in names for each item. Another variation is the 'getting to know you' activity, where each student meets one other student and they exchange names and some personal information for a minute or two, before breaking off and talking to someone else.

There are some other interactions, involving a combination of individual and collaborative work.

Interdependence. Students interact with each other through writing notes. In a conventional classroom, each student is allotted a partner, writes them a question on a piece of paper and delivers it. Each partner then answers the question, writes another question in response, and so on. The same activity can be done online using text messaging, through WhatsApp or any other texting tool.

Pass it on. Each student gets a worksheet which requires a large number of responses; filling in responses to a given set of words, for example, or answering a set of questions, or brainstorming written responses to an open-ended cue. Each student fills in as much as they can in two minutes; they then pass the sheet on to a neighbour who fills in more and so on. A similar process can also produce a collaborative story. Each student writes a sentence beginning 'Once upon a time...' and passes it on; the next student writes a sentence to continue the story, and passes it on. The same can be done to produce a poem. 'Pass it on' can be run in the full class, or in small groups.

Review! Check yourself

1. How many reasons can you think of for teacher questioning in the classroom?
2. What are some key characteristics of effective questioning in the classroom?
3. What kinds of responses might the teacher want to elicit, other than individual student spoken answers?
4. What are some advantages of using group work?
5. Can you give examples of individualized classroom procedures during which students can work at their own speed? Choose how much to do? Choose their own language level? Choose their own task?
6. Can you give an example of an activity which combines group and individual work?

Further reading

- Teacher questioning
 Bruldi Timmins, A. C. (1998). Classroom questions. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 6(1), 6.
 (A brief, useful summary of the main issues in teacher questioning)
- Tsui, A. (2001). Classroom interaction. In Carter, R. and Nunan, D. (Eds.) *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (pp. 120–125). Cambridge University Press.
 (A discussion of the various aspects of classroom interaction, focusing particularly on teacher questioning processes)
- Group and individual work
 Jacobs, G. M. and Hall, S. (2002). Implementing cooperative learning. In Richards, J. C. and Renandya, W. A. (Eds.) *Methodology in Language Teaching* (pp. 52–58). Cambridge University Press.
 (Practical tips on the organization of group work in English lessons)
- McDonough, J. and Shaw, C. (2003). *Materials and Methods in ELT: A Teacher's Guide* (2nd Edition). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
 (See Chapters 11 and 12 for some useful discussion of group and pair work, and individualization, focusing on self-access facilities)
- Scrivener, J. (2012). *Classroom Management Techniques*. Cambridge University Press.
 (Some useful guidance on the management of group work (see particularly pp. 199–225))

References

- Davis, P. and Rinvolutri, M. (1988). *Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Seedhouse, P. (1999). Task-based interaction. *ELT Journal* 53(3), 149–156.

Tasks

Overview

- 1.1 **The language-learning task.** A definition and some features of good classroom tasks.
- 1.2 **Task evaluation.** The features described in the previous section applied as criteria for the evaluation of the effectiveness of different tasks.
- 1.3 **Organizing tasks.** Aspects of the presentation and practical classroom management of tasks.
- 1.4 **Interest.** How to stimulate and maintain student interest in doing tasks.
- 1.5 **Homework.** Different homework tasks and ways of checking them.

The language-learning task

A task is defined here as a learner activity that a) aims to enhance learning of some aspect of language, and b) has an outcome that can be discussed or evaluated. It could be a grammar exercise, a problem-solving activity or a writing assignment. It thus excludes tasks which are designed to assess rather than produce learning. Note also that this is a wider definition of the word *task* than that used in the methodology called 'task-based language teaching' (Ellis et al., 2019), which focuses on communicative tasks as a vehicle for language acquisition.

The following are some underlying practical principles of good language-learning task design.

1. **Validity.** The task should activate students primarily in the language items or skills it is intended to teach or practise. This is an obvious principle that is surprisingly often violated. For example, oral fluency tasks based on full-class discussions actually allow for very little oral fluency practice by most of the class, as relatively few students get a chance to speak: it's better to divide them into small groups or pairs for this purpose (see 1.5 Teaching speaking).
2. **Quantity.** Roughly speaking, the more English the students actually understand and engage with during performance of the task, the more they are likely to learn. If the time available for the activity is seen as a container, then this should be filled with as much volume of language and language activity as possible. So you need to make sure that if, for example, you are practising a particular grammatical form, then students repeatedly engage with it (receptively or productively) in different contexts; if you are doing an activity aimed at improving listening, then you need to ensure that the students actually do a lot of listening. And you should try to activate as many

students as possible simultaneously rather than one by one, minimizing time spent on classroom management or organization, or on fruitless puzzling out or not knowing. Many word games and puzzles, for example, such as sorting out scrambled words or wordsearches, involve the students spending most of their time looking for, rather than finding, the answers, and waste a lot of potential learning time on not knowing, when they could have been using it for engaging meaningfully with the target vocabulary.

- **Success-orientation.** On the whole, we learn by doing things right. Continued inaccurate use of language items leads to stabilization of errors: in other words, learners get used to saying or writing language forms that are wrong, in the sense of being less acceptable by the standards of EPIC (see 1 Teaching English today), and will find it increasingly difficult to correct them. This is not to say that there is no place for error and error correction; however, errors should be seen not as failures, but as steps on the way to success: corrections and explanations by the teacher are a transitional step whose function is to make students aware of what they have done wrong (as defined above) in order to raise their awareness of how to do it right, or more appropriately. They then need plenty of opportunities to perform successfully in the use of target forms and skills in order to consolidate learning. It is therefore important to select, design and administer tasks in such a way that students are likely to succeed in doing them most of the time. Repeated successful performance is also likely to reinforce the students' self-image as successful language learners and encourage them to take up further challenges.
- **Flexibility of level.** A good task provides opportunities for students to engage with it at all, or most, of the different levels of proficiency within a class. For example, if you give a learning task which (like most grammar exercises in coursebooks) invites single predetermined 'right answers', then it caters only to one level, and a substantial proportion of your class will not benefit very much. A cue which invites a number of responses at different levels is likely to cater to a wider range of levels. See 20 Learning differences 2: diversity and inclusion for more on ways of adapting tasks to make them doable by students at different levels.
- **Interest.** If the task is relatively easy because of its success-orientation, and if there is a lot of repetition of target forms resulting from the principle of quantity, then there is obviously a danger that the task might become boring. Boredom is not only an unpleasant feeling in itself, it also leads to student inattention, low motivation and ultimately less learning. However, if interest is not based on the challenge of getting the answers right, it has to come from other aspects of the activity: an interesting topic, the need to convey meaningful information, a game-like task, attention-catching materials, appeal to students' feelings or a challenge to their intellect or creativity. See Section 4 for more discussion of this issue.

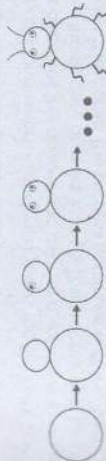
4.2 Task evaluation

The principles presented in the previous section can serve as a useful set of criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of classroom tasks such as those illustrated in the Pause for thought below.

Pause for thought

Go back to look at the scenarios described below. How effective do you think the learning tasks are? How might you improve them? Then read the comments on pages 44–46.

Scenario 1: Spelling: 'Hangman'. The teacher writes seven dashes on the board to represent letters in the word they are thinking of and invites the students to guess what the letters are. They start guessing letters. For each letter they guess right, the teacher writes it above the appropriate dash. For each one they guess wrong, the teacher adds another line to a drawing (traditionally a 'hangman', but today I prefer to use a beeble, as below). The students try to fill in all the letters of the word before the teacher completes the drawing.



Scenario 2: Listening comprehension. The class listen to the following recorded text:

There is a gas composed of molecules possessing three oxygen atoms each (as distinct from oxygen, which has two atoms per molecule). It exists in large quantities in one of the upper layers of the atmosphere, known as the stratosphere, between 20 and 50 kilometres above the surface of the Earth. The ozone layer lets out a large proportion of the sun's ultraviolet rays and thus protects us from the harmful effects of excessive exposure to such radiation.

The teacher then tells the students to open their books and answer the following questions.

- 1 The passage is discussing the topic of a) radiation, b) oxygen, c) ozone, d) molecules.
- 2 Ozone molecules are different from oxygen molecules in that they a) have three atoms of oxygen, b) exist in large quantities, c) may have one or two atoms, d) have one atom of oxygen.
- 3 The stratosphere is a) above the atmosphere, b) below the atmosphere, c) more than 20 kilometres above the surface of the Earth, d) more than 50 kilometres above the surface of the Earth.
- 4 The ozone layer a) prevents some harmful radiation from reaching the earth, b) stops all ultraviolet rays from reaching the Earth, c) protects us from the light of the sun, d) involves excessive exposure to ultraviolet rays.

from the beginning and think of a procedure that will induce students to engage with their spelling throughout the task time (see, for example, *Recall and share in 11 teaching writing*).

Scenario 2: Listening comprehension. This is a listening activity which in fact provides little opportunity to listen: it lacks validity. There is more reading than listening: the written text (the questions) is longer than the listening, and more time is spent dealing with it during the procedure as a whole. The task relies heavily on memory rather than on ongoing comprehension: students need to recall accurately a set of facts presented very densely and quickly. This may be extremely useful for those who do not have the underlying knowledge in advance, since it is based on a subject which may be unfamiliar to them. If, on the other hand, they did know the information, then they would probably be able to answer most of the questions without listening at all. The task also scores low on quantity (the listening text is very short) and on flexibility (there are no opportunities for giving responses at different levels). The text would be improved if it were longer, with the information given less densely. A better task might be to ask students to take notes on the text as they hear it, and then compare with each other or with a replay of the original text. Alternatively, brief questions might be given in advance, so that students can think out for the answers and note them down as they hear them (see **8 Teaching listening**).

Scenario 3: Grammar. A lot of the students' time and energy is spent reading the cue sentences, which do not include the target feature at all. This means that the task is of dubious validity. Moreover, the whole exercise produces only six responses using the target structure, so there is little quantity. And, since each response is linked to one right answer, the task does not allow for flexibility of level. Finally, it is not very interesting! The exercise could be improved by deleting the verb in each cue sentence at the end of the cue items, and inviting students to account for the given situation each time by various statements using the present perfect. The first sentence, for example, might elicit a number of sentences like: *She has forgotten to put them in her bag. She has left them on the bus. She has dropped them. Her brother has taken them. Someone has stolen them. The dog has buried them.* Such a strategy is likely to solve most of the problems. It is a little more demanding in terms of creative or critical thinking and effort, though not necessarily much more difficult in terms of language knowledge. (For more on such adaptations see **10 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion, Section 3.**)

Scenario 4: Vocabulary. This may look like a caricature of a vocabulary teaching procedure; but I have seen it happen. The task is based on elicitation of information from students; but it is information which they simply do not have, so they cannot do the task. It is obviously failure-oriented, and most of the time is spent 'not knowing': a waste of time – no validity, and very little quantity – as well as increasing students' feelings of frustration and inferiority. If the teacher wished to base a task on elicitation of meanings of vocabulary, they should immediately focus on provided contexts or hints that would help students to succeed, or allowed

When the students have finished, the teacher asks volunteers for their answers, accepting or correcting as appropriate.

Scenario 3: Grammar exercise: the present perfect. The students are studying the following exercise that requires them to produce sentences in the present perfect.

- 1 Lina is looking in her bag, but she cannot find her keys. (*lose*)
- 2 The Browns live in that house on the corner, but they are not there now. (*go away*)
- 3 Mark and Dan are delighted. (*pass the test*)
- 4 Becky won't be playing today. (*break her leg*)
- 5 Sam will be late. (*have an accident*)

The teacher asks for answers. A student answers the first item: 'Lina has lost her keys'. The teacher approves this answer and asks for a volunteer to answer the second item. This time the student answers wrongly. The teacher asks for another student to provide a correct response. The process continues until the exercise is finished.

Scenario 4: Vocabulary. Teacher: Who knows the meaning of the word *disappointment*? (Puzzled looks: a student hesitantly puts up his hand.) Yes?

Student 1: Write a point?

Teacher: No... anyone else? (Silence) Come on, think everybody, try again!

Student 2: Lose a point?

Teacher: No, it has nothing to do with points. Try again. It has something to do with feelings.

(After another few guesses, the last of which, after broad hints from the teacher, comes fairly near, the teacher finally gives the correct definition.)

Comment

Scenario 1: Spelling: 'Hangman'. The task as described here is apparently intended to practise the spelling of a word. But out of the minute or so spent by the students on the guessing process, they engage with the actual spelling of the target word for only a few seconds at the end. The rest of the time is spent on more or less random calling out of letters, or on mistaken guesses. In other words, we have an activity about nine-tenths of which contributes little or nothing to engagement with the target language feature: it lacks both validity and quantity. This is an interesting example of a task which is superficially attractive – motivating and fun for both students and teacher, as well as demanding little preparation – but which, when carefully analysed, proves to have very little learning value. If we wish to practise the spelling of a set of words, then it is better to display the words

them to refer to dictionaries. But it might be better in this case to abandon the 'elicitation' aspect altogether: simply provide an explanation or translation of the target vocabulary, and then use the time saved for a task which gives opportunities to use it purposefully and interestingly in context. For example, the teacher could invite a number of students to describe situations when they or someone they know experienced *disappointment*. (See **6 Teaching vocabulary**.)

Organizing tasks

4.3

The success of a task in bringing about learning and engaging students depends not only on good initial task design, but also on how you actually run it. Here are some guidelines about what to do before, during and after a classroom task to make sure it works.

Before the task

Prepare a reserve activity. Sometimes individuals, groups or pairs finish early. If you want other students to continue work, then you need to be ready with something for the fast workers to do while the others are finishing: an extension or variation of the original activity, reading, something from the coursebook or a short further task.

Giving instructions

Make sure students are attending. Everyone has to be listening when you are giving instructions; otherwise they may do the task wrong, or spend time telling each other or getting you to repeat yourself. It is worth waiting an extra minute or two before you start giving instructions to make sure that everyone is attending. This is particularly true if the task involves getting into small groups or pairs. Give the instruction before dividing the class into groups: once they are in groups, students' attention may be directed to each other rather than to you.

Repeat. A repetition or added paraphrase of the instructions may make all the difference. Students' attention may wander occasionally, and it is important to give them more than one chance to understand what they have to do. Also, it helps to present the information again in a different mode: if it's not too long, both say it and write it up on the board, and/or ask students themselves to recap the main points.

Keep it brief. Make your instruction as brief as you can to leave maximum time for the task itself. This means thinking fairly carefully about what you can omit, as much as about what you should include! In some situations, it may also mean using students' L1 as a more accessible and shorter alternative to a long or tricky English explanation, then again, leaving more time for the doing of the task itself.

Give examples. Very often an instruction only comes together for an audience when illustrated by an example, or preferably more than one. If it is a textbook exercise, do the first one or two items with the students. If it is a communicative task, perform a rehearsal with a volunteer student or two, to show how it is done.

not students to show they've understood. It's not enough just to ask, 'Do you understand?'; students will sometimes say they did, even if they did not, out of politeness or unwillingness to lose face, or because they think they know what they have to do when in fact they have completely misunderstood! It is useful to ask them to do something that will show their understanding: to paraphrase in their own words or, if you have given the instruction in English, to translate into their L1. This also functions as an extra repetition for those who missed something earlier.

End. Students how it will end. If the task is based on group or individual work, then give information about how much time they have, how you intend to stop them, whether or not you'll give them advance notice a minute or two before stopping.

During the task

Provide ongoing support. Ongoing teacher support is likely to increase the chances of students doing the task successfully and learning well. In a teacher-led interactive process, this involves such things as allowing plenty of time to think, making the answers easier through giving hints and guiding questions, or confirming beginnings of responses in order to encourage continuations. In group or individual work, it means being there for the students, available to answer questions or provide help where needed.

Give feedback. It is important to provide a feedback stage whose main function is to signal off the task: by evaluating results, commenting on the work done and signalling an end to the activity as preparation for moving on to the next one. A task based on group and individual work usually has a clear outcome which can be used as the basis for a full-class feedback stage. If it is problem-solving, elicit and discuss the solutions that different groups have come up with. If it is a brainstorming activity, pool their ideas on the board. If it is a discussion, comment on their suggestions and ideas ... and so on.

Pause for thought

Think about a recent lesson you observed or participated in – not necessarily a language lesson. How did the teacher run the tasks? Could the process have been improved by using one or more of the suggestions above?

Interest

Probably the best way to explore the reasons why some tasks arouse and maintain student interest, and others don't, is to try to analyse the differences in interest between pairs of tasks that have similar teaching aims.

Pause for thought

Compare the pairs of tasks described below. Which, in your opinion, is the more interesting of each pair, and why?

- 1 **Spelling: the spelling and pronunciation rule of the suffix -ion**
Task A. Students are asked to brainstorm in groups as many words as they can that end in -ion. The teacher pools all their ideas on the board and makes sure that everyone knows what they mean.
Task B. The following words are dictated: *prevention, intervention, instruction, intention, conception, nation, reaction, eviction, distraction, direction*. Students write them down, the teacher checks and corrects.
- 2 **Vocabulary: reviewing a set of words learnt from a text.** The words are written on the board.
Task A. The teacher invites students to take any one word of their choice, and compose any sentence that contextualizes it.
Task B. The teacher invites students to take any two words of their choice and compose a sentence with them that contextualizes them.
- 3 **Vocabulary: learning and understanding a set of words describing emotions and moods**
Task A. Students complete the following sentences on their own to describe experiences they have had, and then share with partners. *I was angry because ... I was sad although ... I felt jealous when ... I was tense although ... I was confident because ...*
Task B. Students do the following matching exercise on their own, and then check with partners.

1 angry	a unhappy and angry because someone has something you want
2 sad	b having a strong feeling against someone or something that makes you want to shout or hurt them
3 jealous	c nervous, anxious, unable to relax
4 tense	d sure or trusting
5 confident	e unhappy or sorry

- 4 **Grammar: there is / there are.** The teacher displays a picture that shows a lot of different people, things and activities.

Task A. In small groups, the students suggest and write down sentences using *there is / there are* that apply to the picture. Later, the teacher elicits from each group the sentences they had thought of.

Task B. In small groups, the students suggest sentences using *there is / there are* that apply to the picture. They are told they have one minute to think of and say as many as they can. They do not write anything down; a secretary notes a tick (✓) for each sentence anyone produces. The teacher stops them after exactly one minute and asks the groups how many ticks they have.

Comment

Spelling: the spelling and pronunciation rule of the suffix -ion. Task A is more interesting to do, mainly because words are chosen by the students; they are therefore more likely to have some sense of ownership of the items. All things being equal, an activity which calls on students to initiate ideas themselves rather than repeat or be tested on a set of given items is likely to be more interesting. Connected to this is the fact that the task is open-ended (there are a number of right answers); it is almost always more interesting to produce or hear a response that is not predetermined or predictable, as we shall see with other examples below. Finally, there is the aspect of collaboration: the students are working in a team, which means not only that they can enjoy working together, but also that the result is likely to be more successful.

Vocabulary: reviewing a set of words learnt from a text. Both tasks here are open-ended and allow for student creativity and initiative; but the second is significantly more interesting to do. The difference in this case is produced by the added challenge of connecting two items, which involves the use of higher-order thinking skills: looking for a connections between two concepts and contextualizing it in a statement. You can create a range of challenges based on higher-order thinking challenges: asking students to make false statements with given words, for example, or to work on classification, sorting the words into different groups.

Vocabulary: learning and understanding a set of words describing emotions and moods. In this case, it is Task A which is the more interesting to do. Like the previous ones, it requires student initiative and is open-ended; here, however, we have the added dimension of personalization and real interpersonal communication. The students are relating the target items to their own experiences and sharing these experiences with one another. Finally, there is the less obvious aspect of the use of higher-order thinking skills: in this case, temporal or logical relations, demanded by the conjunctions *when, because, although, etc.*, which make the students think a bit more deeply about the meanings of their sentences.

Grammar: there is / there are. Task B is based on Task A, but it is far more interesting and feels a bit like a game. Participants feel a slight rise in adrenalin, produced by the challenge to produce as many sentences as they can before

time runs out. The game-like effect is produced by the combination of a clear and easily achievable objective (making simple sentences), along with a constraint, or rule, which makes it more challenging: in this case, the time limit. Other interesting producing factors here are the collaboration, and the use of the visual focus of a picture.

Summary

The main practical principles contributing to interest in the design of classroom tasks can be summarized as follows:

- **Initiative:** students initiate their own ideas in response to the task.
- **Open-ended:** students produce a number of different, equally acceptable, ideas.
- **Collaboration:** students work together to produce a better result than they could have done on their own.
- **Success:** students succeed in achieving the task objective.
- **Higher-order thinking:** students are challenged to think about causes and effects, categories, connections, priorities and so on, rather than just recalling or saying simple sentences.
- **Personalization:** students express their own experiences, opinions, tastes or feelings.
- **Game-like activity:** students experience a feeling of playing a game, produced by the combination of a clear and easily achieved objective, together with 'rules': constraints that limit how they can achieve it (a time limit is one of the easiest to implement).
- **Visual focus:** students use a picture or other visual stimulus which functions as a basis for the task.

4.5 Homework

Research indicates that homework makes a substantial contribution to learning, and becomes an increasingly important factor in learning as students get older and/or more advanced (Cooper et al., 2006). Not only does it provide opportunities for more learning or review than would be possible only in lesson time, it is also an investment in future learning. Eventually, after students leave school, their continued progress will depend largely or entirely on their own ability to study on their own initiative: reading books, internet texts, for example, or conversing with other English speakers. So homework is not only a way to provide extra opportunities for language study outside the lesson, but also an investment in the future, in that it fosters students' ability to work on their own autonomous learners and to progress independently of the teacher.

Pause for thought

Think all from your own schooldays one homework assignment, or type of assignment, that you remember as being a waste of time, and another that you feel was worthwhile and learning-rich. What were the factors that made the difference?

Comment

When I have done the task above with teachers, a lot of them recall assignments based on learning by heart of texts as a waste of time; however, some admit that they hated this at the time, but later found that their ability to recall chunks of text they were forced to learn – poems, for example – was rewarding and valuable. When asked which assignments were felt to be more interesting and worthwhile, many recalled those which required some kind of initiative on their part – doing research for projects, for example. It also made a huge difference if the teacher explained in advance why they were giving the assignment.

Types of homework tasks

Most homework tasks fall under one of the three types listed below.

Repetition review. A lot of language learning depends on repetition for its success. Homework is one way of ensuring that the necessary review takes place, and leaves more classroom time available for learning new material, explanation and discussion. So use homework to get students to re-read texts, to review vocabulary or to do grammar exercises. It's worth explaining to the students why this is important for their success in learning. There are many routine language-practice tasks available online, with built-in checking and correction facilities.

Review and preparation. Homework is less commonly used to anticipate upcoming lessons, but it can be usefully exploited to do so. For example, students can be asked to find out all they can from the internet about the subject of a text you intend to work on with them, or to read through a new text and look up words they did not know in a dictionary, or to prepare presentations. The *flipped classroom* model is based on the idea that students watch a video, or read or listen to material in advance, leaving more lesson time with the teacher available for tasks based on information that they have already studied (see more on this in 18 Digital technology and online teaching).

Creative assignments. It's important to give occasional assignments that demand some kind of open-ended response on the part of the students. Such assignments are more interesting to do, and provide opportunities for personal initiative and creativity. They can be as simple as multiple answers to a brainstorming cue ('How many ... can you think of that ...?'); or suggesting alternative answers to questions given in the textbook. They can also be longer and more demanding: creative writing assignments (see 11 Teaching writing), recording presentations (see 9 Teaching speaking) or

doing projects based on information from the internet. These, of course, demand more work from the teacher in responding and giving feedback, but are ultimately probably the most rewarding type of homework in terms of learning outcomes and motivation.

Giving feedback on homework tasks

Often teachers use the first part of the lesson to go through the homework students have just done, eliciting answers from different members of the class, checking and correcting. This can be very time-consuming: it substantially cuts down the amount of time available for all the other things you want to get through in a lesson. Also, review of the homework often does not contribute much to learning. It is much more learning-productive for the students, and saving of lesson time, to take in notebooks and check homework assignments at home. If you have time, if you have large classes and cannot find time to check all assignments, some things that can help are using online tools like 'check changes' to correct written work submitted in electronic form, and selective checking (see **Practical tips** below). Alternative strategies are simply to provide the right answers (if the exercise produces single answers to each item), either written up on the board or dictated by you, so that students can self-check. Or give five minutes in the course of the lesson for students to check each other's homework in small groups, calling on you only if they have any questions. If homework has involved the preparation of oral presentations then usually these will need to be presented in class; but the feedback can be given later, through email or other types of digital messaging.

Practical tips

- 1 **Don't give homework at the end of the lesson.** Take time during the lesson to explain what it involves, how it will be checked, what options there are, and to answer any questions, and write it up on the board. You can always come back to remind the class what the homework is at the end of the lesson; but if you postpone giving it to the end, you may find you don't have time to explain fully or answer questions. Also, giving homework at the end implies that it is less important than the rest of the lesson.
- 2 **Say why you are giving this assignment.** An explanation of why you are giving the homework assignment can raise student motivation to do it, and expresses respect for the students as partners in the teaching-learning process.
- 3 **Make homework a component of the grade.** When allotting an end-of-term grade include the regular completion of homework assignments as a component: say, 10 percent. This encourages students to do their homework and enables less proficient but hardworking students to raise their grade.
- 4 **Limit homework by time rather than quantity.** Tell students to spend 20 minutes (or whatever you think appropriate) on Exercise X and do as much as they can, rather than just to 'do Exercise X' (see 3 Classroom interaction, Section 3). This means that slower-working students will not have to take hours doing something that other students finished in a few minutes: each will work according to their own speed and ability.

1 **Don't worry too much about students copying from one another.** It is true that copying homework may mean that one student is not learning anything; but there is also the possibility that one is helping the other, which may well promote learning and therefore should not be condemned. And the alternative may be that the weaker student wouldn't do it at all! Ask students to tell you if they worked together so that you know about it, but don't ban it completely.

2 **Encourage students to do their homework online.** Whether or not you are teaching the course through videoconferencing, it is far easier to monitor who has submitted and who has not, and to correct and give feedback on assignments if homework is done online. This does not only apply to written assignments: it is easy for students to record oral ones on digital recording tools.

3 **Selective checking.** If you have a large class and cannot possibly check all their homework every week, take in, say, one-third of the class's notebooks each week to check, and then the others in later weeks. Use of an online Learning Management system makes this much easier.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Can you define a task in language teaching/learning?
- 2 What are the main characteristics of a good language-learning task?
- 3 What are some possible problems with a listening comprehension task based on an informative spoken text followed by written multiple-choice questions?
- 4 What are some useful guidelines to remember when giving instructions for a task?
- 5 In what ways can a teacher provide ongoing support for students as they perform tasks?
- 6 Can you remember at least three useful tips on giving and checking homework?

Further reading

Johnson, J. (2012). *Classroom Management Techniques*. Cambridge University Press.
(A useful and practical book on all aspects of managing classroom tasks in language teaching)

References

- Cooper, H., Robinson, J. C. and Patall, E. A. (2006). Does homework improve academic achievement? A synthesis of research, 1987-2003. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(1), 1-62.
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Overview

- 5.1 **What is a text?** A definition of what we mean by *text* in the context of English language teaching: *intensive* and *extensive* text study.
- 5.2 **Teaching the text: the goals.** What we want learners to get from text study: comprehension, language learning, and more.
- 5.3 **Comprehension of content.** Teaching procedures before, during and after reading of the text that can facilitate student comprehension; some practical tips.
- 5.4 **Language learning from a text.** The selection and teaching of grammatical and vocabulary items from a text.
- 5.5 **The text as discourse.** Features relating to the text as a whole: genre, style, structure, coherence, cohesion.
- 5.5 **Follow-up tasks.** Some ideas for tasks for later enrichment based on texts.

5.1

What is a text?

A *text* in the present context is a piece of writing or speech which is used for language learning. It can be studied as a complete and autonomous unit: the reader or listener therefore understand it without necessarily knowing the context, even if it was originally an extract from a longer text such as a book, a website or a conversation. It is coherent so it has a beginning, a middle and an end which make a clear sequence of thoughts or events, and belongs to a recognisable genre of speech or writing. The term as it is used here does not therefore normally include things like lists of words to be learnt, sentence that give samples of usage or a grammar exercise.

Usually, a coursebook text ranges in length from a paragraph to a page or two; or, if it is spoken, lasts for a couple of minutes. It may, however, be shorter; it could consist only of a brief poem, a proverb or a quotation (Maley, 1994, see **Further reading**). Texts outside the coursebook may be a good deal longer: several pages of a website, for example; or an entire book or audiobook. In any case, their function in a language course is to provide input which is a basis for language learning.

A distinction needs to be made between *intensive* and *extensive* text study. *Intensive* means that the text is not only understood, but also studied in detail, or milked for the language that can be learnt from it. It is also possibly analysed or used as a springboard for further language work, as described later in this chapter. *Extensive* means that the text is read or heard for pleasure and/or information, but not studied in detail: the main aim is to improve reading or listening fluency, and any language learning is incidental.

Most texts in English courses are used for intensive study, involving language learning in various ways: comprehension work; learning the language items which appear in a text; analysis of content, genre or structure, and as a basis for further work on content or language.

In principle, it is possible to do intensive work on a listening text as well as a reading one, but in practice this is less common. A reading text is much easier to study, review and scan than a listening one, even with rewind and other digital facilities, and the availability of transcripts.

The guidelines in this chapter relate therefore mainly to texts used for intensive reading, though many of them can also be applied to spoken ones.

Teaching the text: the goals

The main goals of teaching the text in a language course are comprehension of content, language learning, discourse analysis, and then, optionally, enrichment through further text based on different aspects of the text.

Comprehension of content

- 1 **General gist.** First, we need to make sure that the students understand the general content: the plot, for example, if it is a narrative, or the ideas presented if it is an informational text.
- 2 **Detailed understanding.** The next stage is more detailed comprehension of the different parts of the text. This often means sentence-by-sentence study, helping students to understand new language as it comes up.
- 3 **Reading between the lines.** You may invite students to infer meanings that are not stated explicitly. In a literary text that involves dialogue, for example, you may find it interesting to discuss the way the speech of different characters shows their personality or motives. Or in an article presenting an argument, learners may be able to elicit the underlying approach or prejudice of the writer, as revealed by their choice of words.
- 4 **Critical analysis.** The text may then be studied critically: students are invited to judge how truthful, consistent, or logical a text is. This is particularly useful when reading

texts that are designed to persuade: political speeches or commercial advertisements. For example, you might want to draw your students' attention to tautology (unnecessary repetition) in phrases like *a free gift*, or internal contradictions in phrases like *an objective opinion*.

Language learning

- Vocabulary.** The most important language-learning benefit of intensive study of a text is arguably vocabulary expansion or review. By drawing attention to new vocabulary and activating students in tasks that involve understanding it, you can help students to notice and learn new items, and review ones they have met before but may need reminding of (see 6 Teaching vocabulary).
- Grammar.** A secondary benefit is the learning of word- or sentence-grammar (morphology and syntax): any text of more than a few lines will provide a number of examples of grammatical features. You will probably ignore the simpler ones that the students already know, but it is useful to draw attention to ones which they have recently learnt. And you may sometimes pick out a grammatical feature new to the class, and spend a few minutes explaining and teaching it, providing further examples from outside the present text (see 7 Teaching grammar). See Section 4 on page 62 for guidelines on how to select language items to teach as well as some practical tips.
- Other language features.** Occasionally, you may want to draw students' attention to other language features, such as style, punctuation or text formatting.
- Aspects of discourse.** These include features that relate to the text as a whole: genre and structure, for example (rather than particular linguistic features such as grammar or vocabulary). Discussion of aspects of discourse can normally only take place after students have thoroughly understood the content of the text, and is more common in relatively advanced classes.
- Follow-up tasks.** Having finished comprehension, language and discourse-analysis work, you may find that many texts provide rich stimuli for further language-learning tasks which involve student production (speech or writing), such as discussions, or creative writing or research projects. These may be based on the actual content of the text or on aspects of the language, style or discourse genre.

All these are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Pause for thought

Look at the coursebook extract shown on the next page (a reading text and its associated Exercises 1–5 and Exercise 9). Which goals from the list above can you identify? Do you have any comments on the way the text is used? Would you add anything? Would you change anything?

VOCABULARY 70 AND SKILLS

Read the text. Answer the questions. Write your answers in the spaces provided.

Vocabulary and Speaking

- Look at these sentences. Which of the words/phrases in bold do you know? Check the meanings in the glossary on page 142.
- I'm on a social networking site such as Facebook, Google+ or Twitter.
- I update my status every day.
- I change my profile quite often.
- I've downloaded one or two new apps recently.
- I sometimes upload videos to websites like YouTube.
- I sometimes post comments on news sites and forums.
- I'm on Twitter and I tweet quite often.
- I also follow some famous people on Twitter.
- I often share links to interesting websites, blogs or videos with my friends.
- Work on your own. Tick the sentences that are true for you.
- Work in pairs. Compare sentences. Ask follow-up questions if possible.

Speaking and Reading

- Work in groups. Discuss these questions. In what ways do social networking sites help people's social lives?
- What problems can social networking sites cause?
- How is social networking affecting teenagers and children, do you think?
- Before you read, check these words/phrases with your teacher or in a dictionary. *colleague* *lonely* *withdrawn* *bullying* *be addicted to*
- Read the article. Which of the ideas that you discussed in 2a are mentioned in the article?

Vocabulary computers (2), articles (4), in, the, no article. Skills Reading a magazine article. Listening in informal conversation

Social networking

- Read the article again. Answer these questions.
- Why doesn't Robin Dunbar think we can have 1,000 friends?
- Why does he think some people collect friends?
- How did people get a free burger from Burger King?
- What does the author think children's charity say about loneliness and online bullying?
- What do some young people find difficult to cope with?
- Why do professional people use a few less LinkedIn?
- Work in pairs. Compare answers. Do you agree with the points discussed in the article? Why/Why not?

The lonely generation?



These days, millions of people are online. They are using social networking sites like Facebook, Google+ or Twitter, and many of them can't go – or even shut off – without checking for status updates. But what effect is this having on us, and how are we coping with it?

The scientist Robin Dunbar suggests that relationships a person's brain can deal with is 150. However, most people have hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of Facebook friends, partly because making friends online is so easy. When you receive a friend request, you just click 'confirm'. You don't have to go to your calculator or enter friends. But do you really want to be friends with everyone who asks? It's not always clear. To illustrate the point, the Burger King chain of restaurants in the US offered to give people a free burger if they deleted 10 friends from their Facebook page. Amazingly, over 520,000 people did just that, which shows how this game people value many of these online friendships.

Experts are also concerned that spending so much time online is making the number of calls that most people make to their friends and family drop. The number of calls that most people make has been dropping for years. In 2007, it was 1.5 calls a day, but by 2012 it had fallen to 1.1 calls a day. In another report, a third of people at LinkedIn said they spent too much time communicating online and not enough in person. So it's not surprising that young people who are addicted to social networking also find it harder to form strong, long-lasting relationships. For them, to be online is to be disconnected from the real world. It's not always clear why this is. It may be that it's harder to form strong, long-lasting relationships when you're not face-to-face.

Of course, not everyone who uses social networking sites has social networking problems. Many professional people use networking sites like LinkedIn to make work contacts. And of course living part of a global professional network means that people can make the most of opportunities anywhere in the world. So if you're working in London or in Beijing, who's moving to London or Beijing? Social networking sites are one of the most effective ways to help your career. And of course, if you're a student, you can use social networking sites to find out about universities and find out what a billion users all over the world are doing. However, the effect these sites are having on our friendships is changing our society forever.

- HELP WITH VOCABULARY**
- Articles: a, an, the, no article
- a Look at the words/phrases in the article. Match one word/phrase to each of these rules.

- We use a or an:
 - when we don't know, or it isn't important, which one.
 - with jobs.
 - to talk about a person or thing for the first time.
- We use the:
 - to talk about the same person or thing for the second, third/fourth, etc. time.
 - when there is only one (or only one in a particular place).
 - with countries that are groups of islands or states.
 - with superlatives.
- We don't use an article:
 - for most towns, cities, countries and continents.
 - to talk about people or things in general.
 - for some public places (school, hospital, etc.) when we talk about what they are used for in general.
- Check in **EXERCISE 2** p.45.
 - Look at the words/phrases in pink in the article. Match them to rules a–j in 4.3. There is one word/phrase for each rule.
 - Work in pairs. Compare answers.

Comment

There is work on comprehension (Exercises 2c and 3), which relates to the main points made by the writer. If I were teaching this text, I would also want students to be aware of the overall gist, or bottom-line message, that the writer is trying to convey. Vocabulary is dealt with in Exercise 1, and the students are invited to relate the items to their own experience in a personalized discussion task (Exercise 1c). I would probably want to add more vocabulary from the text, based on students' level and needs. A grammatical point (rules relating to indefinite and definite articles) is discussed in Exercises 4 and 5, somewhat misleadingly headed 'Help with vocabulary'. There is no discussion of discourse aspects: I would probably want to direct students' attention to the main topics of the different paragraphs, and why they are ordered in this way. An interesting follow-up task is provided in Exercise 9.

5.3 Comprehension of content

The priority in dealing with a text is to get the students to understand it: first the gist, then in more detail.

Before reading the text

Preparatory work before students actually encounter the text can be extremely helpful for comprehension. It can include discussing the topic, pre-teaching vocabulary, raising expectations and asking preliminary questions to which the text will provide the answers.

Presenting the topic. Previous knowledge of the topic is a major factor facilitating text comprehension. So it is a good idea either to give students information about the content of the text in advance, or to elicit it from them by asking questions. In some cases, it may even be appropriate to provide a synopsis in the students' L1 in advance. Students do not necessarily have to discover for themselves what it is about, and they may get a pleasing sense of success as they recognize and understand known content through reading the English version.

Pre-teaching vocabulary. A lot of books and teachers do this routinely, as in the Vocabulary and Speaking section in the textbook extract shown on pages 57–58.

Research indicates it has some value for text comprehension (Pellicer-Sánchez et al., 2022), but possibly not as much as one might expect. Teaching a lot of vocabulary in advance overloads students' short-term memory, and they often do not remember the meanings when they encounter them in the text. Discussing the topic in advance may be more conducive to eventual understanding of a text (Chang and Read, 2006). So perhaps it's best to pre-teach only a small number of vital items, which may come up anyway during an inductive discussion of content, and to provide clarification of the rest as you go through a glossary or through your own input. An alternative, if the text is not very difficult, is to do without pre-teaching altogether: to engage directly with the reading and teach the vocabulary as it comes up in context, and/or in response to students' questions.

Raising expectations and curiosity. In order to motivate students to engage with the text, a useful strategy is to arouse their curiosity by giving them questions to discuss, in which the text will provide the answers. Alternatively, let them glance at the title, headings and any illustrations, and make guesses or ask questions about the content of the text, or brainstorm what words or phrases they think are likely to come up in it. These types of preliminary questions make comprehension easier when students encounter the text, as well as raising their motivation to read (or listen to) it.

First reading for understanding

In the case of a reading text: sometimes students are asked to prepare it at home before it is studied in class, but more often the text is encountered for the first time in a lesson. There are three main ways this is done: the students read along while listening to the text, either on a recording or being read by the teacher; students read it silently; students read sections aloud, in turn.

In many cases, a difficult reading text encountered for the first time will be best understood if the teacher reads it aloud at an appropriate speed (or plays a recording, if there is one) while the students read along. There is some evidence that this can be an effective strategy to support learner comprehension (see, for example, Amer, 1997). If you do this, keep occasional eye contact with your students, and allow yourself to stop now and then to clarify or check comprehension. A more challenging alternative is to allow silent reading – provided that the text is not too difficult, there has been some preparation of content and there are glosses of new words available, on the same page or through a hyperlink. If successful, students will have the added bonus that the students can feel satisfied that they have read and understood the text on their own. Asking students to take turns reading aloud a new text is probably the least effective strategy, and does not usually help comprehension very much. This is partly because a student reading aloud focuses on the decoding and pronunciation of

words and does not have much attention to spare for thinking about the meaning of what is read. Also, students often cannot sight-read well enough to communicate the meaning to other members of the class who are listening; certainly not as well as the teacher can. In some learning cultures, however, students are routinely asked to 'sight-read' a new text and are disappointed if the teacher doesn't let them. If you are teaching in a context where this is the case, try to postpone student reading aloud to the second or third time you read the text when students already understand most of it and are likely to be able to read it more fluently and meaningfully.

Pause for thought

How did you feel about being asked to read aloud a new text in the classroom in your own learning of a new language?

Comment

Your answer here will very much depend on how well you read aloud as a learner and how often you and the other students were asked to do so.

Comprehension tasks

Comprehension questions. The most common type of text comprehension task is comprehension questions after hearing or reading the text. But these may not always be very effective, as illustrated in the following **Pause for thought**.

Pause for thought

Read the following passage and answer the following questions.

Yesterday I saw the Polish fletcher gollining begrund the bruck. He seemed very chanderbil, so I did not jorter him, just deaple to him quistly. Perhaps later he will besand candor, and I will be able to rangal to him.

- 1 What was the fletcher doing, and where?
- 2 What sort of a fletcher was he?
- 3 Why did the writer decide not to jorter him?
- 4 How did she deaple?
- 5 What did she hope would happen later?

Comment

If you did this task, you probably found it easy to answer the questions. However, the student who did not show that you had understood the passage. So we can conclude that answering 'comprehension' questions may not always entail comprehension! The reason in this case is that the questions virtually echo the text, and you can answer them without thinking. If the questions are worded differently from the text itself, or require interpretation and application of the reader's own general knowledge, then they are likely to be more effective.

Here is back at the original text on which the nonsense one on page 60 was based, and check out the following comprehension questions, which are designed using the above criteria.

Yesterday I saw the new patient hurrying along the corridor. He seemed very upset so I did not follow him, just called to him gently. Perhaps later he will feel better and I will be able to talk to him.

- 1 What is the problem described here?
- 2 Is this event taking place indoors or outside?
- 3 Did the writer try to get near the patient?
- 4 What do you think she said when she called to him?
- 5 What might the job of the writer be?
- 6 Why do you think she wants to talk to the patient?

These questions demand real comprehension and encourage interpretation of the text as well as being more interesting to do.

Other comprehension tasks. There are other types of comprehension tasks which encourage and monitor understanding. They are often more interesting than the standard comprehension questions and can be just as effective. Working individually or in groups, students might, for example:

- 1 suggest alternative titles and justify them;
- 2 compose their own comprehension questions, then exchange and answer;
- 3 identify the most important sentence in the text (or two, or three) and justify their choice;
- 4 summarize the content (in L1 or L2, orally or in writing);
- 5 represent the content in a different form: as a picture, a list of points, a diagram, a table.

Note that modern online dictionaries often note the level or frequency of headwords in the *Cambridge Dictionary* (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>), for example provides the CEFR level immediately below the headword.

Having said all this about the importance of prioritizing frequent vocabulary – remind students to leave space also for individual student choice! Some students, for example, might want to learn all the new vocabulary in the text, others might find they like particular words/phrases, and want to note down and remember them.

Pause for thought

Choose a text from a coursebook, a newspaper or a website and imagine you are going to use it with an intermediate (B1) class. Identify:

- the items you think are very common and probably already known by students (leave unmarked);
- the items which are not so common but would probably be useful to teach (underline);
- the items which are much more advanced and do not need to be taught in an intermediate class, but might be appropriate for an advanced one (double underline).

Check how your intuitions compare with a corpus-based analysis, by using a website such as one of those suggested on page 63, or an online dictionary that gives frequencies, such as the *Cambridge Dictionary*.

Comment

You'll probably find that your intuitions are usually – though not always – accurate according to corpus-based frequency lists. For any particular student population, the ratings suggested by the profilers may not be appropriate, so you'll need to decide in each case whether to adopt them, or go with your own intuitions.

Grammar, spelling, punctuation, pronunciation. Again, it's useful to note for yourself in advance which features you want to teach or review. As in the case of vocabulary, prioritize features that are more important and frequent, and don't worry too much about ones that are much more advanced than your students' current level. The items you focus on might be ones you have recently taught, minor ones which students might not notice on their own, or usages which are noticeably different from parallel ones in the student I.1. There will always also be points which come up spontaneously during the lesson, perhaps in response to a student question or error, or because you or a student notice something interesting as you work through the text.

Ranking selected items

You (and/or the students) have selected which language features from a text you want to focus on in class, you need to decide how you are going to do so.

Ranking meanings from context. A popular strategy used by many teachers is asking students to work out what a word means from its context. This, however, is not as useful as it might appear. Research indicates that such inferring is unreliable (Kaivanpanah & Aston, 2008), and, interestingly, students very often believe they have guessed rightly when in fact they haven't. This is a strategy, then, to be used with caution, as it might lead to mistaken guesses, frustration and time-wasting. If the meaning of a word is clearly revealed by the surrounding context, then by all means invite students to guess it; if not, then it is probably best just to tell them what it means and move on.

Ranking of time. Stopping for intensive study of particular features as you go through a text may spoil the momentum of the text content itself. It's better to draw students' attention briefly to the words or grammatical forms as you go, and then return to the reading of the text as a whole. Detailed attention to the teaching and review of new language can be postponed to a separate session within the same lesson.

A more detailed discussion of the focused teaching of vocabulary, grammar and features of a text can be found in **6 Teaching vocabulary**, **7 Teaching grammar**, **11 Teaching writing**.

The text as discourse

The term *discourse* relates to macro aspects of the text as a whole, as distinct from the micro aspects of word, phrase or sentence level which have been discussed up to now.

Genre

There is an enormous number of different genres of text, written and spoken, and usually all of them can be exploited for purposes of language learning.

Pause for thought

Think through the lists below of longer and shorter text genres. Then:

1. Cross out any which you feel would be less relevant or useful for a student population you are familiar with, and add any more you feel are missing.
2. Look at a coursebook used with the student population you are thinking of and check how many of the genres in your list you can find.

Longer texts: **written (online or print)**

academic paper	advertisement	advice or guidance	current news
essay	informative text	instructions	narrative
interview chat	plays, written dialogue	poetry	questionnaire

Longer texts: spoken

face-to-face conversation	full-length film	instructions
interview	monologue, talk, lecture	narrative
podcast	radio or television news	telephone conversation
video		

Shorter texts

'one-liner' joke	advice or tip	book or movie title	cartoon caption
diagram	infographic	map	newspaper headline
notice or street sign	saying or proverb	short poem	
short posting to a forum or blog		tweet	

Comment

The coursebooks I looked at contain a surprisingly limited range of text genres. The vast majority of the written texts were informative articles, taken from websites – often blogs – or print media; there were also a few providing guidance on social or health issues. There was no text messaging (see the next section on informal written style). Spoken texts were mostly interviews or chats; less frequent were talks or lectures. I also found virtually no short texts, and surprisingly little narrative. You may find it advisable, therefore, to supplement the texts provided in your coursebook with some other genres from your list; or, if you are not using a coursebook, to make sure that your students get a reasonably wide variety of genres in the texts you provide. A wide variety of texts are easily accessible nowadays through the internet, though you would need to check copyright! (see **18 Digital technology and online teaching**) and it may be necessary in some cases to simplify in order to meet the needs of a particular group of students.

Style

Style refers to the language choices a writer/speaker makes to clarify their message, attract or identify and to impress their reader. These choices can include features such as: choice of grammatical structure(s) and vocabulary; punctuation; use of capitals, spacing, or different fonts in written texts; use of voice quality, volume, intonation, pauses in spoken texts; and use of literary devices such as repetition, alliteration, or figurative language.

Even with less advanced classes, it is worth drawing students' attention to basic stylistic features. For example, you might look at the way the use of contractions such as *can't* shows informality. With more advanced classes, work can be done on the link between genre and style: what stylistic characteristics are shown, for example, in an email text we are studying that do not appear in academic writing, and vice versa? What sorts of language use are typical of newspaper headlines, but rare elsewhere?

An increasingly common style today is very informal writing, as used in texting and posting inserted in blogs or forums. Such texts are rarely seen in course materials, perhaps because

types of writing is still seen as sub-standard by many teachers and materials writers, and so is to be avoided. But besides being on the increase, it is also today, in my view, a more authentic style, which students need to learn about. It is, therefore, worth exposing students to the genres that use it, and raising their awareness of when and where it is appropriate (see **11 Teaching writing**).

Style: coherence and cohesion

Students' attention to how a good text is structured with a beginning, middle and end can help when they come to write their own compositions, or prepare oral presentations. A diagram, table or list can be a way to represent the components clearly and they are ordered. For example, you might summarize the description of the process of fermentation by a flowchart, or chart the main events in a story in a vertical list.

Linked topics is coherence and cohesion: the way the text hangs together. *Coherence* is the way the text as a whole unit of meaning whose parts combine to make sense. *Cohesion* is the way individual paragraphs, sentences or phrases are linked to each other. Cohesion is achieved by means of *cohesive devices*: grammar and lexis which indicate relationships between one chunk of text (word, sentence or paragraph) and another.

Cohesive devices are: conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *yet*, *because*, *although*, *if*; sentence adverbs or adverbial phrases such as *however*, *on the one hand*; in addition, pronouns or possessives such as *the one*, *she*, *their*.

Students can be encouraged to identify cohesive devices within the text.

Course for thought

Read a link of the short text below, or choose one of your own. What might you draw students' attention to with regard to genre, structure, style, coherence and cohesion?

'Hope' is the thing with feathers by Emily Dickinson

'Hope' is the thing with feathers –
that perches in the soul –
and sings the tune without the words –
and never stops – of all –
most beautiful – in the Gale – is heard –
and sore must be the storm –
that could abash the little Bird
that kept so many warm –
I've heard it in the chilliest land –
and on the strangest Sea –
but – never – in Extremity.
I asked a crumb – of me.

Comment

After making sure students have understood the text, you might check out some formal aspects of the text as discourse. The *genre* is clearly poetry, mainly shown in first glance by the *structure*: the text appears as short lines, each beginning with an upper-case letter. The *style* is typical of poetry; it includes the use of metre, rhyme and stylistic features such as extended metaphor, personification and alliteration. As regards *coherence and cohesion*: you might discuss the use of punctuation; the fact that the whole poem is a single sentence (only one full stop at the end); devices are used to divide sense units. For many texts, your discussion of the discourse may be confined to discussion of such aspects. In this case, however, your class may enjoy further discussion of features, expressions and meanings that contribute to its impact as a poem. (See **16 Teaching content, Section 4** on teaching literature.)

5.6 Follow-up tasks

Once your class has finished studying a text, learning its language, and perhaps analysing some aspects of its genre, structure and style, you might want to draw to a close their move on. Or you might want to add additional tasks which use the text as a trigger for further language enrichment work. If you do want to add enrichment tasks, here are some you can give your students, adapted from Maley (2011).

Shorten the text.

- Delete words or phrases from the text, making sure that what remains still makes sense and conveys the message of the original.
- Take out all the adjectives and/or adverbs. What difference does this make to the overall meaning or feel of the text?

Extend the text

- Add adjectives and adverbs wherever you can.
- Add at least one extra sentence within each paragraph, without destroying its coherence.
- Add an introductory paragraph or an extra paragraph at the end.

Change the text

- Insert synonyms of words in the text wherever you can. What difference did this make to the overall impression of the text?
- Change the style of the text: from formal to informal, for example. Or simplify to make the text accessible to less proficient learners.
- Change the genre of the text. For example, if it is written as a poem, rewrite as a newspaper report (try this on the poem shown on page 67).
- (for a monolingual class) Translate (part of) the text into L1. Discuss any interesting translation problems that came up.

Compare the content and style with another text you have studied previously, or with a text one provided by the teacher.

Write your own text

Write your own text based on the genre and structure of the text you have just studied, but on a topic of your own choosing.

Write a personal response to the text. This could be in the form of a letter to the writer, responding to their ideas, or it could be in the form of an essay. In either case, you should make clear your own opinion or interpretation of the ideas brought up in the original text.

Spread knowledge

Discuss the issues raised in the text: either through a class discussion, or online (a forum, an exchange of emails, a blog).

Conduct a survey on issues raised in the text.

Find out more about the content of the text by searching for information from the internet, books, or by asking people you know. Create a presentation displaying the results.

Evaluation and reflection

Evaluate the text: did it achieve its objective? What was good or bad about it? How did you personally respond to it? Did you enjoy studying it?

Reflect on your own learning: what have you learnt, in terms of information, new ways of thinking about things and language?

Review: Check yourself

1. What is meant by *intensive study of a text*?
2. What are some common problems with comprehension questions on texts? How can they be overcome?
3. How might you decide which lexical items from a text to teach and which not?
4. Can you recall at least seven different genres of text that you might use with a class?
5. What aspects of style might you want to draw your students' attention to?
6. How many types of enrichment tasks on texts can you remember?

Further reading

- Driscoll, L. (2004). *Reading Extra*. Cambridge University Press.
(A variety of different reading texts of varying lengths, with some ideas of how to teach them)
- Maley, A. (1994). *Short and Sweet*. Penguin.
(A useful collection of short texts of varied genres, with some very imaginative practical ideas on how they may be treated in the classroom)
- Thornbury, S. (2005). *Beyond the Sentence: Introducing discourse analysis*. Oxford: Macmillan Education.
(A discussion of how written and spoken texts are structured, and how a knowledge of this structure can help us teach a text)

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Teaching vocabulary

- 1.1 **What is vocabulary?** A definition of the word *vocabulary* in the context of English language teaching.
- 1.2 **What students need to learn.** Aspects of lexical items that learners need to learn, associated with their form, meaning and use in context.
- 1.3 **How best to teach vocabulary: some facts and figures.** Research-based information about how vocabulary is most effectively learnt and taught.
- 1.4 **Presenting new vocabulary: selection and presentation.** Choosing which lexical items to teach, and how to present them.
- 1.5 **Vocabulary review.** Later practice and enrichment activities to enhance vocabulary learning.

What is vocabulary?

Vocabulary can be defined, roughly, as the words in the language. However, it may include more than that: for example, *post office* and *mother-in-law*. There are also longer multi-word expressions such as *call it a day*, *in any case*, which express a concept and are stored in the memory as a whole chunk. A useful convention is to refer to all such cases by talking about *vocabulary items* rather than *words*.

The term *vocabulary* is also sometimes taken to include *grammatical items*: pronouns such as *the, someone*, or determiners such as *the, that, any*. These are contrasted with *lexical items* such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. Grammatical items do not have much meaning on their own, but are used to show the relationships with other words within meaningful sentences. They are *closed sets* (it is unlikely that the language will acquire a new pronoun, or another demonstrative to add to *this/that*), whereas lexical items are an *open set* of items are constantly being added, lost or changed.

What students need to learn

The most important things the students need to know about a lexical item are its written and spoken form and its meaning, or meanings. However, there are additional aspects which also need to be learnt at some point: its grammar, collocational links, connotations, and appropriate contexts for use.

Form: pronunciation and spelling

The learner has to know what a word sounds like (its pronunciation) and what it looks like (its spelling). Many people assume that meaning is more important than form: but remember that knowing a meaning is pretty useless without knowing the form it is attached to. In most cases, the learners will encounter a form before they know its meaning, not vice versa – which is why it is put first here.

You may stress either pronunciation or spelling when teaching a particular item: ultimately, students will need to know both. Most English words are pronounced and spelt according to a set of reliable rules (see 11 Teaching writing, Section 5), but where they are not, you will need to teach the irregular form.

Meaning: denotation

The meaning of a word or expression is what it refers to, or denotes, in the real world. This is given in dictionaries as its definition. Sometimes a word may have various meanings: most often these are metaphorical extensions of the meaning of the original word (for example, the *foot* of a mountain, deriving from *foot* as part of the body). But sometimes a word such as *bear* has multiple meanings (*bear* the animal and *bear* meaning 'tolerate') because they are derived from two different words which happen to have developed into the same form (*homonyms*).

Grammar

The grammar of a new item will need to be taught if this is not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An item may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts (for example, the past simple of irregular verbs), or may have some particular way of connecting with other words in sentences (for example, the verb which take *-ing* forms after them (like *enjoy*) rather than the *to* infinitive (like *need*). It is important to provide students with this information when, or soon after, introducing the item itself.

Collocation

Collocation refers to the way words tend to co-occur with other words or expressions. For example, we normally say *tell + the truth* but not **say + the truth*. As in this case, a specific phrase may be grammatically correct and yet sound wrong simply because of inappropriate collocation. More examples: you can *do* your homework, but you cannot *make* it. Similarly you *throw* a *ball* but *toss* a *coin*; you may talk about *a high mountain*, but not **a high person*. Collocations are often, but not always, shown in dictionaries under the headword of one of the collocating items.

Connotation

The *connotations* of a word are the emotional or positive-negative associations that it implies. The words *moist* and *damp*, for example, have the same basic meaning (slightly wet),

but *moist* has favourable connotations while *damp* has slightly unfavourable ones. So you could talk about a *moist chocolate cake*, which sounds appetising, but a *damp cake* would be somewhat distasteful. Many words have only weak connotations or do not have them at all; however, where the connotation is marked, as in the above example, it needs to be taught. The dictionary does not always specify connotations in its definitions, though where these exist, they may often be understood from the examples or collocations provided.

Appropriateness

In order to know how to use an item, the student needs to know in what contexts it is appropriate to use it. Thus, it is useful for a student to know, for a particular item, if it is usually used in writing or in speech, in formal or informal discourse, whether it is commonly used or rare. Some items may be taboo in most social interactions; others may belong to certain varieties of English. For example, learners need to know that the word *crap* is virtually synonymous with *cry*, but it is more formal, tends to be used in writing more than in speech, and is in general much less common.

Pause for thought

How would you present the meanings (denotations) of the words *swim*, *fame*, *childish*, *political*, *impertinence*, *kid*?

For which would you mention their connotations? Collocations? Appropriateness?

Comment

Swim means to move oneself through the water by moving parts of the body; you might clarify by using pictures or mime (it could also be a noun, as in *go for a swim*). It has no particular connotations and collocations, and is neutral as regards context of use. *Fame* means the state of being well known. It has a positive connotation; you would not use the word about someone who is well known because they have done something bad. It has no particular collocations and is neutral as regards context of use. *Childish* means like a child, but it has a strong negative connotation: it would be used to insult, or criticize behaviour. It often collocates with words like *games*, *silly*, *stupid*. It is neutral as regards context of use. *Political* means associated with politics. It can have a negative connotation in some contexts: where, for example, political motives are contrasted with motives of justice or morality. It commonly collocates with *party*, *prisoner*, *decision*. It is neutral as regards context of use. *Impertinence* means being rude or cheeky, particularly

New words are constantly entering the language. Often, these are based on prefixes or suffixes added to known words (as in *ultra-modern*, *watchable*). Another way vocabulary items are built is by combining two (occasionally more) words to make one item, sometimes hyphenated (*copypaste*, *crossdressing*, *state-of-the-art*).

How best to teach vocabulary: some facts and figures

How many of its words do you need to know in order to understand a text? Many people think that if you understand 80–85 percent of the words of a text, then you can probably guess the rest and, when reading, feel confident that you understand what the text as a whole is saying. This is now known to be an underestimate (try the Pause for thought experiment below if you don't believe me, before reading on to the comment). It is generally agreed by researchers today that in order to understand a text, you need to be able to understand between 95 percent and 98 percent of its words (Laufer, 2020).

Pause for thought

Take a look at the following passage. I have deleted about 20 percent of the words. Can you understand roughly what it is about?

Since the beginning of Western civilization, there has been a particular interest in the _____ that _____ have in their _____ of _____. The body of _____ associated with the _____ of _____ in which a person is _____ is a particularly important difference between _____ and _____. Much of this knowledge can be _____ and _____ with _____ to benefit _____ in the domain and can help _____ and _____ their progress toward _____. The special status of the knowledge of _____ in their _____ of _____ is acknowledged even as far back as the Greek civilization.

Comment

It is quite difficult to understand what the topic is. Knowledge? Talent? Character? And it is almost impossible to guess what the missing words are. It is, in fact, about *superior* (the first missing word), and is taken from a book on the topic by Ericsson et al. (the full reference is given in the References list at the end of the chapter). Now move on to the next **Pause for thought**, shown on the next page.

relating to the behaviour of someone to a superior who is normally respected. It has no particular connotation or collocation but is used mainly in formal speech or writing. Kid means a child, of either gender. It has slight connotations of affection (though it can also be used with negative adjectives) and commonly collocates with *sister*, *brother*. It is normally used only in informal conversation or writing.

Meaning relationships

It can also be useful to look at how the meaning of one item relates to the meaning of others, though this is perhaps less essential for initial learning than the aspects discussed above. There are various such relationships: here are some of the main ones.

- **Synonyms:** items that mean the same, or nearly the same. Example: *bright*, *clever* or *smart* may serve as synonyms of *intelligent*.
- **Antonyms:** items that mean the opposite. Example: *rich* is an antonym of *poor*.
- **Hyponyms:** items that serve as specific examples of a general concept. Example: *dog*, *lion*, *mouse* are hyponyms of *animal*.
- **Co-hyponyms/correlatives:** other items that are the same kind of thing. Example: *red*, *blue*, *green* and *brown* are co-hyponyms, or coordinates.
- **Superordinates:** general concepts that cover specific items. Example: *furniture* is the superordinate of *chair*, *table*, *sofa*.

Besides these, there are other, perhaps looser, ways of associating meaning that are useful in teaching. You can, for instance, relate parts to a whole (e.g., the relationship between *arm* and *body*); or associate items that are part of the same real-world context (e.g., *tractor*, *farmer*, *milking* and *irrigate* are all associated with *agriculture*). All these can be exploited in teaching to clarify the meaning of a new item, or for practice or test materials.

Word formation

Words can be broken down into *morphemes*: for example, *unkindly* is composed of the prefix *un-*, the root word *kind* and the suffix *-ly*. You may wish to teach the common prefixes and suffixes: for example, if students know the meaning of the prefixes *un-* and *sub-* and the suffixes *-able*, *-ful*, this will help them understand the meanings of words like *substandard*, *ungrateful* and *untranslatable*. They should, however, be warned that in many common words, the meaning of the prefix or suffix has got lost and knowing it may not help them understand the meaning (examples are *subject*, *refine*). In general, the teaching of prefixes and suffixes is more useful for high-intermediate or advanced learners (B2 upwards), less so for lower levels (Ur, 2022).

Pause for thought

Below is shown the same text as used in the previous **Pause for thought**, but now with only 3 percent of the words deleted. The general meaning is now clear, assuming that all the other words are understood. But it is very difficult to guess the meaning of the missing words. Try it! And then check with the full text, shown on page 64.

Since the beginning of Western civilization, there has been a particular interest in the superior knowledge that experts have in their domain of expertise. The body of knowledge associated with the domain of expertise in which a person is expert is a particularly important difference between experts and other individuals. Much of this knowledge can be _____ described and shared with others to

_____ making in the domain and can help educate students and facilitate their progress toward expertise. The special _____ of the knowledge of experts in their domain of expertise is acknowledged even as far back as the Greek civilization.

Comment

Of course, in a real learner situation, the gaps would be filled with the unknown words, and in some cases the learner would be helped by knowing meanings of component morphemes: base words, prefixes or suffixes. In the present text, for example, the meaning of the base word *decide* might have helped the learner work out the meaning of the word *decision*. The other items are very difficult to guess, and you will probably have found that you could correctly identify the meanings of only one or two of them: maybe none. This obviously does not mean that you don't know English, or don't have good inferring strategies. The reason is that in many, if not most, natural contexts the meaning of an unknown word is simply not clearly revealed by the content of the surrounding text. You need to think twice, therefore, before asking a student to guess meanings from context, do so only when you are fairly sure that these are in fact guessable.

Knowing about 98 percent of an unsimplified text means knowing a lot of vocabulary, and a substantial amount of research has been done in order to try to identify the number of words needed at different levels. The research is complicated by different definitions of what a 'word' is. The two most common definitions are

- a **lemma**: a word similar to the headword in a dictionary (for example, *send*, assumed to include regular grammatical variants like *sends*, *sent*, *sending*);
- a **word family**: a set of words from a common root with commonly used prefixes or suffixes (for example, *nation*, *nations*, *nationalize*, *national*, *international*).

A word list based on word families, will therefore imply a much longer list of lemmas; and it will be longer still if we include multi-word items, such as *of course* or *on the other hand*, whose meaning cannot necessarily be worked out from the component words. Most research on

quantity of vocabulary needed for the different levels has been based on word families; so, for example, Schmitt (2014) estimate that 3,000 word families are needed in order to reach a high-intermediate level (end of B1), and up to 9,000 in order to cope with advanced levels (B2).

The challenge facing the teacher and materials writer, particularly those working in, or training for, schools in a country where English is not commonly spoken outside the classroom, is how to reach these levels in the time available. A typical school curriculum in such a country may allow for the teaching of English during the 30 to 40 weeks of the school year for three or four hours a week for eight years or so. If you add it up, that means that about 20–30 word families need to be taught a week. There will be fewer, of course, in the younger classes and more in the older; but however you divide it, it is a lot of words!

In addition, it is not enough for learners just to read or hear and understand a new item and then forget it. They need also to review it. Researchers have claimed that we need at least six, or even as many as 16, re-encounters with an item in order for it to be properly learnt (see, for example, 2007).

Incidental and deliberate teaching and learning

An important question is whether you can acquire a large vocabulary incidentally, only through listening, reading and conversation. This is certainly the main way we learn to display in our L1. However, in second language learning in the context of a formal school course, this does not work so well. It is simply inefficient (Zahar et al., 2001): our slow and rather unreliable. Most researchers agree that we need to include some deliberate, focused vocabulary-teaching procedures as a supplement to – though not a substitute for – incidental acquisition through extensive reading and listening.

Deliberate vocabulary-teaching procedures can be divided into two groups: those that are aimed to teach new items for the first time in order to expand the students' vocabulary; and those that are designed to provide opportunities for review in order to consolidate and deepen students' knowledge of the new items. The next two sections will deal with these.

Presenting new vocabulary: selection and presentation

Selection and sources of new vocabulary

The most important criterion for the selection of which vocabulary items to teach has to be their usefulness for the students' own needs. One helpful measure of the usefulness of an item is *frequency*, i.e. how often a word, or expression, is used in conversation or writing, as revealed by a corpus survey (see the websites referred to in 5 Texts, Section 4). Frequency, however, is not the only criterion. We might want to teach new items for any of the following further reasons:

- They are important for the students' own present situation or culture;
- Students have asked to learn them;

- They are easy to learn (short, easily pronounced and spelt);
- They are cognates (similar to equivalents in the students' L1);
- They occur frequently in classroom interaction or coursebook instructions;
- They are fun or interesting items in themselves.

In any case, when we come across large number of new vocabulary items in a text, we do need to differentiate between which items we feel are important enough to teach and review so that the students remember and can use them, and which only need to be explained so that they can understand the current text being studied (see 5 Texts).

Texts may not supply all the vocabulary students need. They can be supplemented by activities whose focus is simply vocabulary expansion. For example, you might have a spot in the lesson, perhaps at the beginning, called 'word of the day' or 'expression of the day' where you teach a new item. Or you might have students themselves 'show and tell' find out about new items and teach the rest of the class. For more vocabulary expansion activities see Ur (2012).

Presenting new vocabulary

Once we have selected the items to teach, we then need to get students to perceive their form and understand their meaning(s). We want to do this as emphatically and interestingly as we can, so that the students pay attention and take the items into short-term memory. Some key practical principles are:

- **Include both written and spoken forms, both receptive and productive.** Usually the new items have to be both said and written up on the board. Students ultimately need to know both forms, and displaying both is likely to make the item more clearly perceptible and memorable. Similarly, if students both say and write down the item, they will be more likely to remember it than if they only hear or see it.
- **Ensure understanding of meanings.** As we have seen above, guessing meanings of words from context can be quite difficult, and students often guess wrongly. Even looking words up in the dictionary is not reliable: the student may choose the wrong meaning. Both these strategies can be used to access meanings, but they will need to be checked and supplemented by you. If you yourself are presenting the meaning of a new item, there are various ways you can do this.
 - Pictures, realia (actual objects or toy models). These help a lot with making sure the presentation is memorable (see **Optimize impact** on the next page), but pictures can sometimes be misinterpreted, so it's good to back them up with a translation or other clarification strategy. Incidentally, pictures can be used effectively not only with words with concrete referents and younger classes, but also with abstract meanings and older classes (Farley et al., 2012).
 - Gesture and mime. These are useful for conveying meanings of action verbs and moods.

Examples. Examples can be used to explain superordinates: for example, 'Mars, Venus and Neptune are all *planets*.'

Sample uses of the item in context. As we have seen above, use of an item in context may not always convey its meaning unambiguously; so contextualizations are best backed up by one of the other methods.

Translation. If you have a monolingual class whose language you know, translation is a very useful way of clarification of meaning: at least as accurate as any of the other methods, quick, and easily understood by students. It can also be used effectively as a back-up, either before or after any of the other ways of explaining meanings, to make quite sure the students have understood.

Optimize impact. The more impact your presentation of new items makes, the more likely students are to remember it. A memorable first presentation does not make review unnecessary, but it does make learning easier and faster. This is one good reason for using pictures, mime and gesture (particularly if you are a good artist and/or actor!) instead of, or to back up, translation and explanation. The use of realia, where possible, is also effective: I have found that real objects are more attention-catching than pictures, particularly (but not only) in younger classes.

Mnemonics. Another useful strategy is to use mnemonic devices, in particular the technique called *keywords*: students link the target word with an image involving a similar word in their own language. For example, suppose you were teaching the word *shelf* to a group of German speakers: tell them to imagine a cat (or any animal they like) sleeping (*schläft*) on a shelf. The next time they come across the word, or need to use it, the image of a cat asleep on a shelf will help them remember it.

What helps students remember individual items?

Some interesting insights on how memory works are gained through an experiment where subjects are asked to memorize contrasting lists of vocabulary: all with three letters, but of differing difficulty and meaningfulness, as in the following **Pause for thought**.

Pause for thought

Here are two lists of words to learn.

A: who dot com lar sex oct pad awe ion rub own dig obi sof the
B: jam leg fat pig peg fox dog cat man boy son mum dad bad sad

Take yourself a minute to learn List A. Then close the book and see how many you can remember and write down. Do the same with List B. If you are working in a group, then calculate the average scores of the group. Then think about or discuss the results. Which list was remembered better? Which individual words? Can you explain why? And what particular strategies did you, or others, use to help you remember?

Comment

List B often produces near-perfect scores: List A noticeably less. There are two main reasons for this: the uniform (fairly low) level of difficulty of the items in List B in contrast to the rather more advanced and varied level of List A; and the fact that the words in List B are grouped according to meaning- or sound-association, whereas in List A there is no such grouping. The results would indicate not only that we learn words better when they are easier (i.e., we can easily assign meaning to them, and/or their spelling and pronunciation are transparent), but also that it is helpful to learn words in pairs or small groups, where one word can be associated with another, because they are naturally associated in our minds (*dog + cat*) or because they would go together in a natural phrase (*fat + pig*) (but see second bullet point below). Words with emotional associations (*mom, dad, sex*) are remembered better. Words at the beginning of a list also tend to be remembered better.

The implications for the teaching of new vocabulary can be summarized as follows:

- The easier a word is to say and spell, the more quickly it will be remembered; so we find it easier to get students to remember, for example, *sky* than *earth*.
- It is useful to link words together when teaching and reviewing them. Several studies have shown, however, that teaching a larger set of isolated items for the first time which are co-hyponyms, or the same sort of thing (e.g. *red, yellow, green, blue, purple*) can be confusing and lead to less effective memorizing (Wilcox and Medina, 2011). Better results can be obtained if you select and present them as they would combine naturally in a phrase or sentence, e.g., *blue + sky*.
- Learners remember words better if they have some personal significance or emotional connection. So when presenting them, try to link them to students' own lives, feelings and experiences, or to your own.
- Words taught earlier are on the whole learnt better: if you are teaching a whole set of words in a lesson, put the more important ones first (see also tip 2 below).

Practical tips

- 1 Don't teach more than ten or so new items together in lower-level or young classes. Highly motivated classes of adult learners can, however, cope with a lot more.
- 2 Teach new items early in the lesson. Students are fresher and better at learning new material at the beginning of lessons than they are later.
- 3 Get students to write down the new vocabulary they have learnt: in a vocabulary notebook, on cards, on their phones or other digital devices. They might also use online tools such as Quizlet or Memrise which incorporate digital flashcards.
- 4 Don't insist on students making detailed entries for each item they write down. It is sometimes suggested that students add to each item an English definition as well as

an L1 one, a sample sentence, the part of speech, a phonemic transcription. But in my view, all this takes up more time than it is worth in terms of benefit to learning. Probably the word or phrase itself, possibly with a synonym or L1 equivalent, is enough.

Use flashcards, which display the word on one side, and, optionally, the meaning on the other. These can be digital or paper: either format can be used for review. For example, a card is displayed and students are asked to define or translate; or a card is selected but hidden and students are given hints to help them guess what is on it. The online tools mentioned above include more tasks which use the flashcards for practice and tests.

Vocabulary review

It has already been noted that a learner needs to re-encounter a new item a number of times in order to remember it permanently. Very common words like *go, put, people, day* are likely to be encountered again anyway in the course of listening to or reading texts, or in interpersonal communication. But as soon as you start expanding taught vocabulary to include rarer items like *kitchen* or *rise*, this becomes less and less likely, and we need to create opportunities for review. This means using effective learning tasks (see 4 Tasks) where focus is multiple, meaningful encounters with the target items. Ideally, every lesson should include some vocabulary review work.

The importance of retrieval

There is substantial evidence that review is more effective when it involves *retrieval* – the learner makes an effort to retrieve from memory either form or meaning of the target item – than if it just involves being exposed to the item or studying it again. So don't just show students the items they've learnt and remind them of what they mean: challenge them to do something that involves retrieval: matching, translating, grouping, completing sentences and so on. Retrieval tasks need to be carefully designed, so that they are success-oriented: the students can, with a bit of effort and perhaps help from the teacher or classmates, succeed in performing them. Inevitably, however, there will be some items which have been forgotten: re-teach them, and then review again later.

Expanding rehearsal

The most effective review takes place when students still remember the item but need a slight effort to recall it. So do the first review very soon after students have learnt the item – in the next lesson, for example. The next review can be after a longer gap – perhaps a week. Then two weeks, then a month and so on: what is called *expanding rehearsal* (Roediger, 2015). As students learn the item better and better, the length of time they can remember it without a reminder grows, as does the speed at which they can retrieve it when needed, until they get to the point at which the item is part of their permanent vocabulary.

Types of review tasks

Single-item. Review of single words or expressions does not always have to be done through encountering them in full sentences. Work on individual items is also very useful and a lot quicker than working on sentence-contexts. Very quick reviews can be based on procedures such as the following.

- Display and check. Items are displayed on the board: students identify meanings of items to be reminded of those they don't remember.
- Recall. Students are challenged to recall items recently learnt.
- Dictations. The teacher dictates single words or brief phrases.
- Translation dictations. The teacher says the word in L1, students write the English, or vice versa.
- Collocations. Students suggest what other words a target word might go with.
- Yes/No. Students are shown a list of items and asked to say whether they know their meanings or not.
- Quick bingo. Each student writes down their choice of five of a set of 15 items displayed on the board. The teacher calls out one, and students cross it off if they have it. The first and last students to finish are the winners. (The last condition ensures that you get through all the words, not just the ones listed by the first finisher, and that every student is motivated to continue until they complete their list – as well as increasing the number of winners.)
- Guessing. Tell the students you are thinking of an item they have learnt this year, and give a hint in the form, for example, of a picture, mime, synonym or quick definition. Students guess it. The successful guesser then thinks of another item and gives a hint for the rest of the class to guess.

Items in context. Asking students to engage with (understand or produce) items within a sentence or longer text takes longer than recalling single words. However, it provides for review and deeper learning of ways the word is used in context which cannot be provided in single-item work.

- Sentence completion 1. Students are asked to insert a target word in a gapped sentence. This may be based on a bank of words, or students challenged to retrieve from memory.
- Sentence completion 2: A beginning of a sentence is provided that includes a target vocabulary item: students complete it any way they like that makes sense.
- Sentence composition. Students compose sentences (spoken or written) that contextualize one of the items from a set shown on the board. There are some interesting variations on this one:
 - Compose a sentence that contextualizes two of the items.
 - Compose a sentence (including one of the items) that expresses a false statement.
 - Compose a sentence (including one of the items) that is true for you.
 - Compose a question that includes one of the items.

Review: Check yourself

1. What does the term *lexical item* include?
2. What aspects of the meaning, form and use of a word does a learner need to know?
3. What is the meaning of *collocation*? Can you give some examples?
4. How much (percentage) of the vocabulary of a text does the reader need to know in order to be reasonably sure of understanding it?
5. How many times (approximately) does a learner need to review a new item in order to be sure of remembering it?
6. What are two important criteria for selection of the vocabulary to teach a class?
7. What are some ways of making sure that the initial presentation of new items has impact?
8. Can you recall at least four different activities that can be used to review or deepen vocabulary knowledge at word level? Contextualized in sentences?

Further reading

- Block, E. (2004). *Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
(Some excellent practical techniques for getting advanced classes to extend and consolidate their vocabulary)
- Balton, J. S. P. (2022). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press.
(A classic, comprehensive book on various aspects of vocabulary teaching and learning)
- Chen, P. (2012). *Vocabulary Activities*. Cambridge University Press.
(A range of practical activities for vocabulary expansion, enrichment, review and assessment)
- Chen, P. (2022). *Penny Ur's 77 Tips for Teaching Vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment.
(Some useful practical tips, briefly summarized)
- Widds, S. and Nation, P. (2017). *How Vocabulary is Learned*. Oxford University Press.
(Further, more detailed research-based information about the teaching and learning of vocabulary)

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Full version of paragraph from pages 75 and 76

Since the beginning of Western civilization, there has been a particular interest in the superior knowledge that experts have in their domain of expertise. The body of knowledge associated with the domain of expertise in which a person is expert is a particularly important difference between experts and other individuals. Much of this knowledge can be verbally described and shared with others to benefit decision making in the domain and can help educate students and facilitate their progress toward expertise. The special status of the knowledge of experts in their domain of expertise is acknowledged even as far back as the Greek civilization.

Ericsson, K. A., Hoffman, R. R. and Kozbelt, A. (Eds.) (2018)

Teaching grammar

Summary

- 1.1 What is grammar? A brief definition.
- 1.2 What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability.
- 1.3 How best to teach grammar. Explicit and implicit processes; grammar practice; timing of explicit grammar teaching.
- 1.4 Presenting grammar: explanations. Some practical guidelines on the provision of grammatical explanations in the classroom.
- 1.5 Grammar practice exercises. Different types of grammar practice activities, and the importance of meaningful, communicative practice of grammar in context.

What is grammar?

The term *grammar* includes *syntax* and *morphology*. Syntax is the way words are chosen and combined to make correct sentences: so in English *I am a teacher* is grammatically acceptable, **I a teacher*, and **I are a teacher* are not. Morphology is the grammar of single words: it includes features like the plural *-s* of nouns, or the past tense of verbs. English morphology is fairly simple, compared to many other languages: grammatical affixes are at affixes, and there is a limited number of them. It is the syntax, on the whole, which is more difficult for learners and needs more careful teaching.

Grammar is not just a matter of correct forms; it also carries meaning. The meaning of a particular message in a communicative situation is created by a combination of vocabulary and grammar. We use grammatical items and constructions to express, for example, time (using tenses) or place (using prepositions) or possibility (using modals or conditional clauses). It is often the meanings that create problems for students rather than the forms (for example, when contrasting present perfect simple *I have done my homework* with present perfect progressive *I have been doing my homework*).

What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability

There is some debate these days as to what standards of grammatical accuracy should be applied to English as it is taught and learned in the classroom. How much should we worry about grammatical accuracy if mistakes do not interfere with meaning? Surely, it is argued by some, the main purpose of language is communication, so it shouldn't matter if you make a minor slip in morphology or syntax, so long as the communicative message is

clear. For example, should we correct a student who drops the third person -s suffix in the present simple (saying *she like* instead of *she likes*)? And should we correct *which* instead of *who* in relative clauses relating to a person (*the man which* instead of *the man who*)? Should we only correct such variants when they actually make the meaning unclear or misleading? For example, when a student uses a present tense verb where a past tense is needed to convey an appropriate message?

Pause for thought

What is your own opinion on this issue? Would you, as a teacher, always insist on the standard forms? Or would you relate to the non-standard ones – where they do not affect meaning – as legitimate learner variants rather than as errors, and accept them?

Comment

We need to make a distinction between usages that are acceptable in general communicative situations, and those that we teach in the classroom. If in a conversation with a speaker of English I hear variants like those mentioned above, it doesn't bother me particularly, and I wouldn't dream of trying to correct them. In the classroom, however, I would try to teach my students to use the conventional forms, and would relate to such variants as errors. This is not because the conventional forms are those used by L1 English speakers – who are today a minority of users of English – but because they are, as far as we can judge, the forms used by the majority of speakers of English worldwide (whatever their first language is). Our students surely have the right to be taught the standard grammar – as well as vocabulary – that is used by English users with whom they will be – or are already – communicating. There are some additional factors that support this general conclusion: substantial evidence that most students express a wish to be corrected when they make grammatical errors (Roothoof and Breeze, 2016); some high-stakes exams, which may penalize departure from standard grammatical forms; the policy of the Ministry of Education of the country where we are teaching or of the institution that employs us, which are likely to support the teaching of conventional grammar.

It is true that there are situations where grammatical accuracy may matter less. First, an error may not matter so much if it does not affect the basic meaning of what is being communicated. Second, accuracy is a lot less important in informal conversation or text messaging than it is in formal writing. The kind of course we are teaching also makes a difference: if we are teaching a course in conversational English with the aim of improving oral fluency, we may well ignore grammatical errors which do not change a message, and not let them affect our assessment of students' performance. Accurate grammar is more important if our course is, for example, aiming for improvement of academic English for participants who are planning to apply to a university and need to be able to write papers and make academic presentations.

main line is that, as suggested in the **Comment** on the previous page, all things being equal, we shall continue in most situations to teach our students to observe the conventional grammatical rules, while remaining sensitive to the need for flexibility in certain contexts.

What best to teach grammar

Explicit and implicit teaching

Having decided which grammatical features we are going to teach, how should we do it? Should we allow students plenty of opportunities to hear, read and use the correct form through comprehensible input and communicative interaction, but not explain it (implicit teaching)? Or should we provide explanations, focused practice and error correction (explicit teaching)? Or should we use a combination of the two?

Stephen Frashen (1999) claims that grammar is best acquired implicitly, through plenty of comprehensible input (listening and reading), and that explanations, focused grammar practice and corrective feedback have only a marginal effect. Others would add that there is value also to student communicative output: Michael Long (1996), for example, in his *interaction hypothesis*, says that learners learn through interacting with others (both learners and more proficient speakers); Merrill Swain (1995) says it is important for learners also to speak and write in what she calls *pushed output* in order to become more proficient (the *output hypothesis*). In favour of explicit grammar teaching, others have produced evidence for grammar acquisition is facilitated by explanations (Akakura, 2012; Boers, 2021).

For grammar acquisition (DeKeyser, 2010) and error correction (Sheen and Ellis, 2011). A reasonable conclusion, supported by the evidence, is that for good learning of grammar in a foreign language course, you need both: communicative input and output, together with some explicit teaching.

Pause for thought

If you learnt English, or another foreign language, in school, how was grammar taught? What kinds of things were helpful/unhelpful in getting you to use the grammar of the language correctly?

Comment

I was taught French in school through the grammar-translation method, so there was a lot of emphasis on getting the rules right and applying them in largely translation-based exercises. These were helpful in getting me to understand and produce grammatical sentences, when I had time to think about it and apply the rules. So I could not speak French fluently as a result of my school studies, but I could read and write it fairly well, and when I eventually spent some time in France, the underlying knowledge of grammatical rules was certainly helpful as I gradually became more fluent.

The timing of grammar teaching

A rather confusing distinction has been made in the literature between *focus on form* and *focus on form* (Long and Robinson, 1998). *Focus on forms* is the traditional process of teaching grammar according to a grammatical syllabus: the teacher or textbook introduces a rule, students do exercises to practise it, and then move on to the next rule. *Focus on form*, in contrast, takes place when a grammatical feature comes up in the context of a communicative task or text, and the teacher takes time out to focus on it, drawing students' attention to it and explaining as necessary (some writers would include brief practice exercises within this process), before returning to the original task or text.

Approaching the same issue from the point of view of timing, some research has been carried out to try to establish when it is best to teach a grammatical feature: on its own, as a teacher- or materials-initiated process (*isolated*), or in context, in response to a need in the course of communicative activity (*integrated*). In a questionnaire-based survey on this point, Valeo and Spada (2016) asked teachers and learners which they prefer. The majority were in favour of integrated, while also acknowledging the value of isolated.

The conclusion seems to be that there is value to both: I do not see that there is any contradiction between the two models. Many teachers and learners are in favour of the conventional process of a grammar explanation followed by practice exercises; indeed, most coursebooks include them. On the other hand, it is true that a one-off teaching of a grammatical feature, however much practice follows it, will not necessarily lead to effective learning. It is important, therefore, to include also regular incidental focus on form – reactive focus on a grammatical point that comes up in the course of a communicative task. This may be the first time learners have noticed the particular point in question, or may function as a review of something that has been deliberately taught incidentally encountered earlier.

7.4 Presenting grammar: explanations

Grammar explanations may be initiated by the teacher because they are required in your syllabus or come up in course materials. Or they may take place in response to a learning need; you may have noticed that students are making mistakes with a particular feature and might benefit from some focused explanation.

Pedagogical grammar rules

The grammar rules we give students are not necessarily the same as those provided in a formal grammar reference book, such as the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). We will need to simplify; and we need to take into consideration the learners' L1, if we know it. In some cases – where the rule is very easily understood, or similar to the learners' L1 – we may not need to spend much time on it; in others, we may need to work harder at clarifying, perhaps emphasizing the differences between it and the L1, where there are liable to be errors based on L1 interference.

the guidelines on explaining grammar follow below.

Provide students with examples of the target feature in meaningful contexts before explaining it. This sounds obvious, but I have seen teachers start by writing up an isolated phrase on the board and then analysing it immediately, when the students had little or no idea what it might mean in context.

Write say and write examples of the target form. This is important, not only because students might need to use the grammar in both speech and writing, but also because, as mentioned earlier in reference to vocabulary, a new item is more memorable if it is both seen and heard.

Teach both form and meaning. Which of these you emphasize depends on what the target feature is. Some grammatical constructions have fairly easy forms, but rather complex meanings that may have no parallel in the students' L1 and need careful explanation and lots of examples (the present progressive, for example). Others may have very simple meanings, and you need to focus on teaching the forms (the comparative of adjectives, for example).

You may or may not use grammatical terminology. This will depend on your situation and students. On the whole, older or more analytically minded students may find the terminology helpful. Others may not, or may even find it confusing. Remember that terms such as *adjective*, *imperative* are not particularly common in communication in general: so unless you are sure they will help students understand, try to manage without them. With many classes, particularly younger ones, I would try to explain by using actual exponents rather than the abstract definitions: for example, saying *a or an* rather than *the indefinite article*.

Explain the grammar in the students' L1, if you know it, unless they are proficient enough to cope with English explanations. The level of English needed to understand a grammatical explanation in that language is quite high – often higher than the grammatical feature itself – so it may be difficult to understand for many classes. Using L1 can save time which can then be used for practice or communicative use of the target grammar. Use English for explanations with relatively advanced classes who can readily understand them.

Compare the English structure with an L1 parallel if you can. Where there are differences – whether substantial or only subtle – between English and the L1, it can be very helpful to compare and contrast the two. Awareness of such differences can help to prevent mistakes. For example, you might point out that the use of the present perfect in a sentence with *for* or *since* (*I have worked here for six years*) is likely to correspond to the use of the present tense in the students' L1.

Keep it short. With a potentially complex rule, it's best just to give a simple statement of the main, most common, form and meaning – a rule of thumb, as it were – and then move on to using the grammar in context. A long and complex rule is unlikely to be remembered. You can always add further explanations or exceptions in a later lesson.

- Ask students to work out rules for themselves, based on a set of examples (inductive process), or give the rules yourself, and they later work on examples (deductive). The deductive process is more common in both textbooks and classroom teaching. However, if the students can work out the rule for themselves, then they are more likely to remember it. The problem with inductive teaching is that if the rule is really difficult, students may waste a lot of time on frustrating guessing or on misleading suggestions. In such cases, it is better simply to provide the information yourself. It really depends on how easily a rule can in fact be correctly induced from examples, and also on students' own preferences.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the grammar explanations below. Are they clear and helpful? Do you have any criticisms? What might you add at a later stage?

present continuous (I am doing)

We use the continuous for things happening at or around the time of speaking. The action is not complete.

present simple (I do)

We use the simple for things in general or things that happen repeatedly.

I am doing		I do	
past	now	past	future

(from *English Grammar in Use*, 5th Edition by Murphy, R., 2011)

Comment

The explanations given here are mostly simple, short and helpful: they don't go into unnecessary detail, are clearly accessible to a learner at a fairly basic level of proficiency, and the diagram is easily understood. I'm not sure, however, if the additional fact about the present continuous 'The action is not complete' is very helpful to a learner or adds anything essential: surely anything that is going on at a point of time is by definition in process, and therefore not completed. In the definition of the present simple, the phrase 'things in general' is a bit vague: I'd prefer something like 'general facts or situations'. I also tell my students that, in general, the present simple is far more common than the present continuous, so if they're wondering which to use they should usually opt for the simple! Later on, I would add the use of both forms to express a future action which has already been planned. It may be worth telling students about the slight difference between the form we are leaving tomorrow, as a planned, intended action, and we leave tomorrow as a more definite and scheduled one.

Practical tips

- Use pictures. If you can, use pictures to help your explanation or, if appropriate, mime and facial expression. They help make the explanation memorable.
- When you've finished, check understanding. It's not enough to ask, 'Do you understand?' Get students to demonstrate their understanding by giving examples or explaining in their own words. Or try using the next tip.
- Get feedback. When you have finished explaining, delete everything from the board, tell students to close their textbooks, and to write down in their own words what the rule was, in English or L1. Then ask them to read out what they have written, or share with one another. This will give you a good idea of how well they have understood the explanation and is in itself a review of the rule.
- Teach new rules early in the lesson. As with the teaching of new vocabulary, it's a good idea to plan grammatical explanations to take place towards the beginning of the lesson when students are fresher and more willing to engage with new material.

Grammar practice exercises

There is some debate about the place of explicit grammar practice in the form of drills or exercises. Again, this is something that most teachers and coursebooks provide, that students expect and that does seem to contribute to learning (see the discussion of explicit grammar teaching above). But all experienced teachers are familiar with the phenomenon that students continue to make mistakes in the target grammar even after extensive practice. Practice does not necessarily make perfect.

One of the explanations for the phenomenon that learners sometimes just do not seem to take on board a grammatical structure they have successfully practised is given in Penemann's (1984) *teachability hypothesis*. Penemann observed that learners of German acquire German grammatical structures in a fixed order, regardless of the order in which they were taught; and there is some evidence that this is true for the acquisition of other languages as well. From this, it is hypothesized that the teaching of a grammatical item or construction for which the learner is not developmentally ready will not result in learning. One possible practical implication is the idea of teaching grammar through *consciousness-raising* (Ellis, 2001). Consciousness-raising means that learners' attention is drawn to a particular grammatical rule, without demanding immediate implementation in practice exercises. Then, when they are developmentally ready, it is suggested, they will notice the occurrence of the same grammatical features in input and start using them themselves. According to this model, practice exercises have little value. If the learner is ready to acquire the grammar, they will do so anyway, without practice; if they are not, then practice won't help. On the other hand, other writers, as mentioned earlier (DeKeyser, 2010), have claimed that focused practice does contribute to grammatical accuracy.

The most likely conclusion seems to be that most learners do, indeed, go through a fairly stable order of acquisition of grammatical features, and that some acquisition does occur through exposure to comprehensible input, but that explanation combined with practice may contribute to and speed up such learning. We do, however, need to abandon the exaggerated hope that practice makes perfect and content ourselves with the expectation that practice, like explanations of rules, can make a substantial contribution to good learning and is therefore worth including in our teaching.

Implications for the design and ordering of practice exercises

There remains the phenomenon of students who do all the grammar exercises on a given item perfectly, but then make mistakes in the same item when they are composing their own free speech or writing. The problem here is that the structures have not been thoroughly mastered. The student still depends on a certain amount of conscious monitoring in order to produce them correctly. And when students are concentrating mainly on communicating, they do not have enough attention to spare for such monitoring.

In other words, if students have not mastered the grammatical point to the degree that they can produce it without thinking, then in communicative situations they will make mistakes, often based on L1 interference. Is there anything we can do about this? I would claim that there is: we can encourage students in our grammar practice activities to try using the target structure to make meanings, rather than just to focus on getting it right to provide practice tasks that encourage them to combine the two.

Grammar drills, whose focus is only on getting it right, are in general disapproved of in the professional literature as meaningless and unproductive of learning (see, for example, an article entitled 'The evidence is in: Drills are OUT', Wong and Patten, 2003), though more recently they may be making a comeback (see, for example, Scheffler and Butzkamm, 2019). It is probable that at the early stages, it may be useful to give traditional exercises like gapfills, transformation, and matching, with definite right and wrong answers.

However, if this is all the grammar practice the students get, they are unlikely to be able to transfer their knowledge to their own output. Such conventional exercises, therefore, need to be supplemented by activities that prompt students to use the target features to produce their own sentences, while keeping an eye, as it were, on grammatical accuracy.

On the next page is a description of a number of grammar tasks that provide practice in a range of grammatical features. They move from the less productive, very controlled and very accuracy-oriented exercise at the beginning to a fluency activity giving opportunities for the free use of the grammar in context at the end. The aim of the later tasks is to get students to use the grammar in order to say their own thing, paying attention to both communicative purpose and grammatical form. It is not suggested that this sequence should be strictly followed in classroom teaching, though on the whole, the more controlled exercises tend to come earlier. But it is important that our lessons should overall include a combination of grammar-based tasks that provide both form-focused and meaning-focused practice.

Types of grammar practice:

Type 1: Awareness. After the students have been introduced to the grammatical point, they are given opportunities to encounter it within some kind of discourse, and then do a task that focuses their attention on its form and/or meaning.

Example: Past simple. Look at a text extract, and underline all the examples of the past simple.

Type 2: Controlled drills. Students produce examples of the structure. These examples are predetermined by the teacher or materials and have to conform to very clear, closed-ended rules. They can often be done without understanding.

Example: Past simple. Complete the sentence in the past simple, using the correct form of the verb in brackets.

- I _____ to school yesterday. (go) *I went to school yesterday.*
- In July _____ the cake. (eat)
- They _____ the lesson early. (leave)

Type 3: Controlled responses through sentence completion or rewriting. Students produce examples of the structure that are predetermined by the teacher or materials by being required to rewrite according to a set cue, or to complete a sentence. However, in other cases they will need to understand in order to respond correctly.

Example: Comparative adjectives. Use the adjectives in brackets. Write two sentences for each item.

- A computer / a book (cheap / expensive). *A computer is more expensive than a book.*
A book is cheaper than a computer.
- A train / a car (short / long)
- Walking / skating (easier / more difficult)

Type 4: Meaningful drills. The actual grammar is fairly controlled, but the student can insert some words of their own choice in order to make meaningful statements.

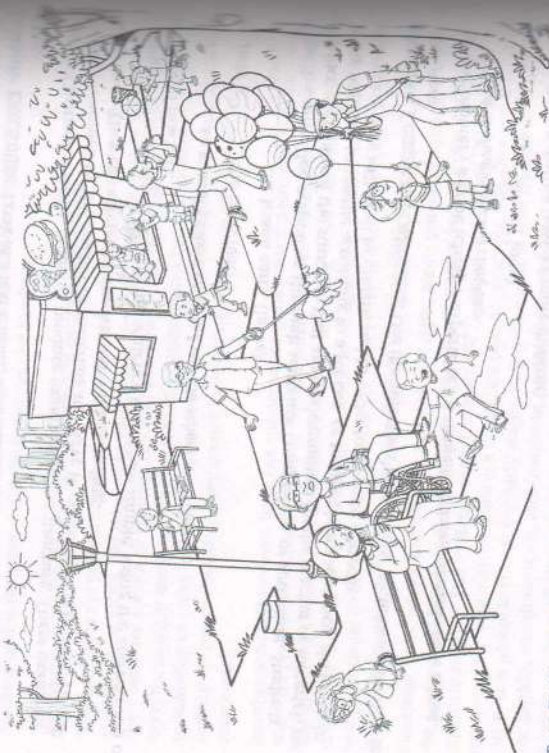
Example: Present simple. Choose someone you know very well, and write down their name. Now compose true statements about them according to the following model: *He/She likes ice cream. He/She doesn't like ice cream.*

- play *She plays tennis. She doesn't play football.*
- enjoy
- live

Type 5: Guided, meaningful practice. The students form sentences of their own according to a set pattern, but exactly what vocabulary they use is up to them.

Example: Conditional clauses. Look at the following cue: *If I had a million dollars. Write down at least five things you would do if you had a million dollars.*

Type 6: (Structure-based) free sentence composition. Students are provided with a visual cue (for example, a picture showing various people engaged in different activities) and invited to compose their own responses. They are directed to use a certain structure is happening, or that is not happening.



Type 7: (Structure-based) discussion and/or composition. Students hold a discussion or write a passage according to a given task. They are directed to use at least some examples of the structure within the discourse.

Example: Modals. You see a good friend of yours cheating in an exam. What might you do? Your recommendations should include modals like *might*, *should*, *must*, *can*, *could*, etc.

Type 8: Free discussion or composition. As in Type 7, but the students are given no specific direction as to what language to use. However, clearly the task invites use of the target structure.

Example: Modals. As for Type 7, but without the last sentence.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the grammar exercises on the next page. What types are they, according to the list above? Can you think of ways you might adapt them in order to make them more meaningful?

Read the situations and complete the sentences using the present perfect. Choose from these verbs:

break	disappear	go up	grow	improve	lose	shrink	stop
Tom has lost his key.							
John is looking for his key. He can't find it.							
Maria's English wasn't very good. Now it is better.							
My bag was here, but it isn't here any more.							
Lisa can't walk and her leg is in plaster.							
I lost my bus fare.							
I lost my bus fare. It was £1.80. Now it is £2.							
John didn't have a beard before. Now he has a beard.							
It was raining ten minutes ago. It isn't raining now.							
I washed my sweater, and now it's too small for me.							

Put in or .

My parents are on holiday. They've gone to Italy.
Hello! I've just come out. He'll be back in about an hour.
Tom has just gone out. He'll be back in about an hour.
Alice isn't here at the moment. I don't know where she's gone.
You're very late. Where have you been?

Complete the sentences using the present perfect.

Sally is still here. She hasn't gone. (she / not / go) out.
I can't find my bag. Has it been lost? (you / see / it) anywhere?
I can't log on to the website. Has it been fixed? (he / not / reply)
I sent Joe an email this morning, but he hasn't replied. (he / not / reply)
Is the meeting still going on, or has it finished? (it / finish)?
Has the weather changed? It's colder now. (the weather / change)
You haven't signed the form. Could you sign it now, please? (you / not / sign) the form. Could you sign it now, please?
Are your friends still here, or have they gone home? (they / go) home?
Paul doesn't know what he's going to do. Has he decided yet? (he / not / decide / yet)
Do you know where Julia is? Has she gone? (she / go)
When is David going away? Has he already gone? (he / already / go)
A hasn't started yet. (your course / start / yet)
B isn't starting yet. (your course / start / yet)

Read the situations and write sentences with or .

After lunch you go to see a friend at her house. She says, 'Would you like something to eat?'
You say: No, thank you. I've just had lunch. (have lunch)
Joe goes out. Five minutes later, the phone rings and the caller says, 'Can I speak to Joe?'
You say: I'm afraid he's gone out. (go out)
You are eating in a restaurant. The waiter thinks you have finished and starts to take your plate away.
You say: Wait a minute! I'm not finished. (not / finish)
You plan to eat at a restaurant tonight. You phone to reserve a table. Later your friend says, 'Shall I phone to reserve a table?' You say: No, it's already reserved. (do it)
You know that Lisa is looking for a place to live. Perhaps she has been successful.
You ask her: Has she found one? (find)
You are still thinking about where to go for your holiday. A friend asks, 'Where are you going for your holiday?' You say: I haven't decided yet. (not / decide)
Laura went out, but a few minutes ago she returned. Somebody asks, 'Is Laura still out?'
You say: No, she's come back. (come back)

(from *English Grammar in Use*, 5th Edition by Murphy, R., 2011)

Comment

These are all exercises that have been planned so that they have one right answer each and can easily be checked using the key available at the end of the book. In order to facilitate such checking, they are all either Type 2 (Exercise 7.2) or Type 3 (7.1, 7.3, 7.4). There is no preparatory awareness exercise (Type 1), and there are no exercises that give the learners opportunities to say their own thing using the target structure (Types 4–6). It would be unfair to blame the writer for the lack of more meaningful or personalized practice, given the aim of the book, which is to enable self-study and self-checking. If I were using it in the classroom, however, I would try to adapt the exercises in order to provide more practice, more interest, and more personalized responses. For example, in 7.1, I might tell students to ignore the verbs in the box, and tell me what they think *has happened* in reference to selected items in order to produce the situation described. For example, I might ask them what they think *has happened* to produce the situation where Tom can't find his key (item 1). Or what *has happened* in order for Maria's English to be better (item 2).

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What is the difference between *syntax* and *morphology*?
- 2 What are some reasons for teaching standard grammatical forms, even if non-standard variants would not affect meaning?
- 3 What does *explicit* grammar teaching include?
- 4 Can you recall at least four useful guidelines or tips to help explain a new grammar point to the class?
- 5 What is the difference between *deductive* and *inductive* teaching of a rule?
- 6 What kind of practice can help students transfer knowledge of a grammatical rule so that they can use it fluently in their own production?
- 7 Can you give two or three examples of exercises that get students to use the grammar to express meanings, rather than just to get the form right?

Further reading

- Ellis, M. (1994). Design criteria for pedagogic language rules. In Swan, M. (2011). *Teaching about language teaching* (pp. 45–56). Oxford University Press.
- (A useful set of guidelines for the explanation of grammatical rules to a class)
- Ellis, M. (2017). *Practical English Usage* (4th Edition). Oxford University Press.
- (A very accessible and user-friendly guide to English grammatical usage, with plenty of examples, including common learner errors)
- Ellis, R. (2009). *Grammar Practice Activities* (2nd Edition). Cambridge University Press.
- (A collection of game-like or communicative activities that provide meaningful practice in grammatical features of English)
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Teaching listening

Overview

- 8.1 Some basic features of listening comprehension. Level of language: bottom-up versus top-down processes; the importance of successful listening experience.
- 8.2 Listening activity design 1: the text. Characteristics of spontaneous speech in English that listeners need to be able to cope with.
- 8.3 Listening activity design 2: the task. Guidelines on the design of listening tasks for effective listening comprehension practice.
- 8.4 Types of activities. A list of listening comprehension activities, from those requiring little or no response to those requiring extended interaction.

Some basic features of listening comprehension

Learners need to be able to listen to and understand spoken English, as a preliminary to speaking it and, in most situations, to reading and writing it as well. This is not only because in the natural order of things we hear a new language before we speak it and because reading and writing are secondary to speech. It is also because listening is normally the main channel through which learners are exposed to new items, lexical or grammatical, in English, and increase their knowledge.

Listening is not just the mirror image of speaking. Learners can understand spoken English that is at a higher level, and a lot more in quantity, than that which they are capable of producing themselves. Texts used for listening comprehension activities should therefore be longer and more advanced than the kinds of spoken output we would expect from the learners who are expected to cope with them: what Stephen Krashen (1981) calls 'i+1'. If students talk to one another in spoken fluency activities, it is true that they are also listening; but the amount of useful listening comprehension practice that they are getting is limited. The speech they are hearing is only at the level they can produce themselves: it is not 'i+1'.

An additional point to be noted is that comprehension of both spoken and written discourse involves knowledge which derives from at least two different sources. On the one hand, there are the *bottom-up* processes which are based on the decoding of the text itself: perception of sounds and combinations of sounds, the identification and comprehension of individual words, phrases and patterns. On the other, there are *top-down* processes deriving from listeners' real-world knowledge of the subject matter, genre or context, which enable easier perception of meanings or underlying implications. In some cases, top-down processes may precede the bottom-up, as when we come to a text with strong preliminary assumptions as to its content or style.

There is some debate in the literature about which is more important (top-down or bottom-up), and this would clearly depend in any specific case on what the text is and what the learner population is using it. However, in general it would seem that top-down knowledge (of content, genre and context) is more important for listening than it is for reading, due to the relative difficulty of perceiving and understanding natural speech through bottom-up processes only. In reading, the learner can read at their own rate and go back to re-read anything that was not initially understood, whereas in listening, the speed at which the discourse moves on is out of the control of the listener, who cannot immediately re-hear indistinct bits at will. The bottom line is that both top-down and bottom-up processes are essential: both can cause problems in listening (and reading) comprehension; and both need to be taken into account when we are designing, administering or giving feedback on activities.

We need, therefore, to find ways of providing learners with plenty of experience of understanding spoken text produced by speakers who are well above the present level of the students themselves, and which activate both top-down and bottom-up processes. And this experience needs to be successful. 'Success' in this case does not mean that the learners have understood every word they hear: it means that they can get the message conveyed by the speaker(s) – which may involve not only explicit information, but also sometimes underlying implications, including those of mood or emotion – and that they can map this message onto what they already know or think in order to respond appropriately. Unsuccessful listening comprehension experience is discouraging and will not help students improve their listening skills very much. The task should be designed therefore, to support, not to test, comprehension (see Section 3). Some ideas on assessing listening comprehension can be found in 13 Assessment and testing.

8.2 Listening activity design 1: the text

After studying French for seven years in school, I went to France and found that I could not understand what French people were saying to me. I needed them to slow down, pause and pronounce things the same way I had been taught they should be pronounced. This was in spite of having had listening comprehension exercises in school. What had gone wrong? The answer is that my schoolteachers and textbooks had simply not prepared me for real-life listening: the kinds of listening texts I heard were not the kind I was likely to encounter in authentic communicative situations, and the way I was asked to respond to them (answering comprehension questions) was quite different from the way I needed to respond to real-life communicative speech.

Simply providing students with authentic listening comprehension texts and tasks, however, is not easy: there are pedagogical constraints. The most common authentic listening situation requiring listener response, for example, is conversation: I hear what my interlocutor says to me and respond appropriately; they speak again, I respond again, and so on. But this is near-impossible to replicate in the classroom outside one-to-one teaching. Conversation between learners will not provide very much useful listening practice, for the reasons given in the previous section. So we need to find a sensible and practicable combination of a) the provision of authentic, as far as possible, listening experience and b) pedagogical validity and practicability. In the next section, I'll be discussing listening tasks in the classroom; but first let's look at the spoken text itself.

Informal discourse in real life

The most common real-life situations where listening comprehension is required are different kinds of interpersonal interactions, such as face-to-face or telephone or computer-mediated chats, interviews, lessons, buying and selling, or getting instructions. These are normally characterized by the following:

- 1 the speech is real-time, not recorded.
- 2 the discourse is typically in informal, colloquial style (see below for more on this).
- 3 the speech is improvised, not written beforehand to be read aloud.
- 4 the speaker is visible.
- 5 the listener responds in real time to what they hear.
- 6 the listener has expectations: some idea of the kind of content or information they are going to hear.
- 7 the listener has a purpose in listening, beyond just comprehension (e.g., getting information, developing a personal relationship, enjoyment, etc.).
- 8 the listener does not need to understand every word.

Pause for thought

Think of a recent situation where you have been listening to someone outside the classroom, and needed to understand them, either in your own L1 or in another language. How many of the above features apply to it?

Comment

Probably your answer is 'most of them'. But, of course, there will be exceptions: in a telephone conversation we may not see the speaker (although of course, when using a smartphone, we very often do). If we are listening to a lecture or watching a movie, we don't need to respond in real time. If we are listening to a news broadcast, whether on television or through a website or on the radio, the discourse may well be based on written text, read by the speaker off a script. But for most of us, these are only the minority of communicative situations requiring listening: most of our listening takes place within the context of interpersonal interaction, characterized by most or all of the features listed above.

Informal language

A key characteristic of most listening situations is the use of informal language.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the two texts on the next page. Text A is a transcript of authentic conversation; Text B is a transcript of a listening comprehension text from a textbook. What are the differences in the use of language?

Text A

Transcript

- 1 <S 01> Are you still playing er
2 <S 02> [Gu-lar]
3 <S 01> Irish music, yeah
4 <S 02> No I don't play very much now, no, not at all
5 <S 01> I thought you were touring the
6 country at one point
7 <S 02> [Laughs] No, I er ... we go, we listen to it quite a lot, every time we
8 go to Ireland we erm, you know, seek out good musicians and er do
9 quite a lot of listening and of course we still buy a lot of records,
10 bought a lot of records over the last few years, but erm, there's not
11 actually anybody to play with around here, you know [<S 01> mm]
12 there's a there's a session every Sunday night in Cambridge in a pub
13 and that's erm about it ... do you still listen to Scottish music?
14 <S 01> Ver ... since this pair have arrived [<S 02> mm] very very little, cos
15 you just don't have the time, and with the new house, and with the
16 garden [<S 02> Mm] occasionally I take fits of putting stuff on, not as
17 much as before

(from *Exploring Spoken English* by Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. 1991)

Text B

- ADAM Hello?
LILLY Hi, Adam.
A Hi, Lily. How are things?
L Oh, um not too bad, I suppose. But now the kids are at school, I've been wondering what to do with my time. I get bored being at home all day on my own.
A So, er what choices do you have?
L Well, I could go back to teaching, but I'm thinking of doing another degree instead.
A Really? Wow!
L Well, if I start teaching again, I'll be exhausted after a year. And I don't know if I want to work in a school all day and then look after three children when I get home.
A What will you study if you do another degree?
L I'd like to do fashion design. You know I've always been interested in that kind of thing. I've talked to a few colleges and I don't think it'll be a problem getting in.
A Well, that's good. But you might not get in this year if you don't apply soon. It's already June.

(from *face2face Intermediate Student's Book 2nd Edition* by Redstone, C. and Cunningham, G., 2013)

Comment

Text A is intended to represent natural informal conversation, but is clearly carefully prepared, as an analysis of the differences between it and the authentic conversation in Text B reveal. Some of these differences are:

Text A includes very few actual sentences. It uses short phrases, 'false starts' (I ... er ... we go) or long run-on utterances that are not really grammatical sentences (at least by generally accepted norms of written English). Text B, on the other hand, is mostly composed of grammatical sentences.

Text A has quite a lot of fillers: 'yeah', 'you know', 'erm'. Text B has relatively few.

Text A often repeats the information, through paraphrase or reiteration (redundancy), e.g., 'I don't ... not, not at all', 'we listen ... do quite a lot of listening'. In Text B, informational content is provided only once.

Text A uses more informal vocabulary, vague expressions like 'putting stuff on' and shortened forms like 'cos'.

In Text A, the listener uses *backchannelling*: this indicates they are listening and understanding with brief verbal interjections – in this case 'Mmm'.

The transcripts on the previous page cannot represent all aspects of the pronunciation; but note that the pronunciation of words in improvised speech may often be indistinct and noticeably different from the phonological representation presented in a dictionary and taught to students. Examples include the use of the neutral vowel sound 'schwa' in the pronunciation of weak forms (such as /əv/ for *of*); assimilation, such as the change of /r/ to /m/ in the pronunciation of phrases like *ten percent* (/tɛmpənt/); and elision, i.e., the disappearance of one or more of the sounds (/əraɪt/ for 'all right' or /fwi:/ for 'shall we'). There is some evidence (Jenkins, 2002) that many English speakers with a different first language tend to pronounce words fairly closely to the way they are written and normally pronounced, which of course makes them more clearly comprehensible. Even so, the pronunciation features described above are still very widespread, and learners need to have opportunities to encounter and understand them.

Other characteristics of authentic conversation include overlaps (two people speaking together), indistinct or incomprehensible words or phrases, pauses, implicit knowledge (information the speakers share and which therefore does not need to be expressed in words), background noise, and the use of gesture, body language or facial expression to express things not put into words, or to add underlying meanings. All these would make such discourse difficult to understand for a non-participant hearing a recording of it later.

Clearly, in order to prepare students for real-life listening, we do not want to limit listening comprehension only to listening texts which eliminate such problematic features: non-interactive formal speech used in events such as rehearsed speeches, talks, and recorded news bulletins. We also need to provide students with experience of natural, conversational input, while making sure that such input is in fact comprehensible and usable in the classroom. In other words, we are looking for a combination of authentic (as far as possible) listening experience with pedagogical validity and practicability.

We will need to compromise on some aspects of authenticity: totally authentic conversation, whether recorded or improvised live, is not usually suitable for classroom use, for reasons discussed above: unfamiliar vocabulary, indistinctness, overlaps, information that is not made explicit. It is also out of context: the listeners do not know the speakers or the surrounding situation. If it is an audio recording, then we lose the input provided by body language, facial expression and the surroundings.

There are two main ways we can nevertheless provide students with authentic or semi-authentic improvised speech.

The first is teacher talk: you, the teacher, provide spoken input, through mini-stories, jokes, explanations. You know your students, can adapt your speech to their level, and can check comprehension as you go, either simply through perception of their body language and facial expressions, or through occasional question-and-answer checking. Teacher talk can be supplemented by occasionally inviting guests – other teachers, friends, parents of students – to come to the classroom to talk to the class in response to their questions.

The second is recordings of a simulation of natural conversation, as many coursebooks already provide, making sure that the actors who perform it keep to a level of language that is accessible to the target student population. Some thought, however, needs to be invested in making such recordings both authentic-sounding and accessible. First, as we have seen, the speaker is visible in most listening situations, and it makes sense therefore to use video rather than audio recordings. Second, the discourse should display at least some of the characteristics of natural improvised speech that do not impede understanding: these include things like repetition and paraphrase; vague, colloquial and abbreviated vocabulary; fillers ('you know', 'I mean', etc.); hesitations ('erm', 'um'). Two useful internet resources when you are searching for such recordings, whether video or audio, are the Open Educational Resources at www.oercommons.org/ and the English Listening Lesson Library Online (ello.org).

Another point to be taken into account when choosing or using recordings, or when inviting speakers to the classroom is the provision of a variety of accents, or when likely to encounter a wide range of different accents when using English for purposes of international communication. It makes sense, therefore, to vary the accents in our listening comprehension texts and to include a variety of speakers of English from different speech communities.

8.3 Listening activity design 2: the task

In the design of the listening task, we need again to aim at providing authentic, or simulation-authentic, listening activity, but taking into account pedagogical considerations. So we need to ask ourselves:

- 1 Does the task provide listening experience that prepares students for real-life listening situations? In other words, does it provide opportunities for students to cope with and respond to different kinds of natural English speech in ways similar to those they are likely to encounter in the future outside the classroom?

It is practical is the task to do in the classroom? Is it easy to present and manage? Can it monitor how well the students are understanding?

There are these two considerations clash. For example, we often want to replay a recorded conversation in order to give students more quantity of listening, to monitor understanding it by providing extra exposure, and in general to increase the value of the exercise as a whole. In real life, in contrast, we almost never have opportunity to hear exactly the same text twice: people do not rewind their speech. For example has to do with responses: in real life, listener responses to what they hear are usually spoken and ongoing: the listener acknowledges, answers, provides comments or questions. In class, because we are usually working with large groups of students, it is very not feasible to elicit spontaneous spoken individual responses as the speech is going on. In both these cases, we will probably prioritize the practical over the authentic: for students the possibility of hearing a text more than once, and ask them to respond in a way of action rather than speech (see the next section).

And, I return to the point made in the previous section relating to text: a sensible compromise means trying to maintain as much as we can of the naturalness of a listening task, while making sure that it has maximum teaching/learning value and is easily monitored in the classroom or made available to students to do for homework.

Design features which can contribute to a successful listening task

Expectations. Students should have in advance some idea about the kind of text they are going to hear. This both replicates the reality of most listening situations and facilitates understanding. The instruction *Listen to the passage*, on its own, is not very helpful. It is better to give the students some idea of what they are going to hear. For example: *You are going to hear a husband and wife discussing their plans for the summer ...* This type of instruction activates students' relevant schemata (their own previous knowledge and concepts of facts, scenes, events, etc.) and enables them to use this knowledge to build expectations that will help them understand (top-down processes). You may even discuss the topic with students in advance. It is previous knowledge of the topic which is probably the major factor in facilitating understanding of a listening passage (Chang and Seed, 2006).

Purpose. Students should be provided with a preset task which leads to some kind of clear and visible or audible response. Instead of saying simply: *Listen and understand*, then answer the questions, it is better to give an instruction like: *Listen and find out where the family are going for their summer holidays. Mark the places on your map. Giving them a purpose means that the students can listen selectively for significant information, as we do in real life. This is easier, as well as more natural, than trying to understand everything ... which leads to the next point.*

Selective listening. The task should encourage students to listen out for what they need to know. This implies that they also need to learn how to ignore irrelevant bits. In the traditional type of listening comprehension task, students are expected to understand almost everything and are often asked questions about trivial points. Trying to understand every word is an ineffective listening strategy and one that is often doomed to failure.

Students should be reassured that they do not need to understand every word, just listen out for meanings that accord with their purpose and expectations.

Ongoing listener response. The task should, as far as possible, allow for responses during rather than after the listening: in other words, students should be encouraged to respond to the information they are looking for as they hear it, not to wait to the end. It is not practical in most situations, as we have seen above, to ask them to respond orally as the speech is going on. We therefore have to use less authentic but more practical alternatives such as asking students to write brief answers to questions, make notes on the content, raise their hands. A visual focus can often provide a basis for such responses. For example, the task could involve inserting items in a picture or diagram, or marking or annotating a written text.

Interest. The task should be one that is interesting to do: see the discussion of arousing and maintaining interest in classroom tasks in 4 Tasks.

Replay. As noted above, it's a good idea to let students hear the listening text, if it's a recording, at least twice, for the sake of the added listening experience, and to make it more likely that they will be able to complete the task successfully.

Exceptions

The above are useful guidelines in the design of most listening tasks: but in some cases, you might want to make exceptions.

No task. You might provide no preset task if the listening text is so interesting and easy to understand that you can be sure students will benefit from listening without the need for a focused goal. The classic example of this is a story: anecdote, joke, folk tale and so on. You do not have to be a brilliant storyteller: any teacher can tell stories they know, and students of all ages react well to them. Reading stories aloud is also useful thing – and not only for younger learners. Other examples of such 'taskless tasks' are watching a good movie or video clip, or an interesting or funny TV show, or listening to a poem. In such cases, present information-based tasks can actually be counterproductive: may spoil the fun, excitement or aesthetic value of the text.

No expectations or preparation. You might occasionally want to challenge students to understand something with no preparation whatsoever, for the sake of the challenge: as when we turn on the television or radio with no idea of what kind of programme we are going to encounter. The task here is to pick up clues to understand what type of text it is, and what it is about.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the listening comprehension task shown on the next page. What do you think works well? Would you make any criticisms? How might you use it yourself in the classroom?

Listening

Work in pairs. Look at these sentences about sleep. Try to choose the correct words or numbers.



- 1 Tiredness causes *more/less* than half of all road accidents in the USA.
- 2 10%/30% of people in the UK have problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- 3 Nowadays people are sleeping 30/90 minutes less than they did 100 years ago.
- 4 Teenagers need *more/less* sleep than adults.
- 5 Teenagers naturally wake up *two/three* hours later than adults.
- 6 We use *less/the same amount of* energy when we're asleep compared to when we're resting.

4 a 60s-13 Listen to a TV interview with a sleep scientist.

Check your answers to 3.

b Listen again. Answer these questions.

- 1 How many British people have serious insomnia?
- 2 How were sleeping habits different 100 years ago?
- 3 Who needs the least amount of sleep?
- 4 What happened when a British school started lessons an hour later?
- 5 What do our brains do when we're asleep?

(from *face2face Intermediate Student's Book 2nd Edition* by Redstone, C. and Cunningham, G., 2013)

Audioscript (The circles represent pronunciation stress.)

[words in pink = weak forms]

MAN How many people do you know who have trouble sleeping at night? For many of us insomnia's part of life, and not being able to get to sleep isn't just annoying, it can also be very dangerous.

WOMAN Yes, and with us today is sleep scientist, Doctor Angela Moore. Welcome to the programme.

ANGELA Thank you.

W Doctor Moore, how much of a problem is this, do you think?

A Well, we know tiredness can cause accidents. More than fifty per cent of road accidents in the USA are because of people driving when they're tired.

M That's amazing!

A Yes, it is, isn't it? And when you think thirty per cent of people in the UK can have problems getting to sleep or staying asleep, and ten per cent have serious insomnia – that's a lot of accidents waiting to happen.

W So how much sleep do you think people are getting these days?

A Well, a hundred years ago, before electricity, people went to sleep when it got dark and woke up when it got light. But now in our twenty-four-hour society we sleep about an hour and a half less than we did a century ago.

W Well, I've got two teenagers and no one can say they're sleeping less!

A I'm sure a lot of parents would say that. Actually, scientists now believe teenagers need about an hour more sleep than adults.

W Really?

A Yes, it's because their bodies are still growing. Of course, teenagers don't need as much sleep as babies and small children – they need the most sleep. It's actually older people who generally need the least amount of sleep.

W That's very interesting.

(from *face2face Intermediate Student's Book 2nd Edition* by Redstone, C. and Cunningham, G., 2013)

Comments

It is good that the book provides a preliminary exercise that invites students to think about the topic of the listening text. This will certainly help them understand the information when they hear it, by activating top-down processes, as well as being interesting in itself. It also provides a preset task: at the first encounter with the text they will be listening out for the answers to the first exercise. As to the later comprehension questions (4b): it's not altogether clear whether the students can answer the questions before they listen again, or listen again and then look at and answer the questions first and then discuss what the answers are; they might be back of the questions first and then discuss what the answers are; they might remember these from the first listening. (Note that at least one of the questions has already been answered at first listening (1), and another partially (3).) The second listening will therefore function as an opportunity to check and review, as well as provide added listening experience. A problem is that each question has a piece of information that is given only once in the course of the recording. If I were designing the text, I'd try to make sure that key information is provided more than once. Finally, all the comprehension questions relate to isolated items of information. So I would at some point provide opportunities for students to discuss some underlying meanings or conclusions, such as: 'What's the context of the conversation? Who are the speakers? How do you think one or more of the main findings here might be applied in your own lives?'

A possible follow-up to any listening comprehension activity is to allow the students to read the written transcript, and read it as they hear the recording once more. This will enable them to mop up any bits they still didn't understand – and also contributes to reading comprehension.

Types of activities

If you are using a coursebook, then you will probably use the listening tasks and texts it provides. If you are not, or if you wish to supplement the materials with more listening practice, this section lists a number of different types of listening tasks you might design yourself. They are classified according to the amount and complexity of response required.

- 1 No overt response. Students do not have to do anything in response to the listening. However, facial expression and body language often show if they are following or not.
- 2 Short responses. Students respond by writing a word or a symbol, or by physical movement.
- 3 Longer responses. Students write longer answers, which may be phrases or full sentences.
- 4 Mixed-skills responses. The listening provides only the first stage in an extended activity involving also reading, writing or speaking.

Some examples follow.

1 No overt response

Stories. Tell a joke or real-life anecdote, retell a well-known story, read a story from a book. If the story is well chosen, students are likely to be motivated to pay attention and understand in order to enjoy it.

Songs. Sing a song yourself, or play a recording of one. Make sure that you focus students on the words of the song as well as the music. Otherwise, they may just enjoy the tune without listening to the words, when your aim is for them to do both!

Entertainment: short videos, films, theatre. As with stories, if the content is really entertaining, students will be motivated to make the effort to understand without the need for any further task. You can search for suitable material on the websites recommended earlier (www.oercommons.org and ello.org) or you might prefer to use clips from video-sharing platforms or full-length movies from (paid membership) sources.

2 Short responses

Obeying instructions. Students perform actions or draw something in response to instructions.

Ticking off items. A list, text or picture is provided. The students listen to spoken description, information or narrative and mark the relevant items as they hear them mentioned.

True/False. The listening passage consists of a number of statements, some of which are true and some false (possibly based on material the class has just learnt). Students with ticks or crosses to indicate whether the statements are right or wrong; or use gesture, or make brief choral responses ('True!' or 'False!' for example); or repeat if the statements are right and stay silent if they are not.

Detecting mistakes. The teacher tells a story or describes something the class knows, but with a number of deliberate mistakes. Listeners raise their hands or call out when they hear something wrong.

Cloze. Like the more conventional written cloze passage, the text has occasional gaps; however, in a listening passage, these gaps are represented by silence or some kind of buzz. Students write down what they think might be the missing word. The gaps have to be much more widely spaced than in a written text, otherwise there is not enough time to listen, understand, think of the answer and write. If you are speaking the text yourself, then you can adapt the pace of your speech to the speed of student responses.

Guessing definitions. The teacher provides brief oral definitions of a person, place, thing or action or whatever; students write down what they think it is.

Skimming and scanning. Students are asked to identify some general topic or information (skimming), or certain limited items of information (scanning) and note the answer(s). Written questions inviting brief answers may be provided in advance; or a grid with certain entries missing; or a picture or diagram to be altered or completed.

3 Longer responses

Answering questions. Questions which require responses of several words are given in the listening text. The listening text provides the answer(s). Students write down the answers as they hear them.

Take notes. Students take brief notes from a short lecture or talk.

Summarising. Students write a summary of the content of the listening passage after they have heard it, either in English or in their L1.

Gap filling. A long gap is left, at the beginning, middle or end of a listening text.

Guessing and writing down. Students guess and write down, or discuss, what they think might be the answer.

4 Shared skill

Problem solving. A problem is described orally. Students discuss how to deal with it and write down a suggested solution.

Interpretation. An extract from a piece of dialogue or monologue is provided, with no previous information. The listeners try to guess from the words, kinds of voices, tone and any other evidence what is going on. At a more sophisticated level, a piece of literature that is suitable for reading aloud (some poetry, for example) can be discussed and analysed using both written and spoken versions.

Reconstruction. Students take notes from a text they hear, and then, in small groups, compare their information and attempt to reconstruct the original text. They may then read the text again during this process. Later, the teacher displays the original text for comparison, and teacher and students discuss together any problems (Wajnryb, 1990).

Review: Check yourself

- 1 How useful is it to have students listen to each other for listening comprehension practice?
- 2 Can you define *top-down* and *bottom-up* listening processes?
- 3 Can you recall at least four characteristics of natural listening situations?
- 4 What are some characteristics of natural conversation that may be difficult for learners to cope with?
- 5 What aspects of authentic listening tasks or texts can be simulated in the classroom? What aspects are more difficult to imitate?
- 6 Can you give at least two examples of listening activities that elicit very brief responses from students?
- 7 Can you give an example of an extended activity based on listening that eventually activates students in speaking, reading or writing as well?

Further reading

- Field, J. (2008). *Listening in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press. (Practical guidelines on the design of listening comprehension activities in the classroom, suggesting alternatives to the traditional comprehension question-based tasks)
- Jannuzi, C. and Zanini, G. (2021). Extensive listening through film (1). *English Teaching Professional*, 134, 49–51.
- Jannuzi, C. and Zanini, G. (2021). Extensive listening through film (2). *English Teaching Professional*, 135, 44–46. (Ideas on how to use films for listening practice)
- Lynch, T. (2009). *Teaching Second Language Listening*. Oxford University Press. (Research and theory, together with practical suggestions for classroom listening tasks)
- Rost, M. (1991). *Listening in Action: Activities for Developing Listening in Language Education*. Prentice Hall International. (A series of suggested activities, classified according to the type of listening, with guiding notes and suggestions)
- Ur, P. (1984). *Teaching Listening Comprehension*. Cambridge University Press. (Theoretical topics similar to those treated here, with a range of ideas for listening activities at different levels)
- Wilson, J. J. (2008). *How to Teach Listening*. Pearson Longman. (A practical handbook on teaching listening, providing a range of sample activities as well as principled guidance on task design)

References

- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (1997). *Exploring Spoken English*. Cambridge University Press
- Chang, A. C. and Read, J. (2006). The effects of listening support on the listening performance of EFL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(2), 375–397.
- Jenkins, J. (2002). A sociolinguistically based, empirically researched pronunciation syllabus for English as an International Language. *Applied Linguistics*, 23(1), 83–103.
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Teaching speaking

Overview

- 8.1 Goals and problems in teaching speaking. The main objectives in teaching oral fluency, some problems and how we might address them.
- 8.2 Speaking activity design: some basic features. The roles of topic and task in stimulating lively conversational English in the lesson.
- 8.3 Getting them to speak: from beginner to advanced. A range of useful speaking activities at different levels.
- 8.4 Presentations. Teaching more formal speaking in the form of classroom presentations at various levels.
- 8.5 Pronunciation. Aspects of English pronunciation which you may find useful to teach, and some ideas for how to do so.

Goals and problems in teaching speaking

Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important. People who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing. And many, if not most, language learners are mainly interested in learning to communicate orally. Classroom activities that develop students' ability to express themselves through speech – mainly informal conversation – would therefore seem an important component of a language course.

It is very difficult to design and administer procedures that actually get students to talk: more so, in many ways, than to get them to listen, read or write. So let's start by defining the main goals of classroom activities that are designed to promote oral interaction, and the accompanying problems.

Goals

The students should actually talk a lot. As much time as possible during the activity should be taken up with talk by the students themselves. This may seem obvious, but in many activities, a lot of the time is actually filled with teacher explanations, pauses, reading texts or instructions, or classroom management issues.

The language used should be of an acceptable level. Students should express themselves in language that is relevant, easily understandable and reasonably accurate. This does not mean that everything has to be absolutely correct, only that it is free from pronunciation,

lexical and grammatical errors that interfere with the fluent communication of meaning. (For a discussion of the teaching of pronunciation, see the last section of this chapter.)

Pause for thought

What, in your experience as either student or teacher, are some of the problems in getting students to talk in the classroom?

Comment

Some of the main problems I have come across are the following:

- **Reluctance to speak in English in the classroom.** A very basic problem is students' lack of *willingness to communicate* (WTC) in English (Yashima, 2012). This can be rooted in a number of factors, including shyness, lack of confidence, aversion to speaking in front of an audience, fear of making mistakes or of losing face.
- **Finding things to say.** Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear students complain that they cannot think of anything to say. Just providing an interesting topic, as we shall see in the next section, is not enough. Students need to feel that they have something relevant and original to contribute so that it is worth making the effort to speak.
- **Low participation.** Only one participant can talk at a time if they are to be heard; and in a large group, this means that each student will have only very little talking time. An added problem here is the tendency of some students to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.
- **L1 use.** In classes where some or all of the students share the same L1, they may fall back on it when they could, with a bit more effort, use English. They do so because it is easier and feels more natural to talk to each other in their own language. Occasional L1 use is inevitable – and, indeed, can be very helpful in solving specific vocabulary problems, for example – but if students spend most of their time speaking their own language, they will obviously have little opportunity to improve their speaking skills in English.

Two features which will help a lot to address these problems are the use of group or pair work and a relatively low level of language.

Group work. The use of group work, whether through face-to-face division into groups within the classroom or the use of breakout rooms in videoconferencing, increases the amount of learner talk during the activity, and also helps to lower the inhibitions of students who are unwilling to speak in front of the whole class. It is true that group work means the teacher cannot supervise all speech produced by students, that errors may go uncorrected and that students may sometimes slip into their L1. Nevertheless, even taking

into consideration occasional mistakes and L1 use, the amount of time when individual members of the class are actually speaking in English is still likely to be far more than it could be in a whole-class discussion.

Easy language. In general, the level of language needed for participation in the interaction should be **lower** than that used in other language-learning activities in the same class. The vocabulary and grammar items needed should be ones which can easily be recalled and produced, so that students can speak fluently without too much hesitation. It is a good idea to review essential vocabulary before the activity starts, and maybe even to display some useful items on the board for students to refer to.

Below are some further useful practical tips.

- 1 **Use pair work.** Where feasible, use pair work rather than small-group work. That way, the amount of talk overall in the class is maximized (at any one time, half the members of the class are likely to be speaking). Also, pair work is far easier to organize than group work: it just involves turning to face a partner, rather than actually moving tables and chairs to get into groups.
- 2 **Discussion leaders.** Appoint one member of the group as discussion leader, whose job it is to make sure that everyone gets a chance to participate and that nobody overdominates the process.
- 3 **L1 monitors.** With classes who have a strong tendency to overuse L1, invite one student (not the discussion leader) to act as monitor for each group. The monitor's job is to note instances of L1 use. Even if there is no actual penalty attached, the awareness that someone is monitoring their language helps participants to keep to English. The monitor's notes could be used later for the group to explore how the L1 words or sentences could have been expressed in English, perhaps with the help of the teacher or by referring to a dictionary.
- 4 **Avoid correcting errors.** In general, give corrective feedback on errors only rarely during oral fluency work. Stopping students to correct them may distract them, and focusing too much on accuracy will discourage them from trying to express themselves freely. On the other hand, there are places where correction can actually help: if the student is obviously hesitant and needs a confirmation of the correct form, for example. An alternative is for you to note errors and discuss them with the class later. For more on this topic, see 12 **Feedback and error correction**.

Speaking activity design: some basic features

Pause for thought

On the next page are two samples of speaking activities designed to have students engage in exchanges of opinion. What are some differences between them? How well do you think each would work in a classroom of students of an appropriate level?

Activity 1

Discuss the following conflicting opinions:

Opinion 1: Children should be taught in heterogeneous classes: setting them into ability groupings puts a 'failure' label onto members of the lower groups, whereas putting differently abled students together allows opportunities for peer teaching and overall better learning.

Opinion 2: Children should be divided into ability groupings for most subjects; this enables students to get instruction appropriate to their differing needs, makes teaching easier, and improves individual achievements.

Activity 2

A good schoolteacher of English should have the following qualities. Can your group agree together in what order of priority you would put them?

ability to activate students	flexibility
ability to create interest	honesty
ability to explain clearly	intelligence
ability to keep order	knowledge of English
clear speaking voice	love of children
enthusiasm for teaching	pleasant appearance
fairness	sense of humour

Comment

The main difference between the two activities shown above is that the first simply asks participants to talk about a **topic**; the main objective being clearly the discussion process itself. The second asks them to perform a **task**, where the objective is the production of some kind of clear result (in this case, a joint decision about priorities). The first includes the explicit command 'discuss'; the second does not, but asks students to complete a task (in this case, agree on an order of priority), which cannot be done without talking. In all groups in which I've tried these out, the second type produced more talk and more interest. When asked why this might be so, participants say things like: 'I knew what needed to be said'; 'It was a challenge – we were aware that time was running out and we had to get a result'; 'It was more like a game, we enjoyed it'. However, there is a minority of students who do prefer discussing a topic: 'I found discussing a topic more interesting; you can go into things more deeply without the pressure of having to reach a decision'.

The distinction between topic and task in the design of discussion activities is a key one.

Topic: A good topic is one to which students can relate, using ideas from their own experience and knowledge. The 'ability-grouping' topic under **Pause for thought** on the next page is therefore appropriate for most schoolteachers or people whose school subjects are fresh. It helps if it represents a genuine controversy, in which participants are likely to be fairly evenly divided. Some questions or suggested lines of thought can help to stimulate discussion, but not too many arguments for and against should be fed to the class in advance: leave room for their own initiative and originality.

Task: A task is goal-oriented: it requires the group, or pair, to achieve an objective in the form of an observable result, such as brief notes or lists, a rearrangement of jumbled items, a drawing, a spoken or written summary or conclusion. This result should be achievable only by interaction between participants: so in the instructions for the task, you often find directions such as 'reach a consensus', or 'find out everyone's opinion'. A task is often introduced if there is some kind of visual focus to base the talking on: a picture, for example, or a list or list of some kind, as in the example shown in Activity 2 on the previous page. You will find more examples of task-based speaking activities in Section 3 below.

The reason for the success of task-based activities is that they are based on an important characteristic of real-life talking: the purpose. It is true that sometimes we speak just to make contact or be polite (e.g., 'Hello!', 'Nice talking to you!' etc.) or to entertain (e.g., telling jokes), or to get something off our chest (e.g., exclamations or cursing) – but in the majority of situations, we have some goal that we want to achieve by talking: to take a decision, to solve a problem, to clarify an issue, to find out the answer to a question and so on. A well-designed task provides students with a purpose of this kind, giving them a reason to speak.

A task can be used more than once: there is some evidence that task repetition results in increased fluency and more successful performance (Bygate, 2009). There is, of course, the possibility of such repetition being seen as tedious and redundant: we need to find ways to vary, by repeating only part of the task process, or by doing it slightly differently (using different student groupings, for example).

On the whole, then, it is recommended that most oral fluency activities should be designed round tasks, while including also, mainly for more advanced classes, some open topic-based ones.

Besides these two main categories, there are other types of oral fluency activities that are useful at more elementary or more advanced levels. For lower-level learners, there are those based on learning by heart, or introducing variations into given mini-texts, or reading aloud (see the first part of the next section for some examples). And then for the more advanced, there are those based on role play, or on individual presentations.

Getting them to speak: from beginner to advanced

This section presents a selection of interactive oral fluency activities, starting with very simple ones for beginners and progressing to more advanced ones.

Beginner-elementary (Pre-A1 to A2 level)

As noted earlier, some of the problems with getting students to participate in speaking activities are their inhibitions based on lack of knowledge of English and fear of making mistakes. But learners even at the earliest stages can be provided with safe ways to express themselves in spoken English, building their confidence in preparation for more challenging tasks later.

Using conventional language exercises. Conventional grammar or vocabulary exercises can be used as a basis for individual speech, by making them open-ended and inviting multiple responses to a question. For example, let's take simple past exercise items like the following:

Write the past simple of the verbs.

- 1 She _____ early. (leave)
- 2 He _____ a film. (see)

If this has been done once conventionally, so the past simple is known, you can then tell students to ignore the end of the sentence and say other possible (full) sentences, for example: 'She left the room', 'She left late', 'She left her husband' or 'He saw me', 'He saw a picture', 'He saw the house'. The utterances are short and make use of known vocabulary, and give the students the opportunity to say their own thing within a given frame. The same can be done with matching exercises (delete one column of matches and invite students to invent their own completions to each item), or some multiple-choice (delete the options).

Pause for thought

Have a look at a coursebook or book of grammar exercises. Can you find items that could be used as above as cues for open-ended oral responses by students?

Comment

You'll probably have found a few, though not all exercise items lend themselves to such adaptation; some allow few possibilities other than the one the item is targeting. Another possibility is to suggest to students that if the subject of a sentence is a person, they substitute 'I' and make sentences that are true for them.

Learning by heart. The procedure of reciting text learnt by heart is associated with the audiolingual method, which was popular in the 1960s, but is now rarely used, and some people mistakenly assume that it is therefore an outdated and ineffective technique. It is actually very useful for the development of oral fluency at elementary levels; it provides beginners with ready-made, meaningful utterances that they can perform fluently, giving them the confidence early on that they can communicate successfully in spoken English without the fear of making mistakes. There are various kinds of text that can be memorized, but perhaps the most useful are chants and dialogues.

chants have been popularized by the numerous books and videos of Carolyn Graham (*Further Reading*): sequences of utterances that replicate the rhythm of speech but without a 'strong beat'. Later writers have adopted the basic idea, but without the 'jazz' effect and have designed simple chants for choral repetition that retain a natural 'strong beat', while teaching useful interactive chunks of text that learners can later bring into their own output.

Here is one of my own (the upper-case letters indicate the stress, and three dots a full stop):

10 YOU ... HOW are YOU? ...

10 YOU ... HOW are YOU?

10 RATE, I'm FEELING GREAT and

HOW ... ARE ... YOU?

I find that younger learners particularly enjoy the rhythm and the experience of chanting in chorus, with appropriate gestures; see more on this in **19 Learner differences 1: age**.

Dialogues can also be learned and recited: whether very simple exchanges like:

Do you like apples?

Yes, I do

For more dramatic exchanges like:

Come here at once!

Who, me?

Yes, you! Come here at once!

What's the matter?

The dialogues once learnt, are repeated, either in chorus or by individuals, and can be varied in speed, mood, volume and so on, as well as added to or changed.

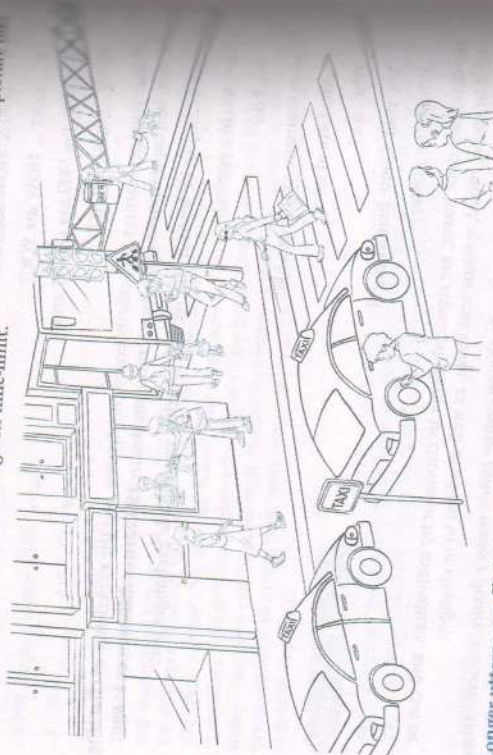
Reading aloud: reader's theatre. In the procedure called *reader's theatre*, students rehearse and perform a scene, or scenes, from a story. They do not learn their parts by heart, but read aloud from a script; the rehearsals ensure that they read fluently and meaningfully. If you check out the phrase "reader's theatre" (American spelling) on the internet, you'll find a number of examples. Again, this is a procedure which helps learners to speak without the stress associated with having to create their own utterances. Note that the text doesn't necessarily have to be based on scripted dialogue: I have used the same technique with poems and even paragraphs from a reading passage from the coursebook. Students are given ten or fifteen minutes to decide who says what, how, whether they will use movement or gesture, pause or repetition ... and then perform before the class.

Scaffolded activities. Scaffolded activities are those where students compose their own utterances based on a given pattern or grammatical structure. A classic example is guessing

Adapted from Baz, H. (1968). *Dramatic Dialogues*. Publishing House of the Teacher's Union in Israel, now out of print.

games, which are based on *Yes/No* questions: 'Guess what I have in my bag,' for example, or 'Guess what I'm doing' (a mime), or 'Twenty questions' (you have twenty questions to guess the thing, animal or person I'm thinking of). Other examples are brainstorming on sentence beginnings: 'If it rains tomorrow ...'; 'Last week, I ...'; 'Next year, I hope ...'.

Simple utterances. The next stage is activities that elicit sentences that, though not easily composed by students at an A2–B1 level, are simple enough to be doodle scrawled on the board or screen might represent; or answering what an abstract questions in an interview; or saying as many sentences as they can about a picture (the one shown below) within a given time-limit.



Longer utterances. Slightly more demanding are those activities which might require longer sentences with more advanced vocabulary. 'Find things in common', for example, is a pair-work task in which partners have to find as many things as possible that they have in common. These must be things that can be discovered only through talking – not obvious or visible characteristics like 'We are in the same class', or 'We both have blue eyes.' At the end, they share their findings with the full class.

Role play. In this, students have to compose entire conversations based on role cards. For example, one student gets Role Card A shown on the next page, and the other gets Role Card B; they are invited to improvise a conversation based on these.

ROLE CARD A: Last time your friend borrowed your bike, it came back very dirty and scratched, but you didn't like to complain. Now the same friend has said they want to go for a favour, and you have the feeling they want to borrow the bike again. You don't want to lend it, but you don't want to lose the friendship.

ROLE CARD B: You don't have a bike of your own, but you need one for a group ride tomorrow. So you're going to ask your friend if you can borrow their bike (you know your friend isn't planning to go on the bike ride). You are good friends, and you've borrowed this bicycle before, so you don't think there will be any problem.

Less inhibited or anxious students may find role play difficult and sometimes even embarrassing. Factors that can contribute to a role play's success are: making sure that partners can easily produce the necessary language; your own enthusiasm; careful and clear presentation and instructions. A preliminary demonstration or rehearsal by you together with a student volunteer can also be very helpful.

An extension of the role play is the *simulation*, where participants are in an imaginary situation with some task to perform, but they do not have specific individual roles, as in the following **Extended discussion**.

Extended discussion. Activities involving extended discussion are often based on tasks that require a group to reach a consensus on some issue requiring a decision, for example, 'Educational Advisory Committee'. Students in the class are invited to recall authentic problems they remember encountering in school with regard to particular classes, or individual 'problematic' students or teachers. Each group chooses one of the problems and has the responsibility, as an educational advisory committee, of working out a detailed suggestion as to some possible solutions, or actions that might improve the situation. They should discuss their recommendations and write them out in the form of a letter to the school principal. At the feedback stage, the resulting letters can be read aloud: this often produces further debate.

Debate. Write a debate motion on the board in the form of the expression of an opinion: for example, *Summer is better than winter*. The class is divided into two teams: one is to support the motion, the other is to oppose it. The teams discuss what their arguments might be in presenting their position. These arguments are presented by a representative for each side, after which the discussion is thrown open to anyone who wishes to express an opinion. The session may culminate in a vote where students are free to vote according to their real opinions rather than the ones they were assigned as members of a team. There are, of course, a number of variations of this process: try searching 'debate' on the internet. See www.weareteachers.com/high-school-debate-topics for some debating topics. And if students can't think of arguments, they might resort to AI tools like Opinionator to help them.

9.4 Presentations

Presentations involve longer stretches of speech and may be accompanied by written or graphic material displayed on a screen or in the form of handouts. They are often followed by a question-and-answer session or discussion.

Teaching students how to give presentations is particularly appropriate for those studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or Business English.

Live or recorded?

Traditionally, students make their presentations live in the classroom, followed by a question-and-answer session or discussion. Today, however, making video recordings of both short and long presentations is very easy using any digital device with a camera and microphone, and the help of tools like Loom, ScreenPal, Capture or Flip; and there are considerable advantages to allowing students to do so. The presenter does not have the stressful experience of speaking in front of the whole group; they can delete and re-record if the first version does not work well; the teacher can give private and personal feedback through digitally recorded or written comments; and if the presentations are long, there is considerable saving of lesson time.

Types of presentation

Short. At the early stages, classroom presentations may be very short: for example, students may be asked to introduce themselves in 30 seconds (Lindstromberg, 2004). Later, they may be asked to speak for up to about five minutes. Short presentations may be based on:

- 'Show and tell'. The student shows an object they have brought from home, and tells the class what it is and why it is significant for them.
- 'Describe'. The student shows a photograph of a person or scene or event, and comments on it.
- 'About me'. The student tells the class something about themselves: personal details, family, occupation, interests, tastes, hobbies.
- A joke. The student tells a brief joke.

Medium-length. Longer presentations of 5–15 minutes may include:

- Narrative. The student tells a story: a joke, an anecdote, a fable, an urban legend.
- Instructions. The student explains to the class how to do something that they are an expert in.
- Recommendations. The student recommends a book, film, television programme or play to the class. This will involve some narrative but should focus on reasons why the speaker enjoyed the work and thinks the audience will also like it.

Any of these can be accompanied by illustrations or text using PowerPoint or Canva or other digital presentation tools.

Long. Full-length presentations simulate ones that are given in real life: promotions of a product in business, for example, or lectures on academic topics. These need to be

based on an introduction telling the audience what the presentation is to be about; a main body with clearly ordered sections that include explanations and examples; and a closing, summarizing and, where appropriate, drawing conclusions and making recommendations. The main types of long presentations are:

Information. The presentation conveys information about a topic, sometimes in the form of a report, very often based on research. It is often accompanied by written materials and/or illustrations or headings on slides.

Argument. A case is presented for or against a claim, which may relate to any area: political, social, scientific, etc. It should include arguments in favour of and against the claim, with the speaker's own position made clear.

Advice for thought

Based on your own experience as a student learning how to give presentations, what are some useful tips you have been given (or wish, in retrospect, that you had been given)?

Comment

Some useful tips I have been given myself, and try to observe in my own presentations, are the following:

- **Prepare!** Make notes about what you're going to say; perhaps learn by heart your final sentence, or a few good phrases that can make an impression! But don't learn the whole presentation by heart – see the next point.
- **Don't read your text aloud or try to learn all of it by heart!** A text that has been learnt by heart and recited, or read aloud, tends to be boring. It's much more interesting for the audience if you explain things in your own words, even if you occasionally hesitate or repeat yourself. But you can, of course, refer to notes to keep you on track.
- **If using slides (e.g., on PowerPoint), don't just read them aloud.** Your audience can probably read English, so you don't need to tell them what's written! Use the text on your slides as cues and reminders, not as your entire text.
- **Keep eye contact with your audience (or with the camera if you are recording).** It's much more interesting listening to a speaker who is looking at you. And address the entire class, not just the teacher!
- **Speak clearly.** This sounds obvious, but it's easy to drop your voice, or speak monotonously, without realizing that you are doing so. Speak louder than you normally do, and try to vary the pitch and speed at which you speak.
- **Use movement and gesture.** Body language also communicates! A speaker who moves and uses occasional gesture to add emphasis or meaning is likely to be more interesting and successful in conveying their ideas than one who is static.

9.5 Pronunciation

The term *pronunciation* as it is used here includes not only the sounds of the language, but also rhythm, intonation, and stress patterns. Students do not need necessarily to know the accents on L1 English speakers – indeed, the speech of such speakers is often difficult to understand! – but their pronunciation does need to be clear enough to be readily comprehensible by other English speakers. Where learners' pronunciation is very difficult to understand, you may want to spend some lesson time working on improving it.

Sounds

Some mispronunciation of sounds in international English conversations can actually lead to about a breakdown in communication, as described by Jenkins (2002): for example, the substitution of a long */i:/* sound for the short */i/* in a word like the verb *live*, which then sounds like *leave*. We do therefore need to make sure that students are differentiating between these two sounds and using them correctly. Other common variants, according to Jenkins, do make very little difference: for example, the pronunciation of the 'th' sounds */ð/* and */θ/* as */d/* and */t/*, or as */z/* and */s/*, does not, apparently, cause problems for most listeners. In general, the nearer the pronunciation is to the actual spelling of a word, the more likely it is to be easily understood by the majority of speakers worldwide. It would not matter so much if students fail, for example, to use the schwa sound in *therefore* like */ə/* for *fər*.

Rhythm

The speech rhythm of many (probably most) fluent speakers of English is stress-timed. This means that in each phrase or sentence, certain words are stressed (usually the lexical words which carry the main content) and the other words are shortened to fit the rhythm. How long each phrase or sentence takes to say, therefore, depends on how many stresses there are in it. For example: *My old GRANDfather used to go SWIMMING in the middle of DeCEMBER* (three stresses) does not take much longer to say than *My GRANDpa went SWIMMING in DeCEMBER* (three stresses). Many other languages are syllable-timed: the time it takes to say a sentence depends only on how many syllables are syllable. However, so many people now speak English with syllable- rather than stress-timing – or a mixture – that both are becoming acceptable worldwide, and it may not be worth investing very much effort in training students to produce stress-timed speech themselves. They do, however, need to be able to hear and understand both types: this is one of the reasons why it is so important to give them a varied diet of different accents in listening comprehension, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Intonation

The rules of intonation in English within L1-speaker speech communities are fairly complex and difficult to teach: very few English textbooks, or teachers, attempt to provide explanations or practice in them. The issue is complicated further by the fact that, as with rhythm and stress, the increase in the use of English as an international language has resulted in a proliferation of intonation patterns that are used, accepted and understood in spoken English worldwide. So it is probably not worth trying to teach rules of intonation.

that we need to do, again, is provide students with plenty of exposure to different texts within comprehensible listening texts.

speakers indicate which word they are stressing in a sentence not by increased loudness but normally by a higher pitch. Thus, the message conveyed by a sentence like *I have been to the bank* will vary according to which word is pronounced at a higher pitch. For example:

than the others, for example:

(iii) came by train in the morning. — It was said, —

train in the morning, = It was by train that

... came by train in the morning, = It was the morning that Lin came/see

... of intonation for stress can produce misunderstandings. Where the student does not stress differently, it may be useful to make them aware of how this works in English. For example, the sentence 'I am not a student' can be interpreted in three different ways, depending on the stress pattern. The sentence 'I am not a student' can be interpreted in three different ways, depending on the stress pattern. The sentence 'I am not a student' can be interpreted in three different ways, depending on the stress pattern.

...into town tomorrow.

Don't want to walk into a room and find out that you've been out of touch with a particular stress; for example:

... walk into town tomorrow.

...that the speaker objects to (in

(the other student has to
the walking).

...cause for thought

Make a list of the aspects of pronunciation that you think need to be explicitly taught in your second language classroom, another language that you know.

Comment

According to Jenkins (2002), the most important aspects of pronunciation that teachers of English are the following:

- **vowels:** contrast between long and short vowels; particularly /i:/ = /ɪ/.
- **consonants:** all the consonants, with the exception, as mentioned earlier, of the /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ sounds, which do not seem to be essential for accurate communication. Particularly important are the contrast between unvoiced plosives (/p/, /t/, /k/) and voiced plosives (/b/, /d/, /g/) and initial consonant clusters e.g., the /pr/ in a word like *proper*.
- **intonation:** the use of intonation to signal stress of a particular word in a sentence. You may find, however, that you may need to add to, or shorten, this list, in response to the particular needs of students in your own classes. See Swan (2001) for a list of English pronunciation problems experienced by speakers of specific languages.

How do we teach pronunciation?

As with grammar, most students can benefit from focused teaching of pronunciation as well as incidental acquisition through listening. This is because very often they may not hear an English sound when listening but perceive it as an approximation to the sound but not identical, sound in their own language. Many Arabic speakers, for example, have problems perceiving and producing the voiceless /p/, which they hear and pronounce as a sound similar to the Arabic /b/. It is therefore useful to start by awareness-raising within minimal pairs such as *bin/pin*, and making sure that they can actually recognise the difference. Or use exercises on phonemic awareness which are a useful preliminary to teaching reading (see 10 Teaching reading). Systematic explanation can help here: you can explain, for example, about the puff of air that accompanies an initial voiceless consonant like /p/, or in what part of the mouth a particular sound is formed. The next step is to ask students to produce the sounds in single syllables or pairs of contrasted syllables, imitating your pronunciation, or that of a recording. Learning to hear the correct performance of entire phrases or sentences can help a lot, particularly within the context of dialogues or jazz chants.

Finally, it is important to practise pronunciation within a meaningful task: challenging students to identify or produce messages based on sentences whose exact meaning depends on correct pronunciation. A variety of activities which do this can be found in Hewings (2004).

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What are some factors that prevent, or discourage, students from talking in English in the lesson?
- 2 What practical aspects of speaking activity design can help address those problems?
- 3 What is the difference between task-based and topic-based speaking activities?
- 4 Why is it useful to get students to learn dialogues by heart?
- 5 What are some advantages of having students record their presentations rather than giving them live in class?
- 6 What are some important features of pronunciation to teach?

Further reading

- Bygate, M. (2007). *Dialogue Activities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Various and interesting activities based on the idea of learning and performing dialogues
- Cambridge, M. (2004). *Speaking Extra: A resource book of multi-level skills activities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mainly for adults, but can also be used with adolescents: a variety of speaking activities involving discussion, role play, storytelling
- Crabtree, C. (2006). *Creating Chants and Songs*. Oxford University Press.
- Useful guidance on how to design rhythmic chants to teach oral skills, grammar and vocabulary
- Ellis, R. (1985). *Keep Talking: Communicative fluency activities for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- (Original and stimulating ideas for getting students to talk, mainly for more advanced students)
- Ellis, R. (2007). *Helping Students to Speak*. Richmond Publishing.
- (Basic problems with getting students to speak and how to overcome them; practical ideas for activities)
- Ellis, R. (2014). *Discussions and More*. Cambridge University Press.
- (Oral fluency activities, suitable for a variety of levels)

References

- Bygate, M. (2009). Effects of task repetition of the structure and control of oral language. In Van den Branden, K., Bygate, M. and Norris, J. (Eds.). *Task-Based Language Teaching: A reader* (pp. 33–58). John Benjamins.
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- Loudstromberg, S. (2004). *Language Activities for Teenagers*. Cambridge University Press.
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- Yachima, T. (2012). Willingness to communicate: Momentary volition that results in L2 behaviour. In Mercer, S., Ryan, S. and Williams, M. (Eds.) *Psychology for Language Learning* (pp. 119–135). Palgrave Macmillan.

Overview

- 10.1 **How do we read?** A summary of some of the basic facts about successful reading and factors that contribute to it.
- 10.2 **Beginning reading 1: phonemic awareness.** Some activities that prepare younger learners for reading by raising their awareness of the separate sounds of English represented by letters or letter combinations.
- 10.3 **Beginning reading 2: learning the letters.** Some general guidelines about the early teaching of letters and the reading of simple texts.
- 10.4 **Beginning reading 3: reading tasks.** A variety of practice tasks for young learners aimed at improving and consolidating basic reading skills.
- 10.5 **Fluent reading.** The factors contributing to fluent reading, including both basic skills and more conscious reading strategies, and how our teaching can promote these.
- 10.6 **Extensive reading.** The nature and importance of extensive reading, some associated problems and practical tips.

10.1

How do we read?

In this chapter, I am taking the word *reading* to mean 'reading and understanding'. A learner who says, 'I can read the words on the page, but I don't know what they mean' is, therefore, not reading. In this sense, but only *decoding*: translating the written symbols into their corresponding sounds.

In this section, I aim to clarify some aspects of the nature of reading by critically examining some generally accepted assumptions expressed in the following statements

- 1 We need to decode individual letters in order to read words; and we need to read and understand all the words accurately in order to understand a text.
 - 2 If we understand all the words in a text, we will understand the text.
 - 3 The more words there are in a text, the longer it will take to read it.
- We'll examine these assumptions in the three **Pause for thought** tasks on the next two pages.

Pause for thought

Read the following text as quickly as you can:

The handsome knight mounted his horse and galloped off to save the beautiful princess. On and on, over mountains and valleys, until his galloping horse was exhausted. At last he dismounted ... Where was the dragon?

Did you understand it?

Comment

Did you notice that the second time the word *horse* appeared, it was spelt 'horses'? If you did not, this does not mean that you are a bad reader, but rather the reverse: you are a good reader, in the sense that you are looking for meanings, and aiming to understand the overall sense of the text. We have a natural tendency to try to make anything we read meaningful to us. If a particular word is irrelevant or misspelt, we tend to overlook any aberrations: to interpret it, as here, in a way which accords with the overall message of the text. So we don't just decode all the letters, or read every word accurately.

Pause for thought

Read the following passage.

In the proposed method, the dynamic model of induction motor is updated based on prediction (receding horizon principle) for the inner control loop (current control) while the brain emotional learning-based intelligent controller (BELIC) is used for the outer control loop (speed control).

(Allan and Uddin, 2021)

Do you understand each individual word? Did you understand the information given in the passage?

Comment

Probably the words are known to you, but the meaning of the text as a whole is incomprehensible (as it is to me), unless you are an expert in the relevant technology. Knowing the meanings of the words in a text ensures understanding only if you have some knowledge of the subject matter. The use of this knowledge to help us understand what we read is known as *top-down* reading strategy and is used together with *bottom-up* reading strategy (decoding and understanding the words) in order to arrive at overall comprehension (see a discussion of these terms in **8 Teaching listening**). While reading the text in the previous **Pause for thought**, you probably had some knowledge of traditional stories with knights

on horseback which helped you make sense of it, it is true (as mentioned in the words of a text in order to understand it easily. This is necessary, but may not in some cases, be enough; some background knowledge may also be needed in order to activate top-down strategies; conversely, a wealth of background knowledge may compensate for not knowing some of the vocabulary. So if they be very helpful as a preparation for reading to activate, share or add to students' previous knowledge of the content (and sometimes genre or context) of the text.

Pause for thought

Read carefully the two lines of text below. Which takes you more time to read (and which less)?

- 1 Jam hot pin call did tap son 'ick
- 2 How quickly can you read and understand this?

Comment

You probably found that the second line was much quicker and easier to read than the first, although it is longer. This indicates that there is not a simple one-to-one relationship between the number of words in a text and the time it takes to read. What appears to be more significant is the number of *sense units*: words combined into meaningful phrases or sentences. So if you have a text made up of one sense unit (in this case, the full sentence shown in the second line), it will be easier and quicker to read than a text made up of isolated, disconnected words (the first line), even if the total number of words is the same. The difference is one of coherence: the words in the first line are difficult and time-consuming to read because there is no connection between them. In contrast, in the second line, the same number of words connect with each other coherently to make a meaningful sentence.

To recap:

- 1 We do not necessarily need to read every letter of every word accurately in order to understand a text. We need to read enough words to understand the main meaning of the text, and can then skip or pay less attention to ones that repeat previous information, are misspelt, or are redundant.
- 2 If we understand all the words in a text, we are likely to understand it – but not always! Some previous knowledge of the subject matter (and sometimes genre and context) may be helpful and even, as in the example above, essential. Application of this knowledge is known as *top-down* reading strategy, as distinct from *bottom-up* which is based on decoding the actual text.

- 3 The more clearly the words are linked together to make coherent sense-units (phrases, sentences), and the more clearly sentences are linked together to make coherent paragraphs, the easier the text will be to read.

Implications

The main implication for teaching all of this is the importance of encouraging students to concentrate on understanding the meaning of a text, using previous knowledge of the content, genre and context of the text as well as the meanings of the actual words, and not to feel obliged to decode every word. Decoding single letters and words is, of course, an important first stage in learning to read, particularly for those students whose L1 does not use the Latin alphabet. But you need to be aware that it is only the first stage, and it must not be an end. You need to encourage students to read and understand meaningful texts – even very short ones – as soon as you can.

Beginning reading 1: phonemic awareness

Many beginner learners of English need to learn a totally new writing system. For some learners, even the concept of an alphabet is new, as their L1 written symbols may represent syllables or even words. Even those who have already learnt the Latin alphabet by their L1 may find that some letters may be pronounced differently in English.

In either case, it is very helpful to do some preliminary work on *phonemic awareness*. This involves making sure the students can hear and differentiate between the different sounds, or *phonemes*, of English which they will need to match with the letters or letter combinations that represent them. They need, for example, to be able to identify the difference between /p/ and /b/, or between /h/ and /i:/ (see 9 Teaching speaking, Section 5). Various kinds of oral exercises can be used, usually based on getting students to listen to sounds and do various identification tasks, such as the following:

- 1 Tell students to put their hands up when they hear a particular phoneme. Say a series of phonemes, including the target one and others that may be confused with it. For example, ask them to look out for /b/ and then dictate: /b/ /b/ /d/ /t/ /b/ /s/ /b/ /b/.
- 2 Ask students which is the odd one out of a series of phonemes. Let them hear the series twice. For example, /t/ /h/ /t/ /d/ /t/.
- 3 Ask students to identify which words rhyme. Give two options. For example: 'Which word rhymes with *patch*? Say *one* or *two*. One: *cash*; Two: *catch*.'
- 4 Challenge students to identify whether a sound is at the beginning, middle or end of a word. For example: say if the /i:/ sound is at the beginning, middle or end of the word. Then dictate: 1. *even* 2. *three* 3. *steep*.
- 5 Add an extra sound to a word, and ask students if they can say what sound was added. For example, 'Here's a word: *sand*. Now I'm going to say the word with another sound added – can you tell me what the new sound is? The word I said before was *sand*. The new word is *stand*.'

- 6 Ask students to count the sounds in a simple word, where these correspond with letters in the written form. For example: 'How many sounds can you hear in the cat?' What are they?
- 7 Provide students with the component sounds of a word, and challenge them to put them together to make a word they know. For example: 'Here are some sounds. Put them together, what word do they make? /m/, /æ/, /n/.'

10.3

Beginning reading 2: learning the letters

Some students at the early stages of learning a new language are having to deal with an entirely new writing system in English. Others are only having to learn different pronunciations for some of the letters of an alphabet that is already familiar to them. For those learning a new alphabet, there are a number of questions we need to consider when beginning to teach reading.

- 1 Should we teach our students only orally for a while, so that they have basic spoken proficiency in English before starting reading? Or start reading and writing from the beginning?
- 2 Should we teach them single letters, and gradually build these up into words (the *phonetic method*)? Or should we teach the written form of meaningful words first and analyse the different component letters later (the *global reading method*)?
- 3 If we decide to teach single letters, should we teach their names first, or their (usual) sound?
- 4 Should we teach them in the same order as they appear in the alphabet?
- 5 Should we teach upper- and lower-case letters together, or first the lower case of all the letters, because they are more common?
- 6 At what stage should we teach the conventional order of the alphabet?

My answers to these are in the **Comment** following the next **Pause for thought**.

Pause for thought

Imagine you have to teach a group of beginners whose mother tongue is Chinese or Arabic, and they need to learn a new alphabet and even a different direction of writing. What would your answers be to the questions above?

Comment

- 1 In such cases, it is usually preferable to begin reading only after acquiring some basic knowledge of the spoken language including familiarity with a core vocabulary of high frequency words. Then reading can more quickly become a matter of recognizing meanings, rather than just decoding symbols. This also means you can give much more interesting tasks for reading practice. Teaching letters before the learners know much interesting spoken English would mean that you would have to provide exercises based on nonsense-words, which can be boring.

In such cases, it is probably most practical to begin with single letters (the conventional phonetic method), starting with the most common and useful. As most students have a few of the most common letters (for example, a, e, c, b, n, l, r), they can read and write a large number of common words. The most common digraphs (two-letter combinations that make a single sound, like sh, ch, wh) are worth teaching even before you teach the less common letters (p, q, z). Having said this, I would add the reservation that it is useful to teach only on a few very common words whose spelling and pronunciation are not too different (for example: *the, he, she, what, are*).

It is possible, of course, to teach both name and sound of the letters – 'This letter is called 'atch' and is pronounced /h/' – if the class can cope. This would be appropriate for older beginners, but with younger ones, it is arguably more helpful to teach them first how to pronounce the letter as it is read in a word, and leave the names until later. Letter names are used only if you need to spell out a word or pronounce initials (UN, for example), and are not very useful for silent reading at the early stages. Note that even students who already know the Latin alphabet are going to have to learn new letter names, as well as some corresponding sounds.

It is more useful to start with the most common letters, as suggested under 1 above, than to stick to the order of the alphabet. Some letters that happen to occur earlier in the alphabet (b, c, for example) are relatively rare and less useful for beginner readers.

My own preference is to teach the upper- and lower-case forms of the letters together. This slows down the process a little, but means that the letters the students do know can immediately be recognized in authentic texts outside the classroom (even in countries where the local writing system is different).

English names regularly appear on signs in public spaces). Another reason is that proper nouns, which regularly begin with upper-case letters, are very useful for reading practice with classes of beginners who do not yet have a very wide vocabulary: names of people, commercial products or places provide a lot of extra words that the students can read and recognize.

Conventionally, the order of the alphabet is taught very early, particularly in younger classes who learn to sing the 'alphabet song'. However, there is not much justification for this. Knowing the names of letters is only marginally useful, as mentioned above, and the order is only needed when students start looking up words in print dictionaries or other reference books. This is likely to happen at a much later stage – and anyway we mostly look things up online these days, with no need for a knowledge of alphabetical order. I am not suggesting that you don't teach the order of the alphabet at all, only that it is not essential at the early stages of learning to read.

Learners whose mother tongue also uses the Latin alphabet – Spanish or German speakers, for example – need only to be taught those letters whose pronunciation is different from their pronunciation in the L1: for Spanish speakers, for example, *ll* and *ñ*. And again, it makes sense to do a lot of preliminary work listening and producing oral English before you start requiring reading or writing: it will then be relatively easy to draw students' attention to such letters and their pronunciation as well as to the common digraphs.

10.4 Beginning reading 3: reading tasks

In order for students to start developing reading fluency, they need a lot of practice at the early stages in reading and understanding very short, simple texts, at word and sentence level. Your course materials will supply a number of these. If, however, you feel there is not enough, or that they are not very varied or interesting, you may want to supplement them with your own tasks, presented as online assignments, or in class using worksheets or work cards (see 3 Classroom interaction).

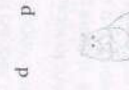
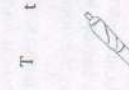
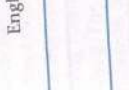
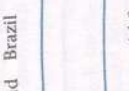
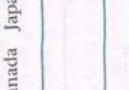
Below is a variety of tasks for beginning reading, ordered from the easiest to the most difficult. I have given only sample items for each, which can be expanded into longer exercises. Note that at this level, instructions may be provided in the L1.

Letters in words

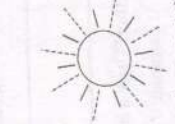
These exercises focus on single letters, but students have to identify the letters in words which they already know in their spoken form. These exercises are particularly useful for classes which are learning a new writing system. They can easily be designed to use only a limited set of letters, and so can be used even before the class has learnt the entire alphabet.

Task 1

Which letter begins which word? Match the letters to the pictures.

h	E	D	H	C	e	d	p	T	t	c
										

For each picture is a set of letters. Cross out the letters that you can't hear when you say the word.

			
P, F, G, T, E, P	O, S, T, F, Z, L	S, B, M, N, I, D	P, F, B, N, M, A, E

Single words 1: cognates

Students are asked to identify words that are likely to be the same, or roughly similar, in their own language. The purpose is simply to provide a wider range of vocabulary for them to practise reading.

Task 3

Can you translate these words into your own language?

pasta television dragon video

Task 4

Write out the names of the countries in your own language. (And perhaps find them on a map.)

England Brazil Canada Japan India Poland

Task 5

Are these names for boys or girls?

Maria Peter David Sarah Anna

Single words 2: English words

Students identify the words and do something with them to demonstrate comprehension.

Task 6

Copy these words in the order of size of the object, the biggest first.
a bag a tree a mouse

Task 7

Which words go together? Draw a line between words that are connected.
table woman up hand
man chair foot down

Task 8

Circle the words that are the names of animals.
head dog table pencil cow horse

Task 9

Which is the odd one out?

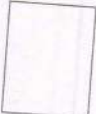
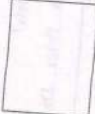
run walk sit jump

Phrases and short sentences

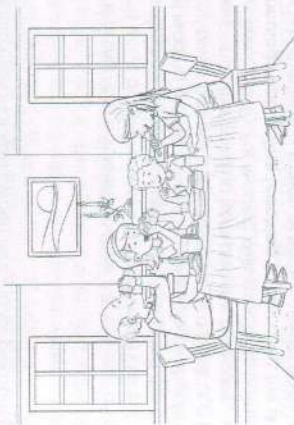
Here, students need to understand whole sense-units and demonstrate understanding in the last stage before beginning full texts.

Task 10

Draw the following items:

			
a red bottle	a blue clock	a white door	a black cat

Copy out only the sentences that are relevant to the picture.



1. There is a table here.
2. They are under the tree.
3. They are not happy.
4. They are not eating.
5. They are drinking.

Task 12

Write what this is (in your language if you don't know the word in English):
It is in Australia. It is big. It can jump.

fluent reading

Since the students have mastered basic reading comprehension of words, phrases and sentences, we need to help them deal with longer and more advanced reading texts and tasks. Note that the focus here is not on reading texts intensively for the sake of the language learning (dealt with in 5 Texts), but on the improvement of the skill of reading in English in itself. The aim is for the students to become fluent readers in the same way that we want them to be fluent listeners and speakers: to access the meaning of a written text successfully and rapidly. A large *sight vocabulary* (lexical items the student identifies and understands at a glance) is the first requirement for this (see 6 Teaching vocabulary). But in order to foster fluent reading, we also need to make sure that students have plenty of successful reading experience through encounter with a wide range of texts read for a variety of purposes.

Today, much of students' reading is done online. This does not mean, however, that reading from paper is necessarily on the decline; it appears to be a matter of personal preference whether you prefer to read from a screen or from paper.

Pause for thought

Given the choice, which do you prefer – screen or paper – when reading professional or informational texts? When reading for pleasure (e.g. novels)?

Comment

I myself prefer reading from a screen, whether it is research articles I'm studying while writing this book, or light novels I read from my Kindle. But I have the feeling I'm in the minority: most people I've asked say that given the choice, they use the screen for brief reading activity (texting, for example, or checking the news on the internet), but prefer paper if the reading text is a book or a long article. And there is some evidence that reading from paper is associated with better reading performance (Clinton, 2019). For reading skills specific to online reading, see 18 **Digital technology and online teaching**. In any case, the skills needed to be a fluent reader, whether from a screen or from a printed page, are very similar.

Characteristics of fluent readers

- 1 **Speed.** Fluent readers read fairly fast, focusing on groups of words that make meaningful units, rather than word by word.
- 2 **Selective attention.** Fluent readers concentrate on the significant bits and skip the rest. They may even skip parts they know to be less significant.
- 3 **Unknown vocabulary.** Fluent readers are not worried by unknown vocabulary. They guess its meaning from context, or ignore it and make do with the general meaning of the surrounding text. They use a dictionary only when these strategies don't work.
- 4 **Prediction.** Fluent readers think ahead, hypothesize and predict.
- 5 **Motivation.** Fluent readers are likely to be interested in what they are reading, to enjoy it, and to be motivated to read more.
- 6 **Purpose.** Fluent readers are reading for a purpose. This may be just pleasure or entertainment, as when they read a good poem or novel. Or it may be to find out or confirm something.

Implications for teaching

If we are trying to help our students read fluently, we can get them to read books (often simplified readers) in what is called *extensive reading*, discussed in the final section of this chapter. Here, I would like to look at the reading of shorter texts provided in coursebooks. Texts dealt with how such texts can be exploited for comprehension and language-learning in general; here, the focus is on their use to foster the development of fluent reading skills.

guidelines as to the selection and use of such texts are the following.

Choose the language accessible. The texts chosen for reading should be of a level that is comprehensible to the students. As noted earlier, a knowledge of between 95 percent and 98 percent of the words is necessary for fluent reading and understanding of a text. If students cannot understand vital information without looking up words, then work on the text may improve their vocabulary knowledge (as discussed in 5 **Texts**), but it will not be as useful for improving their reading skills as such. If you're using a text that has a lot of unknown vocabulary, then pre-teach essential items, or use glosses or your own explanations to help students understand.

Choose the topic is familiar. The content of the text should be based on information or background knowledge that the students already know something about. If they don't know much about it, then you can use various pre-reading strategies to prepare them: elicit what they already know, and then add further input yourself; provide an easy introductory text which provides the information; or send students to the internet to find it out themselves.

Choose interesting texts. Texts should be selected with reader interest in mind: topics that are likely to be at least partially familiar to students, but with enough extra information to invite curiosity and increase knowledge; or good stories. The task is even more important: a boring text can be made interesting through a stimulating task, but a boring task can kill a potentially interesting text (see 4 **Tasks**).

Encourage skimming. *Skimming* is looking very quickly through a text in order to gather the main gist or message, without actually reading everything in it. It is a very useful skill to cultivate on first encounter with a short text (paragraph or article) – particularly if you are not sure if you want to read it more thoroughly or not. For students, a brief skim is likely to provide them with information that will help them understand when they come to read in detail.

Usually provide a preset task. When reading a story or a very interesting or entertaining text (see Section 6), no actual task may be necessary: students will be motivated to read anyway, and a task may actually spoil their enjoyment. But in most cases, you will need to provide a task, given in advance, so that the student has a purpose in reading. Some examples of this are: to find out a specific piece of information; to summarize the main points; to respond to the writer's point of view.

Stimulate expectations. Give the students some idea in advance of what the text is going to talk about, its genre or, where appropriate, context. All this may well be provided through the task; if not, then perhaps discuss the title, or say something about the issue under discussion, or something about the plot or characters of the story (without giving away how it ends!).

Encourage selective reading and scanning. Paying more attention to key information and less to redundancies or repetition is a reading strategy which fluent readers apply intuitively. You can help students by providing *scanning* tasks: ask them to find out a specific item of information in the text and to raise their hands when they have done

So, in order to do this, they will need to search for content which is relevant to their task, and identify and ignore those parts of the text which are not. It is also helpful to do some explicit strategy instruction here, by making students aware that it is not only legitimate but actually desirable to ignore redundant or repetitive items or chunks of text while reading.

Tell students not to worry too much about words they don't know. Pausing reading in order to look up the meaning of a new word in a dictionary is a useful strategy for vocabulary expansion, but it can be counterproductive if the aim is reading fluently. In course, students should know how to use the dictionary, but they should also be aware when it is necessary and when a quick guess based on context (*inferencing*) is preferable. The dictionary results in only an approximation of the meaning. Constant use of the dictionary leads to slower, less fluent reading, as well as frequent misunderstanding when students choose the wrong definition. Finally, tell students that it is legitimate to ignore a new word completely if the general meaning is clear and the unknown word is not necessary for comprehension. Skipping redundant words in this way means missing an opportunity to learn a new item, but if our main priority is fluent reading, then it is a useful strategy to encourage.

Encourage prediction. This is, again, something which fluent readers do naturally. At the conscious level, just to tell students, 'Remember to predict as you read,' is not very helpful. But there are tasks which specifically encourage prediction, such as, 'Read up to the end of the first paragraph of the story: what do you think will happen next?' or 'Read to the end of the page. What do you think the next word/few words is/are likely to be?' **Encourage re-reading.** When you've finished doing any comprehension tasks you want to use, give the students an opportunity to re-read the passage on their own. By this time, they will be familiar with it, and are likely to be able to read it more fluently. Similarly, later in the course you can ask them to go back and re-read any earlier texts they have studied.

Pause for thought

Look at the coursebook page with a reading text and tasks shown on the next page, designed for A2 learners. How well will this section encourage fluent reading? What might you add, take out or change?

READING Read the article. Match paragraphs A, B, and C to the photos.

ADVENTURE VACATIONS

Hot spots



Discounts



About Vacations

A good vacation, for many people, means comfortable accommodations, a great atmosphere, and tasty food. It's a pleasant, relaxing experience. But for some, this type of vacation just isn't enough!

In today's world, many of us have safe, sometimes boring lives. We work, sleep, eat, and watch TV. So more and more people are looking for adventure. They want excitement and danger. They might even want to feel a little afraid!

How about staying on a desert island in the middle of the Indian Ocean? If you want, you can spend your whole vacation completely alone. You'll sleep in a tent and go fishing for your food. Your only company will be the monkeys and birds. But don't worry! You get bored. Just call the tour company and they'll send a boat to pick you up!

Or how about spending a week in the sub-zero temperatures of the North? You will fly to the Arctic, and the local Sami people will teach you to survive in this very difficult environment. You'll learn how to keep yourself warm and make special snowshoes. You'll also go fishing and look after reindeer. You'll even learn how to call when it's going to snow.

But if the Arctic's too cold, you could try the heat of the jungle instead. Deep in the Amazon rain forest, you'll sleep in the open air. At first, you'll spend a week with local guides. They'll show you all the many things, like bird food and the best places to set traps. Then you'll work by yourself. You'll have no tent, no extra clothes, and no cell phone. You'll be completely alone – except for the crocodiles and snakes, of course!

Read the article. Then complete the summary using words from the article.

Holidays, life can sometimes be a little boring. So, many people are searching for an exciting or dangerous 1) _____ during their vacations. Some people like the idea of visiting a desert island. There, they spend nights in a 2) _____ and look for fruit and other plants to eat. If they decide to go to the Arctic instead, they will walk around with unusual 3) _____ on their feet, and they'll have the experience of taking care of 4) _____. If they decide to choose a trip to the rain forest, they'll learn many things from 5) _____, and afterward, they'll live for a whole 6) _____ completely alone.

C Read the comments of people who are on one of these three trips. Which vacation are they on? Write the letter.

1. "I know what the weather will be like tomorrow."
2. "I haven't seen anybody since the moment I arrived."
3. "My whole body is absolutely freezing!"
4. "I've learned so much these first seven days."
5. "I've had enough now! I'm going to call for help."
6. "I haven't eaten anything like this before!"

D GROUP WORK Which of these vacations would you be prepared to try? Which would you refuse to go on? Why?

(from *Interchange Level 2 Student's Book 5th Edition* by Richards, J. C. with Hull, J. and Proctor, S., 2021)

Comment

It's an interesting text, and a lot of teenage and young adult students would relate to it. The first task is not really stimulating pre-reading expectations, as it requires learners to go straight into reading the text, and not really skimming either, as it only requires reading the first sentence of each paragraph. So I would add a preliminary activity that stimulates expectations as to the content of the text: perhaps discuss the title, or ask students what kinds of vacations they have experienced or heard about that involved challenging rather than relaxing activities. Then I'd invite the students to read, and find out which, if any, of the kinds of vacations they mentioned came up in the text. If I think they might find the reading difficult on their own, I'd accompany their silent reading with my own simultaneous reading aloud (see Arner, 1997), or use the recording provided in the textbook, explaining difficult words as needed. Tasks B and C both require re-reading of the text and scanning for specific information. I'd end by inviting students just to read the text again as fast as they (comfortably) can.

Reading strategies

More systematic models of strategies to be used when using a reading text are KWL and SQ3R (more can be found in Grabe (2009), pp. 231–2).

- 1 KWL stands for 'Know – Want to know – Learnit'. The reader looks at the title or topic of an informative text, notes what they already know and what they want or expect to learn further from reading the text. After reading, they note what new information has been learnt.
- 2 SQ3R stands for 'Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review'. *Survey* means skimming through the title, main headings, illustrations, and maybe taking a quick glance at the main points of the text. The *Survey* is followed by, or accompanied by *Question*: what questions occur to the reader about the text or its topic or writer? Then there is *Read*: the reader goes through the text more thoroughly, while bearing in mind the questions asked previously. *Recall* means checking that the reader can remember the main points made. Finally, at the *Review* stage, the reader re-reads and reviews the content of the text.

10.6 Extensive reading

Extensive reading is the silent reading by individual students of long, interesting texts (such as novels) that are in language that is simple enough to be easily understood. It is sometimes known as *reading for pleasure* or *sustained silent reading* (SSR). It necessitates a class or school library from which students can borrow books to read at their own speed and exchange as needed; or, if they have digital devices, online books of an appropriate level which they can access. The main benefit from extensive reading is an increase in reading fluency and confidence, though it may also incidentally lead to the learning of new language items.

Extensive reading programme has the following features (Day and Bamford, 1998):

- 1 students have access to a large variety of reading material to choose from.
- 2 each student chooses their own reading material. The teacher may advise, but does not choose for them.
- 3 students can stop reading material that they find boring or too difficult and swap it for something else.
- 4 the purpose of reading is enjoyment and interest, not a task from the teacher or textbook. In principle, the reading is its own reward, just as when we read a novel in our leisure time.
- 5 the role of the teacher is to encourage students to read and swap books, to help them choose, and to be a role model as a reader.

Problems

Even their potential benefits, extensive reading programmes are implemented far less than you might expect, mainly because of the practical problems involved.

Time. Teachers are worried about getting through the coursebook or preparing for an exam and are unwilling to devote parts of classroom sessions to extensive reading. They see it as a possible waste of valuable class time which could be spent on more intensive language learning.

Money. Many institutions do not have the necessary financial resources to set up and – just as important – to maintain and keep adding to a library. One solution is for students to read stories online, assuming that there is one computer or other digital reading device available for each student. Books, however, it seems remain to this day many people's preferred medium for reading. As Baron (2017) remarks: 'If cost is removed from the equation, digital millennials commonly prefer print.'

Monitoring. It is sometimes difficult to know whether students are actually reading their books, and you may need to check. Many teachers insist on a book report for each book. This provides the necessary feedback, but, of course, spoils the pleasure and motivation associated with extensive reading and takes time away from the reading itself. There are other, easier options, such as oral presentations recommending the book, drawings to illustrate it, or posters to advertise it. But again, this leaves less time for reading. It's a tricky dilemma: personally, I prefer not to have follow-up assignments and to rely on my own perceptions of students' body language in the classroom to check that they are in fact reading and understanding; but many of my colleagues do not agree.

Practical tips

- 1 Set aside a regular scheduled time for extensive reading: at the beginning of lessons, or half a lesson a week. Don't leave it just for homework: devoting lesson time to extensive reading conveys a message about its importance and provides opportunities for exchanging books.

- 2 Read yourself. If you can, use the extensive reading lesson to get on with what book you are reading; example is a powerful instructor.
- 3 Bring books to the class. If your library is not in the classroom, bring a box of books to the appropriate level to the classroom for students to exchange. Sending them to the library in class time is time-wasting and does not allow you to help them choose books. Have some short stories or booklets at an appropriate level ready to bring them to students. Alternatively, if computers are available, prepare website addresses where they can read interesting material at an appropriate level.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What is the difference between decoding and reading?
- 2 Why do we not necessarily have to pay attention to all the words in a text to support it?
- 3 What is phonemic awareness? Can you recall at least two activities that support it?
- 4 Which is more important to teach: the names of the letters or their sounds? Why?
- 5 Can you suggest at least three ideas for simple reading activities based on the comprehension of single words or phrases?
- 6 Can you recall at least six features which are likely to facilitate students' fluent reading?
- 7 Can you list at least three of the main principles to bear in mind when encouraging students to engage in extensive reading?
- 8 What are the advantages and disadvantages of requiring a book report after reading?

Further reading

- Day, R. and Bamford, J. (2004). *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*. Cambridge University Press.
(A collection of practical procedures and classroom activities to support and enrich extensive reading)
- Nuttall, C. (2005). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language* (3rd Edition). Macmillan.
(A classic book on teaching reading, now in its third edition, covering a wide range of reading-related issues)
- Watkins, P. (2017). *Teaching and Developing Reading Skills*. Cambridge University Press.
(An excellent resource with both background guidelines and a wealth of practical ideas for reading activities)

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11

Teaching writing

Overview

- 11.1 **What is writing?** Characteristics of writing, as compared with speaking, reading and listening; conventional formal writing contrasted with informal writing through texting.
- 11.2 **Beginning writing: the letters.** Some practical guidelines and tasks for teaching beginners (mainly for students who are not familiar with the Latin alphabet).
- 11.3 **Tasks that promote fluent writing.** Some intermediate and advanced writing tasks, with critical discussion.
- 11.4 **Process writing.** Enabling improvement through rewriting in response to feedback.
- 11.5 **Spelling and punctuation.** Guidance on the teaching of spelling and punctuation, with some ideas for tasks.

11.1

What is writing?

The teaching of writing has assumed much greater importance in recent years, since the use of the internet requires written input for search engines and works of reference, as well as rapid online written communication through text messaging, blogs and other social media.

Some characteristics of writing

- Writing is fundamentally different from the other four skills. Most obviously it is associated with sight and (usually) movement, as contrasted with the auditory and oral characteristics of listening and speaking; and it is productive, as contrasted with the receptive skills of listening and reading. Other, less immediately obvious, characteristics are the following:
- **It is permanent.** A text, once written, normally remains there, on paper or on the screen, to be easily re-read or rewritten, either very soon after it was written or later, and editing.
 - **It is dense.** The content of a written passage is presented relatively densely, with little redundancy (pauses, repetition, fillers, paraphrases), as is typical of informal speech.
 - **It takes time.** Writing takes longer than speaking, reading or listening, and also requires more deliberate effort.

It is asynchronous, or time-independent. We usually read text some time after it has been written. Even with synchronous chat, there is a time-lapse between production and reception. Spoken discourse is, in most cases, produced and received simultaneously.

The person or people being addressed are not physically present. The target audience for a written text – whether a single addressee, closed group or the public at large – is rarely physically present, whereas spoken interaction is mostly face-to-face.

It is a learnt form. Most people acquire the spoken language (at least of their own first language) intuitively, and may even learn to read on their own; whereas writing is normally taught and learned in school.

It uses more standard forms. English speech typically varies widely, in accent, lexis and grammar, according to the cultural or linguistic background of the speaker; writing, in contrast, is more uniform and tends to observe more carefully the conventional grammatical rules of international English (see 1 Teaching English today).

In spite of the increase in informal writing (see below), most writing is formal. Stories, reports, and websites (wiki entries, for example), newspaper articles, fiction, the book you are reading at this moment ... all these are formal texts. In the past, informal writing was only used for quick notes or reminders; but these days it is used much more: mainly in online testing. For example:

A: hi

B: hi

A: how's things?

B: I'm good

A: were RU?

A: Where

B: train

A: ETA?

B: Dunno, 12?

A: Wow, late ☹

(pause)

A: Want me to meet you?

B: No, CU 2morrow

A: ☺

Pause for thought

What are the features of informal writing that appear in texting and that are different from formal writing? What about ones that are the same? You can use examples that appear in the text above, or others you know about. Then compare your list to the table on the next page.

Comment

The differences derive mainly from the different context of communication in text composition. The writer is detached from the (usually personally unknown) reader in time and space, and can write carefully and redraft if necessary in the message down quickly; it is not so important to use precise language.

Differences

Formal writing	Informal writing (texting)
Usually long (paragraph or more)	Usually short (words, short phrases or sentences)
Typically drafted and redrafted, corrected	Not redrafted, not normally corrected
Precise language	Vague language
Full grammatical sentences	Not usually full grammatical sentences; frequent ellipsis (missing words that are taken for granted)
Correct language	Frequent slips
Words written fully	Shortened words, or use of emojis or symbols

Similarities

But note that there are also some similarities. More than 75 percent of the words in texting are spelt the same way they are in a regular dictionary (see Lyddy et al., 2014), and been clear without it (upper-case letters, full stops and commas, for example).

Although there are, of course, a lot of written texts which use an intermediate style, midway between formal and texting (many emails and blogs, for example), most writing is arguably formal. It is important to make learners aware of the difference in principle between formal and informal writing, and in what contexts and circumstances the different styles may be more, or less, appropriate. Most writing that students will need to do in their future professions is likely to be formal. If they know how to create formal written texts, they will not have much difficulty learning how to write informally – but the converse is not necessarily true. So in classrooms, it is probably best to focus mainly on teaching formal writing.

11.2 Beginning writing: the letters

Note. This section relates to the teaching of monolingual classes whose L1 uses a non-Latin alphabet or another writing system. Such classes are very often composed of young learners. Some basic aspects of the teaching of writing to beginners who don't yet know the alphabet apply equally to the teaching of reading, and have already been dealt with

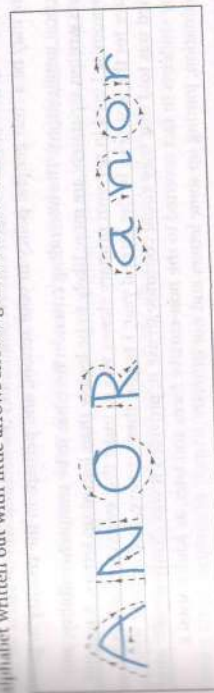
in teaching reading. For example, there is the importance of knowing simple prepositional English and a basic vocabulary of the most frequent words before attempting to learn the letters. As with reading, it is recommended to teach the most common and useful letters before the less common and useful ones, and to present the letters and upper-case forms at the same time.

There are other skills students need to master that are specific to handwriting and, last, typing. Here are some of them, with practical teaching implications.

Letter-writing skills

Other writing systems may go in a different direction from English: from right to left, for example, instead of from left to right (Arabic, Hebrew) or vertically (Chinese). This involves not only getting used to moving one's hand in a different direction along the line, but also often learning to form the letters in a different direction. For example, speakers of Arabic or Hebrew are used to drawing circular letters in a clockwise direction and will now have to learn to form them anti-clockwise. If they are not deliberately taught otherwise, they will continue to write these letters clockwise, which will slow down the flow of handwriting and make it difficult to join up letters, should they wish to do so later (see Cursive writing on the next page).

Practical implications. You need to provide students with models of correct-direction writing: by modelling the letter writing on the board, and perhaps also by providing the alphabet written out with little arrows showing in what direction it should be written.



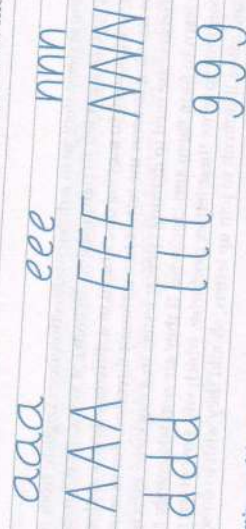
It can help as a preliminary exercise to get the students to write rows of waves or loops, running from left to right, as below. Then they need to practise writing out rows of similar letters, and later combinations of different ones in words, while the teacher makes sure they are forming them correctly.



Height, depth and level. One thing that students learning the Latin alphabet often find tricky is getting the height and depth of letters right: making sure that letters like d, l, b in fact have 'arms' that are of a similar height to capital letters, and that letters like p, y, g

have 'tails' that are sufficiently long beneath the line. Some students also have problems with maintaining level horizontal writing. In both cases, they need the guidance of lines at the early stages of writing.

Practical implications. Early writing should be done within horizontal lines, which limit the height of letters and make sure they are level. These have two parallel lines in the middle which limit the height of the smaller letters such as *c, m, o*, and two added lines above and below to show how far the taller and deeper letters should reach.



Cursive writing. Should we teach learners to write cursive (joined-up) script? If their L1 uses the Latin alphabet, then this will depend how they have already been taught to write it. If, however, the Latin alphabet is a new writing system for them, you will need to decide whether or not to teach cursive. Sometimes the decision will be taken for you there may be a clear general policy in your school, and perhaps in the country (or you) Practical implications. The overriding criterion here has to be comprehensibility; and letters written separately are more likely to be legible than joined-up letters. A possible compromise I used in my own primary classes was to insist that everyone used non-cursive for the first year. In the second year, I taught them cursive, and anyone who wished was told that they could continue to use it, provided it was clearly legible. Most of my students in fact reverted to the non-cursive form and later, as adults, used a combination, joining up some letters and not others.

Typing. For the foreseeable future, it will still be necessary for students to know how to handwrite in English: for personal greetings, paper form-filling, quick notes, shopping lists, etc. And there is some evidence that handwriting actually supports language learning better than typing (Mangen et al., 2015). But it is becoming more and more important for them to learn to type as well, as most writing today is done on a computer.

Practical implications. You should give students plenty of opportunities to use the keyboard, as well as a pencil or pen and to do writing exercises, in order to increase their typing speed. It is also useful to teach them how to use word processing tools to format their compositions: different fonts, sizes and spacings, different colours and positions. Basic writing exercises can be made more motivating by allowing students to use these tools to improve the presentation of a text.

Speed and legibility. When teaching writing, the two main aims are to enable students to write reasonably fast, and to write legibly. However, there's a payoff: if you write very fast,

fast writing may be difficult to understand (true of typing as well as handwriting!). If you write very carefully, so as to be legible, you may sacrifice speed.

Practical implications. Having taught the letters, you need to give students plenty of practice in using them to write words and sentences so that they get to do so faster, but not at the cost of legibility. See **Beginner writing tasks** below for some ideas. Later, any grammar or vocabulary written exercises will obviously give practice in speed and accuracy of handwriting or typing as a useful added benefit.

Beginner writing tasks

Apart from the first two ideas, which clearly relate to handwriting, all the following tasks types can be done either on paper or on the computer.

Copying. Copying is a useful way for students to practise letter formation. It can be done by tracing (using tracing paper or following dotted lines) or copying lines of letters or words.

Colour copying. Since early letter-writing practice can be boring, invite students to use different-coloured pens, or decorate their exercises with coloured frames or underlining.

Meaningful copying. Another way of making early writing practice interesting is to ask students to copy according to particular criteria: to copy, for example, only words that are names of animals (or any other lexical set you choose); or in a different order; or into different categories; or in order to label pictures.

Transliteration. Students transliterate single letters, where possible, or words (cognates or names of people or places are particularly useful) from their L1.

Dictation. Students write down single letters or simple words from dictation.

Completion. Students fill in the missing letter(s) from a known word, perhaps illustrated by a picture.

Labelling. Students label pictures with simple phonetically spelt words.

Tasks that promote fluent writing

Most learner writing in an English course is not done primarily in order to develop writing skills, but because writing is a convenient means of practising other features of language.

For example, students write down new vocabulary, copy out grammar rules, write out answers to comprehension questions, or do written tests. Fluent writing tasks, in contrast, aim to improve students' ability to compose written text for communicative purposes.

Aspects of accuracy (grammar, vocabulary, spelling) are, of course, important in formal writing, but the main focus is on meaningful writing, following the conventions of a particular genre.

Some criteria for the planning or selection of fluent writing tasks are:

Interest. The task should require expression of interesting content: facts, opinions, ideas, stories.

Level. The language required should be at the students' level or slightly below it.

Relevance. The topic of the task should be one that the students can easily relate to.

Authenticity. At least some of the tasks should be similar to the kinds of things students may need to write themselves, now or in the future.

Simplicity. The task should be easy to explain. Often the provision of a model text can help to clarify.

Below are some categories of writing tasks, with examples. There is, of course, some overlap in the kinds of content required; but in general, it is usually possible to identify the main focus of a task as one of the following.

1 Responding to text

- **Extended answers to questions** about a text
- **A summary** of the content of a text
- **Discussion** of the content of a text

Responding to text means not just showing that the learner has understood a text, but writing longer responses showing comprehension or personal critical response. It is probably the easiest task to set up, but is relatively limited: it engages the students' initiative and creativity less than the other tasks listed here.

2 Creative writing

- **A story** based on some kind of given stimulus: for example, a title, a picture or a set of pictures, or a first or last sentence; or a personal anecdote
- **A poem** based on a given stimulus: for example, a topic, a particular structure, first or last lines

Some students respond well to tasks that demand creativity: others really don't like them! Poems are surprisingly easy and pleasurable to write if based on an appropriate stimulus: see some excellent practical ideas in *Writing Simple Poems* (Holmes and Moulton, 2001). The results of creative writing tasks are often enjoyable for other students to read: post them on the class website, or on a noticeboard in the classroom, or ask the author to read them out to the class.

3 Instructions

- **An instruction sheet** for something you know how to do (for example, prepare some kind of food)
- **Directions** for how to get somewhere
- **Advice** for someone entering the school you teach or study at; or for someone entering a workplace you are familiar with

These tasks may be interesting for students if they relate to processes or places they know a lot about. They may require some preliminary teaching or review of vocabulary; and you may wish to give some advice on the layout of instructions: numbered steps, for example, or illustrations where necessary. They are particularly useful for classes in English for Specific Purposes, such as engineering or nursing.

4 Interpersonal communication

- **An application** for a job, by email
- **A letter of complaint**
- **A reply** to a given letter
- **A comment on a blog:** either one that already exists, or one set up for the class
- **A posting on social media,** updating your friends on your news

Assignments like a letter or an email applying for a job or a letter of complaint are probably most suitable for adults or older teenagers. Students also need to be aware that such texts would demand far more formal English than the blog comment or informal email. The blog task is often highly motivating, and can continue later, with other students adding further comments.

5 Description

- **A description of a view, a place or a person**
- **A description of a situation**
- **A description of a process,** such as a scientific experiment, the life cycle of an animal, a sequence of developments as represented by a flowchart
- **A comparison of two subjects:** people, places, etc.

Some descriptions can be done at a fairly basic level of proficiency. To make it even easier, you might ask for phrases or single words, rather than full sentences in a coherent paragraph. For the personal description, it is helpful to provide in advance some topics that the writer might relate to: appearance; occupation; personality; interests; life story. Apart from the flowchart, descriptions of processes can often be laid out in other ways, such as tables, graphs, or infographics.

6 Opinion and persuasion

- **A review:** critical evaluation not only of books, films and other creative works, but also of any kind of product, course, or service, as in websites like TripAdvisor, or Which
- **An argument** for or against something
- **A recommendation** for a suggested development or advertisement for a product
- **Advice** on a problem or tips for any kind of activity

Most of these tasks are suitable for rather more advanced classes, as they demand fairly careful planning of content and organization. The advertisement may be easier and can be decorated with coloured fonts and designs, and illustrated by pictures. A development of the advertisement is the leaflet promoting a place or course or holiday, which can be done collaboratively in a team, each student contributing a section.

7 Information

- A newspaper report on an item of news, genuine or imaginary
 - A short article providing information on a particular topic or issue. It could be based on internet research, and could include tables, diagrams or infographics.
- The newspaper report can be based on a model: an authentic news report which has been read in class. The short paper is a first step on the way to academic writing, though it must be done at intermediate level. It can be highly motivating if the students are researching something that interests them personally. Note that you may need to do some preliminary instruction, not only on the need for formal language, but also on the need for structure: introduction, headed sections, conclusion. An alternative is to require such assignments to be formatted as presentations with slides. In this case, there is less actual writing, but students will need to be careful with the choice of headings and notes to be shown on the slides, and with the formatting: size of font, line spacing, use of punctuation and so on.

Pause for thought

Have a look at an ELT textbook you are familiar with that targets General English – not academic English or a particular profession or subject area (ESP) – at an intermediate or advanced level (B1 upwards), and check out how many of the components explicitly labelled as writing tasks belong to the different categories above. On the whole, do you feel its writing tasks cover a fair range of types? Are there any missing that you feel you would like to add?

Comment

There is, of course, as noted earlier, some overlap: any interpersonal communication is likely to include some of the other elements; and opinion and persuasion obviously include information. But in general, what I found in my survey of six textbooks was that the overwhelming majority of writing tasks were based on either **opinion and argument** or **information**, with some **descriptions**. There were a few which were based on **responding to a text** and some **interpersonal** ones: emails or blog responses. I found no **instructions**, and no **creative writing**, though there was one task requiring students to write a story about a personal experience. I would try to add more creative writing, particularly narrative, and tasks based on instructions.

Students' use of GPT

The question arises today: for any of the assignments listed above – won't a student just give a prompt to GPT and let the AI tool do the writing for them? This is certainly an option which previous generations of teachers did not need to worry about. You can probably tell, in most cases, whether a written assignment was in fact written by your student; but not always. If the assignment is done out of class, then there is no alternative to relying on the students' integrity and willingness to abide by the rules.

Some added possibilities using, rather than prohibiting, GPT are:

- 1 Tell the students to get GPT to write the essay: then tell them they have to insert (or) changes, which in their opinion improves the GPT version, and submit both the original and their improved version.
- 2 Tell the students to write the essay themselves and then get GPT to correct it, noting the changes.
- 3 Tell the students to write the essay themselves and then get GPT to improve it, noting the changes.
- 4 Tell the students to write the end of the essay themselves and get GPT to write the beginning; or vice versa.

Again, these will depend for their success on students playing by the rules!

If all else fails, you can require students to do writing in class, where you can monitor the process.

Writing in class

Writing in class is a rather negative experience for those students who like to write quietly and privately in their own space; but others like the feeling of support and companionship. In-class writing can use the following procedures:

- **Collaborative planning.** Students plan their texts in pairs or small groups in class, before retreating to their desks to do the actual writing alone. They later come together to compare results.
- **Five-minute writing.** Students have exactly five minutes – no more, no less – to write something in class. The time limitation usually increases concentration and is a useful quick way of providing extra writing experience.
- **Multiple contributions.** Students write a sentence on the top of a sheet of paper: for example, the beginning of a story starting 'Once upon a time'. They then pass the paper to their neighbour, who adds another sentence, continuing the story. And so on, until there are between five and fifteen contributions. An alternative is a poem on a given topic: each student adds another line. Note that the paper remains open, not folded, so that every new writer can see all the previous contributions. The results are then read out to the class.

Process writing

When they have mastered the basics, students need to progress and improve their writing. This can be helped to some extent by focused instruction on spelling and punctuation (see Section 5 on page 159); however, this is no substitute for actual writing experience. Such experience is probably best when based on the *process-writing* cycle: students write a first draft, get feedback, and rewrite. Sometimes this cycle can be repeated several times.

First draft

Support. Having given the assignment, you need to provide support in order to ensure that students write their first draft as well as possible. This support can include

- providing key vocabulary that you think students might need or that they ask for;
- providing a model text similar to the one required by the task;
- some discussion of possible content;
- guidance on the organization of texts of the relevant genre;
- allowing the beginning of the writing in class so that students have the opportunity to consult you as they write. They can then continue at home.

No assessment. Students need to be aware that the first draft is not graded, nor are any other preliminary drafts if the process-writing cycle is repeated more than once. The assessment results. First, it lowers stress: students feel free to experiment and to use language they are not quite sure of but want to try out; they know that they will not be penalized if they get it wrong. Second, they are motivated to implement feedback and improve in order to achieve a better final grade.

Feedback

Pause for thought

What are your own feelings when getting feedback on your writing? For example, from a teacher if you are in a language class? Or from an editor who is editing something you wrote? Or from a reviewer if you have submitted an article to a journal?

Comment

I think inevitably the writer in such situations is vulnerable: negative criticisms can sometimes be depressing, or even hurtful. I've noticed, however, a frequent interesting sequence in my own response to a negative criticism: my first response is to reject it, and try to argue my way out of it; but as I argue, I very often realize that the criticism was largely, or completely, justified, and more often than not end up accepting it and making the relevant changes. Another point I've noticed is that I am much more disposed to accept negative criticisms of one aspect of my writing when there is also positive feedback and even praise of others.

- 1 What should feedback be mainly on: language? Content? Organization? The problem. When a student submits a piece of original writing, the most important thing about it is, arguably, its message: does it succeed in conveying the content required in the task? Then there is the organization and presentation: are the ideas arranged

is a way that is easy to follow and interesting to read? Finally, there is the question of language forms: is the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation of an acceptable standard of accuracy? Many teachers are aware that content and organization are important, but find themselves focusing mainly on language forms in their feedback, neglecting the implicit message that these are what matter, sometimes to the exclusion of other aspects. There are various reasons for this: for one thing, mistakes in spelling or grammar catch the eye and seem to demand to be corrected; for another, it appears that students normally want their language mistakes to be corrected (see 12 Feedback and your correction); finally, language mistakes are far more easily and quickly diagnosed and corrected than are problems of content and organization.

Advice. You should correct language mistakes. The problem is how to do so without suggesting that this is your only (or main) basis for evaluation, and the only aspect which needs to be improved in a second draft. So corrections to language or style should be noted, but you should also take care to include comments on content and organization.

3 Should all mistakes be corrected?

The problem. If we accept that language (including punctuation) should be corrected, another problem arises: should *all* language mistakes be noted, even if there are so many that the page will be covered with corrections? If not, how do we judge which to correct and which not?

Advice. The problem is one of potential conflict between two of our functions as teachers: language instruction versus support and encouragement of learning. Correcting mistakes is part of the language instruction, but too much of it can be discouraging. Also, over-emphasis on language mistakes can distract both students' and teachers' attention from the equally important aspects of content and organization, as noted above. The answer is obviously some kind of compromise, which will vary according to the course objectives, class and student. You might correct only mistakes that could actually lead to misunderstanding, and/or those which are very basic. Or, of course, you can vary your response according to individual need. In any case, it is important to ask the students themselves (even younger ones!) how, and how much, they want to be corrected. Finally, it's important to draw attention also in your feedback to the positive aspects of the writing: for example, things they got right, ideas well-expressed, good organization.

3 Should we let students correct or give feedback on each other's written work?

The problem. Correcting written work is very time-consuming, particularly with large classes. It helps to let students correct and edit each other's writing. They may not be able to identify all its good or bad qualities, but they will detect at least some of them. The problem is: will students feel uncomfortable correcting, or being corrected by, their classmates? Will they accept criticism (positive or negative) from each other?

Advice. Students on the whole, it appears, prefer to be corrected by the teacher rather than by their peers (see 12 Feedback and error correction). On the other hand, peer editing can be a time-saving and useful technique: it helps to present it as 'helping each other to express things as well as possible' rather than 'correcting each other'. Also, from the point of view of the peer-editor, critical reading for style, content and language accuracy is a valuable exercise in itself.

- 4 Is it a good idea to use digital tools that give feedback on writing?

The problem. There are a number of automated writing evaluation (AWE) tools available online that claim to do comprehensive correction and assessment of student writing. These include, at the time of writing: Criterion® Online Writing Evaluation service, developed by ETS; Write and Improve (free) from Cambridge English; MY Accessible Writing Learning; WriteToLearn from Pearson ... and there will be many others by the time you read this. There are also the easily accessible spelling and grammar checks included in Microsoft Word and also offered by programs such as Grammarly. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools like GPT can also correct language errors in a text. All these can help with regard to other aspects (content, organization, coherence), the teacher is needed to give additional feedback, and will be so for the foreseeable future. See Hockly (2019) for a summary of these issues.

Advice. Encourage students to use such tools to help them check their English, but also provide your own feedback during the drafting/redrafting process.

Practical tips

- 1 **Give feedback quickly.** Students get much greater benefit from your corrective feedback if it is given immediately, or very soon, after they have submitted their work. They should also be required to rewrite and re-submit within a fairly short time limit.
- 2 **Use track changes.** Word processing on a computer means you can make changes or corrections and add comments to a document, while the original text can still be clearly seen. This is a very useful and time-saving way of correcting. Similar editing tools are available on PDF document readers.
- 3 **Use 'share documents'.** If you want your students to do multiple rewrites, then instead of sending documents by email attachment, you may prefer to use a file-hosting service that allows you to share documents online, such as Google Docs. Your student uploads a document and names you as a 'sharer'. You can then annotate or correct it, and the student can immediately see what you have done and implement the corrections in a second version, which again you can see immediately.
- 4 **Use screencasting apps.** Tools like Loom, ScreenPal, Capture, Flip enable you to provide your feedback orally, talking the student through the written text and your comments. The student thus sees you and hears your feedback while simultaneously scrolling through the text.
- 5 **Give positive as well as negative feedback.** Remember to draw students' attention to things they have done well: an appropriate use of language, interesting content, a well-organized sequence. As I noted in my response to the **Pause for thought** on page 156, corrections are far more likely to be appreciated and responded to when they are accompanied also by praise for other aspects of the written assignment.

Spelling and punctuation

Spelling

Contrary to general belief, the majority of words in English are actually spelt phonetically or according to regular rules which can be taught and memorized. This means that teaching students to spell correctly is not as difficult as you might have thought. And most of the words that have genuinely irregular spellings are the very common ones which students learn anyway early on: *to, what, one, would*, for example.

Other irregular spellings can be taught as the individual words come up.

It is, therefore, important to teach the rules to your students. There is also some evidence that the teaching of spelling contributes to students' general proficiency in the language (Pitman and Santangelo, 2014).

Some basic spelling rules that are worth teaching are:

- the digraphs *th, ch, sh, wh* and the less common *ph*;
 - the final *e* which causes a previous vowel to be pronounced like its name, as in *late, these, time, hope, tune*;
 - the letter *c*, usually representing the sound /k/, regularly pronounced /s/ before *i, e, y*; and similarly *g*, usually representing the sound /g/, but usually (not always) pronounced /dʒ/ before *i* and *e*;
 - the suffixes *-tion, -sion, -ssion*;
 - the prefix *al-* spelt with one *l* in words like *always*;
 - the suffixes *-al* and *-ful* spelt with one *l*;
 - the *u* that regularly follows *q*;
 - ck* instead of *c* or *k* at the end of one-syllable words;
 - the combinations *-ight, -ought*;
 - that a double consonant usually causes the previous vowel to be pronounced short, not like its name, in words like *apple, filling* (compare *paper, filling*). Hence the rule about doubling the consonant when adding the *-ed, -ing* suffixes to short verbs, or making the comparative of short adjectives.
- (For more useful rules and ideas on how to practise using them, see Shemesh and Waller, 2000.)

Practice tasks for spelling

Dictations. Dictate a set of words that you have taught which follow a rule the students have learnt. Other variations are as follows:

- Dictate a set of words that the students don't know yet, but whose spelling follows a rule they know, and challenge them to spell them correctly.
- Provide the students with the target words, but with some key letters missing. You read out the full words, and they fill in the missing letters.

- Dictate only the definition of a word; students write down the word.
- Provide the L1 translation; students write down the English word (if this is a monolingual class whose L1 you know).

For more variations on dictation, see Davis and Rinvolucri (1989).

Recall and share. Write the target items on the board, give students a minute to look at them, and then delete them. The students try to remember all of them, first individually

and then sharing. Finally, you display all the items again. This is particularly useful for words spelled irregularly. (It is also an appropriate exercise for vocabulary review; see 6 Teaching vocabulary.)

Think of examples. Give the students one of the spelling rules listed above (including the further spelling tips), and challenge them to think of words they know that accord with the rule. They can use a dictionary or the internet to help them search. Pool their suggestions on the board.

Pause for thought

Can you add more ideas to the suggestions above: either from your own experience as teacher or learner, or from a textbook, or your own invention?

Comment

To my surprise, there were very few spelling activities in the textbooks I looked at, except where these actually focus on pronunciation and teach the spelling incidentally. One of the few I found requires learners to correct the spelling of misspelt words in sentences. This is more of a test than a teaching procedure, and exposes students to misspelt words – a strategy that may backfire: the students may remember the misspelling, I'd rather do things that go straight into reading or writing the correct versions, as in the examples above.

Punctuation and capital letters

The most common punctuation signs are likely to be used in the students' L1 in a very similar way; for example, the full stop or period (.), the comma (,), the question mark (?) and the exclamation mark (!). There may, however, be marked differences in the way quotation marks are used. There are also specific punctuation usages in some other languages which are different from English. Spanish adds an upside-down question mark at the beginning of questions, for example, and German inserts a comma before the equivalent of 'that' in relative or noun clauses. If you are teaching a monolingual class whose language you know, you will probably be aware of such differences and will teach them as they occur in reading texts, or responding to errors in students' compositions.

Students whose L1 does not use the Latin script may have problems mastering the use of capital letters to mark the beginning of sentences and proper nouns, as well as in initials and acronyms: these will need some focused teaching at the early stages. See the Practice tasks below for some ideas.

Practice tasks for punctuation and capital letters

Inserting punctuation. Give students a text with missing punctuation and invite them to insert it. It is, perhaps, best with most classes to provide texts from which only specific signs have been excluded. For example, there are no full stops, or no quotation marks in a conversation. Students are told which type of item is missing and to insert it where appropriate.

Capitals. Dictate a mixed list of common and proper nouns. Students write them down, inserting the initial capital where appropriate.

Dictation. Dictate a short and fairly simple text, where the spelling is not difficult, but which needs quite a lot of punctuation and capital letters.

Recall and share. As in the 'recall and share' activity suggested for spelling on the previous page, give the students two minutes to look at a text similar to the one described in the preceding dictation task. Then they try to reproduce it without looking back at it, with the punctuation and capitals accurately inserted. They can share their results before checking with the original.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Can you recall at least four aspects of writing that distinguish it from the other four skills (other than the fact that it is based on written symbols and is productive rather than receptive)?
- 2 Can you identify at least three important differences between formal and informal writing?
- 3 What are some problems in learning to write English for students whose L1 uses a different writing system?
- 4 Can you suggest two writing tasks that might be appropriate for elementary or intermediate classes, and two that are appropriate for more advanced ones?
- 5 What is process writing?
- 6 Suggest two problems associated with the giving of feedback on a preliminary draft, and then some solutions.
- 7 How irregular is English spelling?
- 8 Can you suggest two activities that might help students practise punctuation?

Further reading

- Hyland, K. (2003). *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press.
(A particularly clearly written and accessible guide to the teaching of second language writing)
- Kroll, B. (2003). *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press.
(An interesting collection of articles covering both research-based theory and practical topics such as providing feedback)
- Thaine, C. (2023). *Teaching and Developing Writing Skills*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment.
(A collection of useful and practical ideas for getting students to write a variety of different kinds of texts at different levels)
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(A must-read for the English teacher: the basic rules of punctuation, entertainingly presented)

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12 Feedback and error correction

Overview

- 12.1 Error correction. Some basic issues.
- 12.2 Learner preferences. Whether and how students like to be corrected.
- 12.3 Oral correction. Various techniques used for correction of oral work in class, and some indication of which are more, or less, effective.
- 12.4 Written correction. Suggestions for how samples of student writing may be corrected.

Error correction: some basic issues

The term error correction

When using the term *error correction* here in its conventional sense to refer to what a teacher does when indicating to the learner when they have said or written a form that is considered an error by the standards of acceptability of international English (see 1 Teaching English today) and helping them to correct it. Researchers mostly prefer to use the more precise term *corrective feedback*, since the word *correction* assumes that the error has in fact been corrected, whereas this is not necessarily the case: the learner may continue to make the error. In this book, I'll use mostly the more common, conventional term *error correction*, while bearing in mind that such correction, from the learner's point of view, may be only temporary, or may not be perceived at all: the term refers primarily to the written or spoken input of the teacher.

Is error correction effective?

Most teachers assume that error correction is a natural and necessary component of the language teaching/learning process, as do students. However, there are some who cast doubts on its effectiveness (e.g., Truscott, 1999), based on the fact that learners often continue to make the same mistakes after being corrected (more on this below). Krashen (2002) says that error correction only helps conscious learning and does not have much lasting effect on permanent language acquisition. The general consensus today, however, is that error correction does contribute to proficiency (see, for example, the introduction to the collection of papers on the topic edited by Nassaji and Katchava, 2021).

Do learner errors derive from L1 interference?

In learning their first language, learners have no competing language, and their mistakes therefore will be a result of what they know, or don't know, of the language so far. For

example, they may over-generalize rules (e.g., **goed* instead of *went*). As they hear the correct forms more and more, these will naturally take over, and conscious correction is not necessary (although it is sometimes supplied by, for example, parents talking to their children). However, second-language learners are already fluent in one language. So unless they are aware of the differences, they may sometimes unconsciously apply an L1 usage which is not appropriate for the second language (*interference*). For example, a French speaker may say something like, *We drink always coffee*. This word order is perfectly acceptable in French, but not in English; and some learners may never notice that English orders the words differently unless their attention is drawn to it. Many learner errors are indeed rooted in L1 interference, but not all; others are derived from issues within the language itself, such as the example of over-generalization mentioned above. Yet others result from the natural tendency to simplify, especially in real-time speech production. For example, the omission of auxiliary verbs (**I playing*) even when the learner's first language has an equivalent which uses the corresponding auxiliary (e.g., Spanish, *estoy jugando*).

Is there a difference between an error and a mistake?

A theoretical distinction is sometimes made between an *error* – an unacceptable form which the learner regularly makes because they do not know a rule, or have internalized it wrongly – and a *mistake* – a slip, which the learner could in fact have avoided with a little more thought. So in principle, a learner should be able to self-correct a mistake, but needs input in order to correct an error. But the two are difficult to distinguish when they actually occur, and the distinction, therefore, does not help us very much in practice.

Are errors an indication of a failure in learning or teaching?

No. It's true that the word *error* has a negative connotation, which leads us to assume it is somehow bad. But in fact errors are an inevitable and essential component of good learning (of anything), and their detection and correction can contribute to the learning process. There is even a suggested procedure for grammar teaching (the so-called *garden path technique*), based on inciting learners to make errors in order to help them learn by drawing their attention to the correction. Errors, therefore, should not be condemned, but accepted as a natural and positive aspect of the development of the new language, and the correction offered as a basis for further progress.

What is the goal of error correction?

The main goal of error correction is to prevent mistakes from becoming entrenched, whether they are rooted in interference from the first language or in some tricky feature within English itself. So when we correct a student's error, our goal is to make them aware of what was wrong and what the correct form should have been so that the same error can be avoided in future. The process is a very conscious one: it involves explicit thinking about the language rather than just using it for communication. Sometimes the goal may be wider: to use one student's mistake as a basis for teaching the whole class a language point, and thus to anticipate and possibly prevent similar mistakes by others.

Why do learners often continue to make errors after being corrected?

Error correction does not necessarily produce either immediate or consistent results. Many teachers are familiar with the situation that they correct a student in one lesson – and then see them making precisely the same mistake in the next! Were they not listening? Did they not understand? Why don't they remember? One reason may be that they have understood the correct form consciously, and can get it right if they think about it – but not when they are speaking. Another reason may be that they have not had enough time to work it out. Or it may be that the influence from the learner's L1 is too strong, or they may have got into the habit of using the less acceptable feature and find it difficult to change. There is also the factor of the developmental order of acquisition of grammatical structures, which was discussed in 7 Teaching grammar: it seems likely that there is a certain order of acquisition which cannot be changed, and therefore if we correct a structure for which the learner is not developmentally ready, the correction will not, at that point, result in an update. Whatever the reason, it is clear that we cannot expect every correction of every error to produce clear and immediate improvement in students' performance; the effect is likely to be marginal, delayed and cumulative. We need to be patient and willing to continue to re-correct the same errors as necessary.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the statements below: where would you place yourself in each case, on the continuum indicated by the dotted line between the two extremes?

- 1 The fact that the teacher assesses and corrects students' language implies a power hierarchy: the teacher above, the student below.
Very much agree ←-----→ Totally disagree
- 2 Receiving corrective feedback from the teacher is potentially humiliating to the student.
Very much agree ←-----→ Totally disagree
- 3 Teachers should try not to correct very much, in order not to discourage students.
Very much agree ←-----→ Totally disagree
- 4 It is important to draw attention to when students get things right, not just when they get them wrong.
Very much agree ←-----→ Totally disagree
- 5 Teachers should not let students correct each other's work, as this is harmful to their relationships.
Very much agree ←-----→ Totally disagree

Comment

Most of these have fairly flexible answers, and depend on the respondent's experience, personality, teaching context and professional judgement. My own responses are presented below.

- 1 **Power hierarchy.** My answer here would tend towards the 'Agree' end of the line which may surprise you. In order to understand, you need to free yourself from the negative connotations often associated with the phrase *power hierarchy*. Power hierarchies may in some circumstances be necessary, productive and fully compatible with good human relationships; parents and children, for example. In the classroom, the fact that the teacher is an authority on the subject being taught, with the power to assess and correct student errors, undeniably gives them a position of power. It is important to be aware of this in order to be careful not to exploit such a position ... which leads us to the next item.
- 2 **Potentially humiliating.** Again, I would tend towards 'Agree'. Note the crucial word *potentially*. The issue here is not whether correction humiliates, but whether there is or is not such a potential. As with the previous item, this is a question of awareness: we need to be aware that we have the power to humiliate a student in order to take care not to do so.
- 3 **Correction may discourage.** I'm about in the middle here. It is true that a lot of corrective feedback with no compensating praise (see next item) may result in discouragement and even antagonism; however, too little may lead to frustration or even irritation on the part of the students. It's a question of balance, and of being aware of students' preferences (see Section 2).
- 4 **Notice things that are right.** Very much agree. Many teachers simply do not think of drawing attention to students getting things right. It is seen as a sort of default situation, not needing to be noticed. But surely getting it right should not be taken for granted: a student who produces an accurate bit of language (particularly if they are avoiding a very common mistake) deserves to be noticed and praised. Moreover, other students are likely to learn from the acceptable language item to which their attention has been drawn.
- 5 **Correcting each other.** It is true that students don't really like being corrected by one another (see Section 2). This is not so much because of embarrassment or distress, but rather because they do not rely on one another to provide the appropriate correction, and prefer to get it from the teacher. In some situations, however, helping each other to get things right can be a positive experience for all (see 11 Teaching writing).

Learner preferences: whether and how students like to be corrected

There has been quite a lot of research on the subject of learner preferences in the area of error correction, the majority based on input from adult respondents. In this section, I'll present some of the major findings, and also refer to an unpublished survey of my own, based on questionnaires administered to primary and secondary schoolchildren in Israel.

Clearly, it is useful to learn about learner preferences with regard to error correction, though we are not necessarily obliged to do exactly as they want: other research may indicate that the students may want things that are not necessarily best for their learning; and our own professional judgement also counts for something! But we can certainly gain insights and awareness that can inform classroom decisions. Each finding is followed by my own suggestions as to possible implications for classroom practice.

Pause for thought

As a learner of an additional language yourself, how much do you like to be corrected? In speech? In writing? Do you find it helpful? What kinds of corrections help you most?

Comment

Personally, I really want to be corrected if I get something wrong, whether spelling, pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. I'm fairly advanced in my second language, so corrections don't happen very often: when they do, I'm likely to remember and learn from them. It's probably the corrections in writing that I find most helpful, because it's more important to me to produce correct language in writing than it is in speech. You probably also agree that you want to be corrected; and there is substantial evidence that this is true of most learners, as we shall see below.

Learners want to be corrected

A synthesis of research on teachers' and learners' preferences with regard to oral corrective feedback (Li, 2017) indicates a firm and consistent desire by most learners for teachers to correct their errors. This was confirmed by my own survey: school pupils wanted the teacher to correct them in both oral and written work, though the preference was slightly more pronounced for written. Interestingly, Li also notes that learners on the whole want to be corrected more than teachers want to correct them; and the same appears to be true when the feedback relates to written work (Amrhein and Nassaji, 2010).

Implications for practice. The desire of learners to be corrected fits the generally accepted research-based assumption that error correction helps learning. So in general, yes, you should correct errors. This does not, however, necessarily mean correcting every single mistake all the time: see the next page for further discussion of selective correction.

Learners want teachers to tell them the correct form

Both in my own survey and in the two papers cited on the previous page, the majority of respondents wanted the teacher to tell them explicitly both what was wrong and what the correct form should have been. This is an interesting finding, given the general assumption that learners are likely to learn something better if we get them to work it out for themselves – see, for example, the research on retrieval in vocabulary practice as discussed in 6 Teaching vocabulary. Anrhehin and Nassaji (2010) conclude rather disapprovingly that many learners like to shift the responsibility for identifying the correct form on to the teacher. I am not so sure: the reason may rather be that students are not confident they can provide the right form themselves, and want to be sure they get it right.

Implications for practice. I have the feeling that, in general, learners are right to request their teachers to tell them what's right, not just what's wrong. That is one of the functions of a teacher: to teach acceptable forms. On the other hand, if a learner is capable of self-correction, then the process of doing so is likely to produce better learning than just being fed with the target form. So where you are sure the student could, with a bit of effort, self-correct, try to get them to do so. Where you think they can't, or where you are not sure, it's probably better to just provide the correct form. It's not always easy, however, to distinguish between the two!

Learners do not, on the whole, want to be corrected by their peers

This is a finding reported in Li (2017), and I got the same result in my study. When the teachers of the students in my survey were discussing later why this is so, most of them thought that the reason was students' unwillingness to embarrass or distress each other by correcting. But when, later, they went back and asked their classes about this, it turned out that the main reason was that the learners felt that teacher feedback was simply more reliable.

Implications for practice. I think this is fair enough: if a student makes a mistake during a lesson, it's probably better to correct them yourself, rather than asking one of the other students to do so. (A problem is that very often, in my experience, if one student answers a question wrongly, someone else in the classroom calls out the correction without being asked! And then it is up to me to confirm (or not).) As regards correction of written work, peer editing – where students work together on both their compositions – can be very useful and save work for the teacher (see Section 4 on page 171): but it is a supplement to teacher feedback, not a substitute.

Learners want most (sometimes all) of their mistakes to be corrected

One of the consistent differences between teachers' and learners' attitudes to error correction that emerges from the research is that learners, on the whole, say they want to get a lot more correction than the teachers wish to give. Teachers' reluctance to correct everything, particularly in written work, is partly because of the sheer load of work that this would mean, partly because they don't want to discourage learners by covering the page with corrections, and partly because, where there are a lot of corrections, the learner cannot possibly attend to and deal with every one.

Implications for practice. Some (e.g., Lee, 2019) suggest that 'less is more' and that it is better to focus on specific aspects of the written language in feedback and ignore errors relating to anything else; but not everyone agrees. In any case, it's often almost impossible to provide the corrective feedback that learners often say they want, for the reasons given above: we have to compromise. Quite how much you decide to correct will depend largely on your own teaching context and constraints. In any case, it's probably worth discussing with students to advance how their oral and written work will be corrected: listening to what they want, clarifying your own approach (and constraints) and coordinating expectations.

Learners want error correction to be given immediately rather than delayed

This clearly relates to correction of speech rather than writing; though even for writing, the implication is that the feedback should be given sooner rather than later. On the whole, the research backs up learners' preferences here: see, for example, Fu and Li (2022). It appears that a correction that is given immediately in response to an error is more likely to have positive learning outcomes than one that is given later. On the other hand, we often do not want to interrupt a student who is speaking, since such interruption may disturb the flow, and negatively affect the communicative nature of the speech.

Implications for practice. The above issue is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Oral correction

The main methods of oral correction used in most classes (following a much-quoted study by Lyster and Ranta, 1997) are:

- 1 **Recast.** The teacher simply says the correct version of the student's erroneous utterance, without any further comment. For example:
Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: I am reading a book.
- 2 **Elicitation.** The teacher elicits the correct form from the student. For example:
Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: Can you correct that?
Student: I am reading a book.
- 3 **Clarification request.** The teacher asks for a clarification of the meaning. For example:
Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: I didn't understand, can you say that more clearly?
Student: I am reading a book.
- 4 **Metalinguistic feedback.** The teacher explains using grammatical or other linguistic terminology. For example:
Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: In the present continuous, you need the verb *be* before the *-ing* form of the verb.

- 5 **Explicit correction.** The teacher says explicitly that there has been a mistake, and what the right form is. For example:

Student: I reading a book.

Teacher: No, that is incorrect. You should have said 'I am reading.'

- 6 **Repetition.** The teacher repeats the incorrect utterance, with a rising intonation and a doubting expression, implying that there's something wrong with it. For example:

Student: I reading a book.

Teacher: I reading a book?

Effectiveness of the different techniques

According to the Lyster and Ranta study, and confirmed by later research, the recast is by far the most common of all the techniques listed above. Teachers use it because it is quick and easy and causes minimum disruption of a student's speech. However, it is also the least effective in bringing about uptake (i.e. in getting the student to understand and produce the correct form in response to the correction), and probably the least likely to result in lasting learning. This may be partly because the student sometimes does not realize it is a correction at all; they may not notice that the teacher's utterance was different from their own and understand it merely as an echo or confirmation. But it is partly also because the recast does not require any kind of confirmation or processing by the learner, and therefore gets less attention.

It seems that the most effective oral correction involves some kind of negotiation and active contribution by the student, to ensure that they have paid attention to it. So elicitation and repetitions, for example, which get the student to rethink what they have said and (hopefully!) self-correct, have significantly better results than do recasts.

Should we correct during fluent speech?

The above conclusion produces a dilemma. On the one hand, we do not want to interrupt students as they are speaking, which might disrupt the flow of speech, discourage and harm communication. On the other hand, no correction at all might lead to the mistakes being further entrenched, and contradicts the general desire of most students to be corrected in real time (see the previous section). So if a teacher decides to correct, they may choose to do so using a quick recast, hoping to disrupt the speech as little as possible. But then, as noted above, the correction might be ineffective. If you are going to correct effectively, you need to stop the student, and correct in a way that ensures that they have noticed and accepted the correction – which will inevitably involve some disruption of communication. There is always the possibility of noting the mistake and coming back to it later, but as we have seen in the previous section, this appears to be less effective, and students prefer to be corrected immediately. There is also research evidence that immediate correction does not discourage but actually contributes to WTC (willingness to communicate) (Zare et al., 2022). See the Comment below for my own conclusions.

Pause for thought

How would you address the issue described on the previous page? How do you feel about interrupting a student who is speaking in order to correct errors?

Comment

There is no one easy answer to this. In any specific instance, we will need to make a decision based on our own professional judgement, taking into account a number of factors: the level and confidence of the student, the goals of the course, the frequency or gravity of the error, the willingness of the student to tolerate interruption and so on. The main point to be remembered here is that even if in general you prefer not to interrupt communicative interaction, there may be times where such interruption for the purposes of error correction may be helpful, learner-friendly, and productive of learning. In any case, consulting the students in advance about how they wish to be corrected during speech may help you make the right decisions.

Written correction

This section relates to the correction of language errors in short writing assignments, such as language exercises, answers to comprehension questions, or brief compositions. (For guidance on giving feedback on longer written assignments, including corrections, aimed at the rewriting and improvement of the composition as a whole, see 11 Teaching writing.)

Below are some samples of uncorrected student work, followed by some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which relate to the correction of such assignments with suggested answers.

The first sample is a grammar exercise on the present perfect, which the students did for homework. The second is a test on vocabulary, which is also intended to check students' mastery of the use of relative clauses in definitions. The third is a short piece of writing done in class as an individual summary of a group discussion, and given in to the teacher at the end of the lesson.

Pause for thought

How would you correct the student writing shown on the next page? Which errors would you correct, and how? Which might you ignore, and why?

1. Grammar exercises on the present perfect, given as homework

- 8.1 You are asking people questions about things they have done. Make questions with *ever* using the words in brackets.
- (ride / horse?) Have you ever ridden a horse?
 - (be / California?) Have you been to California?
 - (run / marathon?) Have you ever run a marathon?
 - (speak / famous person?) Have you ever spoken to a famous person?
 - (most beautiful place / visit?) What's the most beautiful place you've ever visited?
- 14.2 Complete the answers to these questions. Use the verb in brackets.
- Example: Is it a beautiful painting? (see) Yes, it's the most beautiful painting I've ever seen.
- Is it a good film? (see) Yes, it's the best film I've ever seen.
 - Is it a long book? (read) Yes, it's the longest book I've ever read.
 - Is she an interesting person? (meet) Yes, she's the most interesting person I have ever met.

2. Test on vocabulary and relative clauses

Define the following words, using *who/which/that/whose/where/when*.
For example: a deserted house = a house where nobody lives

- a temple: a house where religious people live in
- a motionless tree: a tree which not moving at all
- an illusion: a false sight
- courage: a man who not have any fear
- sweat: the liquid that have then skin
- a PR man: a man who work in a public relations
- a virus: a thing which make people sick
- an antibody: a thing which help the body get over the sickness
- a host: a man who takes visitors to his home
- a paw: a piece of animal

3. Writing following a discussion

Dear Hospital Harrier,
I have a problem with this teacher at school. He is always shouting at me, though I don't disturb more than lots of other people in the class. It's true that I sometimes don't do my homework, but I know his subject very well, so I always get high marks on the tests, so there is no point doing silly homework. He gave me a much lower mark than I deserve at the end of the term. It's not fair. And it's no good saying go to the class teacher, the always backs him up. What can I do?
Yours,
FRUSTRATED STUDENT

My advice to you is to talk with the mathematics teacher and trying to explain him what he you should think about her and what do you think that you can do together to solve your problem together please try to case what happened with

Comment

How and how much, you correct will depend on various factors: how important the error is for your students in this course; what the conventions are for error correction in your institution; how proficient a particular student is. After making your own corrections, read on to the section headed *Frequently asked questions* below.

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

- Should I use a red pen for red insertions, if the responses are in digital form) for my comments? Or another colour?
- It's probably best to use a bright colour for corrections, simply in order to make them clearly visible to the student. Some teachers feel that red is too aggressive and prefer to use another colour. If the assignment was submitted digitally, you have the option of using track changes, or notes using Google Docs, and you can choose which colour to use.
- Is it necessary to give an evaluative comment at the end such as 'Well done'?
- Students really like to know what your overall assessment was of the assignment: so let them know what it was in an evaluative comment or assessment. Even more helpful are specific comments aimed at helping the student in future similar assignments: 'Remember next time to start sentences with capital letters!'
- Should I correct all the mistakes? If not, how do I decide what to correct and what not?
- As we have seen in Section 2, students on the whole want to be corrected more than teachers want to provide corrections! A general guideline might be that if there are not many mistakes, correct them all, but if there are a lot, allow yourself to ignore some of them. You certainly need to correct mistakes that are associated with the goal of the exercise (for example, in an exercise on the simple past you will correct mistaken past forms). Of the others, you need to decide for yourself which are the most important ones to correct and which can be ignored for the moment.
- Should I write in the correct forms? Give a hint what these should be using codes, ('sp' for example, for 'spelling')? Or simply underline something to indicate it was wrong, without any hint?
- Students on the whole like you to tell them exactly what the mistake was and to write in the correct version (see Section 2, page 168). On the other hand, we simply don't have the time to write in all the correct forms in all our students' compositions if we have a lot of assignments to correct and a heavy work schedule. Probably the answer is a compromise: write in the corrections if you think the student would find it difficult to work them out on their own, and otherwise just underline, cross out or put in an insertion mark ^. Whether you use a code such as 'sp' for 'spelling' is a matter of personal preference; there is some evidence that students prefer simple underlining (Chandler, 2003).

- 5 Should I only correct, or also note things that were good, e.g., particularly relevant parts of language by a student?
- It is important to remind yourself to note positive things, where appropriate, e.g., double ticks, complimentary comments in the margin. These responses can draw students' attention to their successes, boosting morale and reinforcing learning written work?
- 6 How far can I rely on AWE (Automated Writing Evaluation) tools to correct student work?
- AWE tools such as Grammarly can be very helpful and time-saving when the student assignment is submitted digitally, in that they pick up the more obvious mistakes and/or inappropriate expressions and suggest corrections. They are becoming more and more accurate and comprehensive. However, they still cannot completely replace the teacher: there are aspects of coherence, appropriate vocabulary and relevance which only a human teacher can assess and give feedback on; and it still occasionally happens that AWE tools will neglect to correct a mistake, or correct unnecessarily.
- 7 When or why should I require the student to redo some or all of the assignment?
- If the work is in digital text, then students can very easily implement your corrections and rewrite. On paper, however, rewriting of the items of a grammar exercise can be mechanical and rather tedious and does not benefit students so much. You might instead, give the class the same, or similar, exercises a few days later to see if there has been progress in eliminating errors. Full written compositions, in contrast, should usually be redrafted, whether on paper or digital, correcting mistakes of language, content and organization. For more discussion of this topic, see 11 Teaching writing

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Can you define the primary function of error correction in the classroom?
A secondary one?
- 2 What are some problems with error correction as a means of helping students improve accuracy?
- 3 Do most students want to have their mistakes corrected?
- 4 Why, probably, do students prefer on the whole to be corrected by the teacher rather than by peers?
- 5 Which is the most common oral correction procedure? Why is it probably not very effective?
- 6 What can a teacher do to make sure that an oral correction is noticed and learnt from?
- 7 List some of the considerations you might take into account when deciding which mistakes, and how many of them, to correct in a piece of written work.

Further reading

- Chambers, J. (1990). *Mistakes and Correction*. London: Longman.
- (A simple, practical handbook: suggests various techniques for correcting in different situations)
- Ellis, R. (2011). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* (2nd Edition). The University of Michigan Press.
- (A research-based but practically-oriented discussion of written error correction)
- Ellis, R. and Katchava, E. (Eds.) (2021). *The Cambridge Handbook of Corrective Feedback in Second Language Learning and Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- (A collection of papers summarizing research on different aspects of corrective feedback)

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Assessment and testing

Overview

- 13.1 **Functions and types of assessment.** A general introduction to the types of assessment, why and how we assess.
- 13.2 **Assessment tools.** Tests and alternative assessment tools as a basis for giving a grade.
- 13.3 **Giving a grade.** Issues to do with giving a final grade at the end of a course: paper versus computer-based tests.
- 13.4 **Test design 1: testing accuracy.** A list of test items, with critical discussion.
- 13.5 **Test design 2: testing comprehension and fluency.** How listening, reading, speaking and writing can be tested.
- 13.6 **Administering tests in class.** Practical tips on the presentation and management of classroom tests.

13.1

Functions and types of assessment

- The main reasons for trying to assess English proficiency are as follows:
- 1 In order to determine learners' overall level: for example, we may want to specify their level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), or let them or their parents or employers know how good their English is, or assign them to an appropriate course.
 - 2 In order to assess learners' progress: we may want to give feedback showing how much a learner has improved since the last assessment.
 - 3 In order to find out how well learners have learnt specific material during a course: we may wish to know how well they know a set of vocabulary items, a text or a grammatical feature.
 - 4 In order to evaluate learners' strengths and weaknesses (*diagnostic assessment*): so that the learners themselves can be aware of what they need to learn, and so that we can plan our teaching appropriately.
 - 5 In order to evaluate our own teaching: often the results of learner assessment can provide useful feedback on how well we as teachers have been enabling students to learn.

Summative and formative assessment

Formal and prestigious types of assessment, such as state school-leaving exams, international exams such as IELTS or TOEFL, are *summative* in nature: they provide a numerical grade, may offer no specific feedback on aspects of performance, and are used to conclude a period of learning. Summative assessment may be used as a basis for selection, or for acceptance into further education or employment. It may contribute to nothing to ongoing teaching and learning; however, it is a part of the teacher's job and we need to know how to do it effectively. Items 1 and 2 of the list of reasons for assessment on the previous page are used mainly for summative purposes.

In contrast, most of the assessment that we carry out during a course (tests at the end of units in a coursebook, for example) is *formative*: it may, like summative assessment, provide a numerical grade, but it happens in the midst of a period of learning rather than at the end, and provides clear feedback in the form of error correction and suggestions for improvement. It has the primary aim of enhancing future learning. For example, we might respond to a student with a grade like 6/10 and the comment, 'You need to work on the spelling of the words I have underlined.' The types of assessment described in items 3 and 4 on the previous page are essentially formative.

Summative assessment is usually carried out either by the class teacher or by an external authority: a ministry of education, for example, or an internationally recognized body such as Cambridge Assessment. In contrast, formative assessment is normally done by the class teacher as part of the teaching process, though it may be supplemented occasionally by the student's own self-assessment (see the next page).

Assessment tools

Various tools are used to assess students' language ability: tests, teacher assessment, continuous assessment, self-assessment, portfolio assessment.

Tests

Tests are by far the most common assessment tool. The criterion for success is a fixed level which the student is expected to reach (pass); and the result is usually expressed as a percentage or other numerical value. Tests are relatively easy to design and check, take place at preset times and places, give clear-cut results, and are in general (rightly or wrongly) accepted as reliable bases for grades.

A side effect of tests is the *backwash* – the influence which the test has on the teaching and learning leading up to it, which may be positive or negative. On the positive side, an awareness that there is going to be a speaking component, for example, in a test, will encourage teachers and learners to do a lot of oral work in the classroom; on the other hand, there is the phenomenon of 'teaching to the test': teaching only those aspects of language and types of task that are going to be tested, and neglecting others.

Tests also have useful functions in the course other than assessment:

- They act as stations in the course programme, marking off the ends of units
- They encourage students to review material in preparation.
- They are motivating, in the sense that students will work hard to do them well
- They can give a sense of achievement and progress.
- In classes with discipline problems, they often provide a welcome oasis of quiet, concentrated work during the lesson.

However, there are problems with tests as a basis for assessment:

- They are not always *valid* (i.e., actually test what they are meant to). For example, a listening test based on long multiple-choice written questions may actually test reading as much as, or even more, than listening comprehension.
- They may not be *reliable*. For example, similar classes may get quite different results on the same tests because their teachers mark them differently.
- They are a one-off event which might not give a fair representation of the student's overall ability.
- They discriminate against students with test anxiety who perform badly under test conditions.
- If they are the basis for crucial summative assessment in the student's career, they can be extremely stressful.

However, other tools are available, which can be used as an alternative, or supplement, to tests.

Teacher assessment. The teacher gives their own estimate of the student's level. This is based on the performance of the student over time in a wide range of tasks, and it takes into account aspects such as the student's effort and progress, or particular learning disabilities. On the other hand, it is inevitably subjective to some extent and may be seen by stakeholders as unreliable.

Continuous assessment. The final grade is some kind of combination of the grades the student received for various assignments during the course. Again, there may be a problem of subjectivity, as the grades are given by the teacher. Also, the assignments and criteria for the different grades may vary from class to class, which makes it difficult to achieve standardization between classes.

Self-assessment. The students evaluate their own performance, using clear criteria and grading systems. This is not very popular for summative assessment, even with students themselves. And again there is the problem of subjectivity. However, for formative purposes, self-assessment can be very valuable, since it encourages students to reflect on and take responsibility for the evaluation of their own learning. It is particularly helpful when it is combined with teacher assessment and discussed in a tutorial.

Portfolio assessment. The student collects examples of their own work over a long period to create a portfolio, which provides the basis for evaluation. This is a more sophisticated method of assessment, as although the teacher decides on the overall position of the portfolio (for example, one essay, one test, one text comprehension question, etc.), the exact assignments that will go into it are chosen by the student. Portfolio assessment avoids the stress and one-off problems of testing. It also provides a broader basis for evaluation, though there is likely to be a disproportionate focus on writing. Its main disadvantage in practice is the amount of work for the teacher, who has to keep track of students' work on the portfolios during the year to ensure they collect all the required components, as well as read and assess the portfolios of entire classes.

Points for thought

What experience do you yourself have of any of these assessment tools, as teacher or student? What comments would you add to the definitions and problems shown above?

Comment

My main experience, both as teacher and student, has been with tests, as I imagine yours has, too. As a teacher, I experimented with both portfolio assessment and self-assessment. The former, I found simply created too much work for me, as noted above, and I did not continue with it. Self-assessment, however, I have found useful not as the overall basis for the final grade, as the students themselves do not consider their own assessment as reliable enough, and they wanted a more objective judgement. However, I found it really helpful to sit with each student and discuss self-assessments: sometimes their views provided very useful insights into how they were learning and affected the way I assessed them as a teacher.

Giving a grade

The most common practical problem relating to assessment that we face as teachers is how to decide the final grade of a student, whether it is at the end of a course, at the end of a term or at the end of a year.

Criteria

The first decision to be made is what standard(s) you will use to judge your students' level: whether you are going to use criterion-, norm- or individual-referenced assessment.

Criterion-referenced assessment means that you judge the student according to some fixed criterion. This can be based on an estimation of what it is reasonable or desirable to demand from students according to their age, career, level, stage of a course, etc. The criteria might also be based on the levels of the CEFR.

Norm-referenced assessment means that you evaluate the student's performance relative to what you would expect from the particular group. In this case, a group of less advanced, or learning-disabled, students would be assessed according to different standards from those applied to a group of advanced students within the same school.

Individual-referenced assessment means that you relate the assessment of an individual student to their own previous performance, or to an estimate of their individual ability. You might, for example, give a student a high grade if they have worked hard and made impressive progress, even if by norm- or criterion-referenced standards the student may have received a fairly low one.

Components of the grade

Having decided what your criterion (or combination of criteria) will be, you then need to decide what information you will use as a basis for the grade. You may not have much choice: some schools have rules for their teachers about what the final grade must be based on. But if you have a choice, then it is probably best to take into account ongoing work as well as tests: whether a student has made an effort and progressed, whether they have consistently submitted homework assignments, for example, or displayed personal initiative in improving their learning. In some classes, particularly the younger ones, you may also want to include behaviour as a component: whether or not the student has been punctual, attentive and cooperative.

The use of such components in a grade is fairer than assessing students only on the basis of a one-off test, which may not, for reasons given earlier, provide a fair sample of what they can do. It also helps student motivation. This may not be very educational, but it is a fact of life: if we know that something is going to affect how we are assessed, then we are more likely to make an effort than if we know it is not. For example, if students know that completing homework assignments throughout the term accounts for 10 percent of their grade, they are more likely to do them.

It is then necessary to determine what *weighting* (percentage of the final grade) we will give to the different components: which means, of course, rather more work for us than just copying out the results of a test.

Pause for thought

In a teaching situation you are familiar with, and assuming that the teacher is responsible for determining every student's grade at the end of the course rather than an external examiner, what components would you take into account, and what weighting would you give them?

Comment

In my own teaching situation – a state high school in a country where English is not spoken very much outside the classroom – my criteria were: final exam 40 percent; periodic class tests 20 percent; ongoing class work and attentiveness 10 percent; homework assignments 10 percent; overall progress since last assessment – 10 percent. In different situations, it might be appropriate to remove or change some of these criteria, or add others, or change the weighting. Your own pedagogical approach and student expectations will also make a difference.

How do you express the grade you give the student at the end of the course? There are various possibilities:

Percentages are probably the most common, though in different places the actual value assigned to the different percentages may vary. For example, in some places 40 percent is a pass, in others it is 60 percent; some student populations consider 75 percent a high grade, others would think anything below 85 percent unsatisfactory.

Letters, words or phrases, such as 'A' or 'B'; 'Good', 'Very good', 'Excellent', look a little less impersonal, less definitive than percentages; however, the students and other stakeholders (e.g., parents, employers) often read them as definitive number-type grades, exactly as they read percentages.

Profles are a totally different kind of expression of assessment, comprising a number of separate grades on different skills or sections of knowledge, so that there is a possibility of describing the performance of an individual student in more detail, showing their various strengths and weaknesses. You might, for example, provide a rubric with categories such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, and give a grade, or remark, for each. This provides a more rounded view of the student's level, but obviously involves a lot more work for you.

Evaluative comments, such as, 'Well done! You have worked hard,' without any expression of level of achievement, avoids the difficult and sometimes unpleasant job of actually having to give a grade; however, the institution will normally demand a grade, as will other stakeholders, such as parents. Students also, in my experience, want to see a grade: they need some kind of clear-cut evaluation of how well they are doing. So it is probably best in most contexts to give an indication of achievement through a grade, but accompany it with encouraging and constructive comments.

In any case, if you as the teacher are responsible for giving the final grade at the end of the course, you might find the following tips helpful.

Practical tips

- 1 Tell students early on what your criteria are. Right at the beginning of the course, make sure you explain on what basis the grades are given: whether the students are taking into account aspects of ongoing work, or only results of a final test. This should be assessed.
- 2 Discuss the grade with individual students. If your class is not too big, and it allows, try to set up individual meetings with students. Give them general feedback on their performance, tell them what grade you intend to give them, ask them what grade they consider they deserve; clarify and discuss any differences. You can sometimes change the grade after this consultation. This will remove the stress of knowing what the final grade is until they get it in writing; and in some cases, it will help you decide on a fair grade. If you are short of time, the meetings can be done in class time while the rest of the class is doing individual work.
- 3 Make sure grades are kept private. Don't make the grades public (unless your institution insists on it). Most students prefer to find out privately what their grade is, usually through a password-protected section of the course LMS, and then check themselves whether, and with whom, to share it.

13.4

Test design 1: testing accuracy

In this section you will find a list of the most common types of test items for testing vocabulary and grammar, with some notes on their advantages and disadvantages. For testing techniques for the assessment of listening or reading comprehension, or of speaking or written ability in general, see the next section on page 188.

The test items on the next page are normally used in conventional class tests given at the end of a teaching unit, term or year. Occasionally, some of them may be used in an oral test, such as an interview, which provides the tester with information about how well the student can understand and produce the spoken forms. Interviews are, however, rather time-consuming as well as expensive, so most tests are written.

We need to take into account various considerations when selecting items to use for a particular test.

- What will it tell me about the student's knowledge? For example, will it reveal the student's ability to produce the item, or just show that they understand it? Will it provide evidence that the student can use the item in appropriate contexts or not?
- How easy is it to compose? Will it take me a long time to think up and write out the item? Is there a source (the coursebook, a website) which will provide me with ready-made items I can use?
- How easy is it to check? Does it require only a quick, objective check based on a single possible right answer, or will I need to use my own judgement in assessing the answer?

Practical tips

1 Tell students early on what your criteria are. Right at the beginning of the course, make sure you explain on what basis the grades are given: whether the students are taking into account aspects of ongoing work, or only results of a final test. This should be assessed.

2 Discuss the grade with individual students. If your class is not too big, and it allows, try to set up individual meetings with students. Give them general feedback on their performance, tell them what grade you intend to give them, ask them what grade they consider they deserve; clarify and discuss any differences. You can sometimes change the grade after this consultation. This will remove the stress of knowing what the final grade is until they get it in writing; and in some cases, it will help you decide on a fair grade. If you are short of time, the meetings can be done in class time while the rest of the class is doing individual work.

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Practical tips

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1. large a. high

2. sad b. big

3. tall c. many

4. a lot d. unhappy

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2. sad b. big

3. tall c. many

4. a lot d. unhappy

1. large a. high

2. sad b. big

3. tall c. many

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2. sad b. big

3. tall c. many

4. a lot d. unhappy

1. large a. high

2. sad b. big

3. tall c. many

4. a lot d. unhappy

Write the noun.

1. happy	a. _____
2. long	b. _____
3. angry	c. _____
4. difficult	d. _____

- 5 Dictation. The tester dictates a passage or set of words; the student writes them down.
- 6 Focused cloze. The target lexical or grammatical items are omitted from a passage. Insert verbs in the past tense. Beowulf 1. _____ was _____ (be) a great warrior 1,000 years ago. He 2. _____ (win) many battles against monsters and dragons. Grendel 3. _____ and he was very strong. Grendel 4. _____ (not sleep) and 5. _____ (have) his last meal (not eat). He 6. _____ (drink) blood ...
- 7 Transformation. This usually involves alterations such as changing the tense or voice (active/passive), or number (singular/plural), or positive to negative.
- Put into the past simple: I go to school by bus.
- 8 Rewrite/Compose. A new sentence is to be composed based on a given sentence. It could be a paraphrase, for example, or a question relating to an answer.
- Complete the second sentence so that it means the same as the first. He came to the meeting in spite of his illness. Although _____
- Write a question to which the sentence is the answer. Yes, I came here yesterday.

Less frequently used test items

- 9 Sentence completion. The student may complete the sentence any way they like, provided the language is acceptable. Complete the sentence. She will come to the party if _____
- 10 Translation. This may be either from the L1 into English, or from English into the L1.
- 11 Mistake correction. Correct the mistake. *We talked to the man which is in charge of the project.
- 12 Sentence repetition. The student repeats a sentence they hear.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the test from a coursebook shown on the next page, or at any test of correct language (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, punctuation) which you have come across. Which types of test item are used? Any comments?

Name _____ Score 100

- 9 It's got more space _____ our last house.
- 10 This is _____ smallest place we've seen.

Rewrite these sentences with the words in brackets.

- 1 I'm not as sensitive as him. (more)
He's more sensitive than me.
- 2 John is more adventurous than me. (less)
I _____
- 3 Julia and I are both 1.65 m tall. (as ... as)
I _____
- 4 I don't know anyone who's nicer than Jo. (nicest)
Jo _____
- 5 My mobile isn't the same as yours. (different)
Your _____
- 6 His laptop is almost the same as mine. (similar)
My _____
- 7 Your handwriting is better than mine. (worse)
My _____
- 8 Leeds Castle is very beautiful. There isn't a more beautiful castle in England. (most)
Leeds Castle _____

Choose the correct verb forms.

- SAM When you start working from home next week, which room _____ you going to work in?
working in?
- KIM This bedroom, I think. It's nice and bright.
- SAM Do you think it'll be big enough?
- KIM Oh yes, I think so. My new desk _____ take it.
isn't taking up much space.
- SAM That's good.
- KIM In fact, the shop has just phoned. They'll bring/They're bringing it round tomorrow.
- SAM Where are you thinking of putting it?
- KIM I'm not sure. I'll probably put it in probably putting it by the window.
- SAM I don't think it's going to fit in there.

(from *face2face Intermediate Teacher's Book 2nd Edition* by Redstone, C., Clemmeston, T. and Cunningham, G., 2013)

Comment

As is fairly typical of grammar and vocabulary tests, the most frequent type of item used in the above example is gapfill, with or without a hint as to what the learner is expected to write. It is also noticeable that there is only one possible answer to all the questions, so the teacher – or even a computer – can quickly check and give a grade. If you looked at another test: do these two statements apply also to them?

Discussion

A characteristic of all the more frequently used test items is that they are easy to check. Most are also fairly easy to write, with one notable exception: multiple choice (see below). A lot of them today can be composed by an AI tool, provided you give a precise prompt: this is particularly useful when you need to compose a more complex and potentially time-consuming type of item (see, for example, the note under Multiple-choice below).

- 1 **True/false/dual-choice** items check only receptive knowledge: the fact that students got the answer right does not necessarily indicate that they would be able to produce the target item themselves correctly or appropriately. And note that they have a 50/50 chance of getting it right, even if they are guessing.
- 2 **Multiple-choice** may be used for the same testing purposes as true/false items and checks knowledge more reliably, since it offers more options (there is only a 25 per cent chance of getting it right by chance). Good multiple-choice questions, however, are surprisingly difficult to design. They often come out with more than one possible right answer, or no clear right answer at all, or one over-obvious right answer. Also, the punctuation and aligning of the stem and options can be tricky. Finally, less experienced test-writers tend to make the right answers the longest ones, which may give them away to students who are aware of this tendency. Such problems can be solved by using AI tools to design the item; then all you need to do is make sure your prompt is comprehensive and accurate, and then to check through the suggestion made by the tool to ensure that it is appropriate.

- 3 **Gapfills**, again, test mainly receptive knowledge. You need to be careful to design a gapfill item so that there is only one right answer, or a very limited number of right answers, otherwise it becomes difficult to check. For this reason, choices are usually limited through the inclusion of a root word in brackets or a word bank.

- 4 **Matching** can be used not only to elicit knowledge of various lexical or grammatical relationships: synonyms or parts of speech, as shown in the examples, but also opposites, collocations and grammatical cohesion (appropriate sequence of tenses, for example) and more. Design is not too difficult, but as with multiple-choice questions, you do need to take care that there is only one right match for each item.
- 5 **Dictation** mainly tests spelling, sometimes punctuation and, perhaps surprisingly, comprehension: people can normally write things down accurately from dictation only if they understand them. For this reason, dictations appear also in the section

on listening comprehension on the next page. If the dictated text is of a whole phrase or sentence, responses may supply some information on students' receptive knowledge of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, or even general proficiency (MacNamara, 2000). If you are teaching a monolingual class whose language you know, you might use translation dictation: dictate a word or short text in the L1; the students write down the translation into English.

8 **Focused cloze** can be used to test grammar, vocabulary, spelling or punctuation, depending on which items you choose to delete. Marking can be slightly less straightforward than for previous items: you may find it difficult sometimes to decide if a specific item is acceptable or not. If you insert multiple-choice options at each gap, composition is more time-consuming, but the marking becomes easier.

9 **Transformation** items require changing the grammatical form of a particular word or phrase. They are fairly easy to design and check, but often can be done mechanically: the student does not necessarily need to understand the whole sentence.

10 **Rewrite** items are also based on transformation, but they relate to an entire sentence: the learner will therefore need to understand in order to answer correctly. Occasionally, there may be more than one acceptable answer.

Then there are the **less frequently used test items**: less frequently used for a variety of reasons.

11 **Sentence completion** is difficult to check, since there is often a very large number of possible right answers. Its big advantage is that it tests production: it shows whether the student can produce correct sentences and use the target items in appropriate (though limited) contexts.

12 **Translation** is still frowned on by some teachers and methodologists, though far less than it used to be. It is actually a very useful technique in a monolingual class whose teacher also speaks the students' L1. The translation of a language item to or from English can give very quick and reliable information about what the student does or does not know, particularly when it involves entire units of meaning (phrases, sentences) within a known context. Items are fairly easy to design and may be more, or less, easy to check, depending on how close and obvious the translations are.

13 **Mistake correction** is, again, something which many teachers feel uncomfortable with. There is always the worry that exposing students to a mistake in print might reinforce that mistake rather than correcting it. If used, it has to be very clear what the mistake is. One possibility is to cross out the wrong words (for example, **We talked to the man which is in charge of the project*) so the students only have to decide what words should replace them. Another is to write an insert symbol ^ where something is missing. But both design and checking are fairly straightforward.

14 **Sentence repetition**, or *elicited imitation*, sounds like a mechanical imitation task. In fact, it produces surprisingly reliable results, because normally we can only repeat accurately an utterance of more than a couple of syllables if we understand it (see the note on Dictation on the previous page). Successful responses, therefore, are evidence of comprehension. Sentence repetition has been shown to correlate well with results of other types of test (Van Moore, 2012).

Practical tips for test design

- 1 **Clarity.** Make sure the instructions for each item are clear. They should usually be an example with its solution. For low-level, monolingual classes, it may be appropriate to have the instructions in the students' L1, as well as in English.
- 2 **'Doability'.** The test should be quite doable: not too difficult, with no trick questions. It's sometimes difficult to judge the doability of your own tests, so it's worth asking a colleague to read through and check they can answer the questions before you give the test to students.
- 3 **Marking.** Decide exactly how you will assess each section of the test, and how many points you will give each one out of the total. Make the marking system as simple as each section on the test sheet itself.
- 4 **Suitability for administering and checking online.** Make sure that most or all of the test is based on single-right-answer items, which can be completed and checked through a computer, thus saving you time and ensuring accurate results. If the students are working online, however, you do need to make sure that they are not using online facilities to find out answers by checking a dictionary or using an AI tool.
- 5 **Varied level.** Lower-level students should feel that they are able to do a substantial part of the test, while the higher-level ones should have a chance to show what they know. So make the earlier items fairly easy, and perhaps define one or more of the more difficult ones as optional.
- 6 **Tests designed by students.** Occasionally, let students compose their own tests, test items, individually or in groups. You then collect these items, correct them if necessary, and use some or all of them as a basis for the test. This is in itself an excellent review of the test material and also reduces test anxiety.

13.5

Test design 2: testing comprehension and fluency

Tests that assess comprehension through listening and reading, and fluency and accuracy in speaking and writing, rather than knowledge of specific language items, need a different set of testing techniques.

Listening comprehension

This is usually tested as a skill on its own, although in real life it more often than not occurs in conjunction with speaking (for discussion of the teaching, rather than testing, of listening skills, see 8 Teaching Listening). A test which involves both speaking and listening tasks are the following.

Dictation and repetition. As mentioned previously, a student can only normally write down more than a word or two accurately from dictation if they have understood it. Both dictation and sentence repetition therefore are valid and reliable tests of listening comprehension.

Text + comprehension questions is probably the most common form of listening comprehension test. The student hears a text, usually more than once, and is asked to answer questions on it. The questions may relate to gist or details of content. For convenience of marking, they are very often multiple choice. This kind of test can be administered and checked online, using audio texts followed by questions with a limited possible set of right answers.

Writing notes is a useful test of listening comprehension, but one that demands, of course, the ability to write quickly and clearly, as well as understand what is heard. It obviously needs to be checked by a human assessor.

Reading comprehension

Reading aloud single words can normally show only that the student can decode the letters accurately; however, reading aloud a text with appropriate prosody (pause, intonation, stress) can be done well only if the text is understood. So reading a text aloud is a very easily designed and administered test of reading comprehension, in very much the same way as dictation and repetition are tests of listening comprehension. It is, on the other hand, time-consuming because it has to be done through one-to-one interaction with the tester. The student should usually have time to read, re-read and prepare before such a test: only at very advanced levels can we expect students to sight-read competently.

Text + comprehension questions is, as with listening, the most common format of the reading comprehension test. The students study a text and answer questions, which are commonly gapfills and multiple choice in order to enable easy, possibly digital, checking.

There is another way of checking general reading comprehension. Words are deleted that can be guessed from the surrounding context, and the testee required to fill them in correctly. Sometimes each gap is linked to a bank of two or more possible answers.

Jumbled paragraphs. Students are given a text with the paragraphs in the wrong order, and they have to sort them out. Their success depends not only on their comprehension of the content, but also on their awareness of the typical discourse structure of the genre and of cohesive devices (use of pronouns, connectors such as *however*, *moreover*, discourse markers such as *first*, *on the one hand*, *finally*).

Speaking

The assessment of a student's ability to speak fluently, accurately and appropriately is particularly problematic for two reasons. One is practical: unlike the other three skills, speaking can only normally be tested in individual (or, occasionally, pair- or small-group) interaction. Even if the student's speech is recorded while interacting with a computer, or avatar, the assessment will need to be done by an individual human assessor. This means that it takes a long time to test an entire class, and it is expensive to pay the testers. The other problem is reliable assessment: there cannot possibly be one right answer, so there is no possibility of objective or computer-based grading. Moreover speech is fleeting: it cannot usually be re-read and reconsidered for assessment. It is also difficult to retain speech in the memory long enough to assess its level. It can help to record the student's speech and then listen to it again later, but this increases the time and expense even more.

The use of scales of standards, or rubrics can help to solve the problem of reliability by making sure that there are clear criteria for the different possible grades, as shown in the rubrics for the Cambridge B2 First exam below.

B2	GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY	DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT	PRONUNCIATION	INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION
5	Shows a good degree of control of a range of simple and some complex grammatical forms.	Produces extended stretches of language with very little hesitation. Contributions are relevant and there is a clear organisation of ideas.	Is intelligible. Intonation is appropriate. Sentence and word stress is accurately placed.	Initiates and responds appropriately, taking contributions from other speakers.
4	Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views on a wide range of familiar topics.	Uses a range of cohesive devices and discourse markers.	Individual sounds are articulated clearly.	Maintains and develops the interaction and negotiates towards an outcome.
3	Shows a good degree of control of simple grammatical forms, and attempts some complex grammatical forms.	Produces extended stretches of language despite some hesitation. Contributions are relevant and there is very little repetition.	Is intelligible. Intonation is generally appropriate. Sentence and word stress is generally accurately placed.	Initiates and responds appropriately.
2	Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views on a range of familiar topics.	Uses a range of cohesive devices.	Individual sounds are generally articulated clearly.	Maintains and develops the interaction and negotiates towards an outcome with very little support.
1	Shows a good degree of control of simple grammatical forms.	Produces responses which are extended beyond short phrases, despite hesitation.	Is mostly intelligible, and has some control of phonological features at both utterance and word levels.	Initiates and responds appropriately.
0	Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary when talking about everyday situations.	Contributions are mostly relevant, despite some repetition. Uses basic cohesive devices.		Keeps the interaction going with very little prompting and support.

Performance below Band 1.

(from B2 First Handbook for teachers for exams by Cambridge English, 2021)

The following are some common formats used in oral testing.

Interview consists of a conversation between two people. It is the most common context for speech in daily life and therefore should provide useful and reliable evidence of the ability of the student to converse in English. Note that, as mentioned above, it tests listening comprehension as well as speaking. Its main disadvantage is the problem of attention for the interviewer who has to initiate and maintain a conversation as well as assess it; this can be solved if the assessor is not the interviewer but an independent listener – but of course, this raises the cost still further.

Picture description is particularly suitable for younger learners or beginners. The student describes a picture or a series of pictures. It is easier for the tester, who does not have to participate in conversation and can devote their attention to assessing the student's performance.

Presentation is a longer, more advanced procedure. The student is asked to present an extended description, explanation or other oral account, while the tester simply listens and assesses. The problem here is that students may memorize their presentations in advance, which gives no idea of their ability to compose and deliver spontaneous speech. An alternative is to give the student a topic, two minutes to prepare, and then ask them to speak about it for a minute or two.

Group or pair discussions can be used in order to assess the speaking ability of two or more students at the same time, while the tester simply sits at the side and listens. This possibly saves time, but there is always the chance that the less assertive students, however good their spoken English, may not get sufficient opportunities to speak.

Computer-based oral testing. Eliciting speech from a student by recording their responses to questions or cues from an avatar can save expense: the student output is then assessed by a human. (At the time of writing, I do not know of a digital tool that provides valid and reliable feedback and assessment of informal speech.) The problem is that many students find it difficult to respond to an interviewer they know is an avatar, and will provide more reliable evidence of their abilities in face-to-face interaction with a human interlocutor.

Writing

A written assignment used for assessment purposes can of course be done on a computer, in which case, students can use computer tools to check their spelling and grammar. Some teachers prefer not to let students use computers when doing writing tests for this reason. However, the use of such tools cannot disguise poor writing ability; and in any case, since much, if not most, English writing is now done with these tools available, it does not make sense to exclude them from tests. A trickier problem with using computers is the possibility that students will copy-paste passages – or, indeed, full essays – from the Internet, or use GPT to compose texts (see a discussion of this point in 11 Teaching writing). We can usually find out if a whole text is plagiarized from an online source by using a search engine. AI use is more difficult to detect, though there are some websites which claim to be able to identify AI-derived text in the majority of cases: for example, <https://www.turnitin.com/solutions/ai-writing>. In general, it is therefore advisable to deny testees internet access while doing a test. And if they are your own students, you can usually tell if the writing is not at the same level as written assignments you have received from them previously.

Assessing free writing is difficult. We need to check various aspects: accuracy, coherent organization, content and so on. How much weight should be given to each? Again, rubrics (parallel to those shown above for speaking) can help. There are also some online tools which can assess the overall level of a text by CEFR levels (for example, Cambridge's Write and Improve, at <https://writeandimprove.com>).

Compositions are probably the most common form of tests of writing skills at intermediate or advanced level. The student is given a topic, or sometimes a genre, communicative purpose and target audience and asked to write a composition of a set length.

Brief descriptions and dialogues can be used to test writing at elementary level. The student is given a picture to describe, or the beginning of a dialogue to continue with a set number of exchanges. Care has to be taken when selecting the picture or writing the beginning of a dialogue to limit the lexical and grammatical knowledge required to do the test.

13.6 Administering tests in class

In practice, most tests are actually run by the teacher in their own class. The test experience can be a stressful one for students: even those not badly affected by test anxiety may perform less well under test conditions, thus not providing a fair sample of their knowledge and abilities. It is important for students to feel that, although we have to assess their performance and will be as fair as we can in doing so, we are on their side and want them to do as well as possible.

Practical tips

- 1 **Inform your students about the test well in advance.** Don't suddenly announce the test a day or two before it, and don't do surprise tests. Tell learners exactly when it will be and how long it will take. Let them have enough time to prepare themselves, and review any material they need to.
- 2 **Allot some class time for preparation.** If the test is based on particular material, don't leave all the review for homework. Lead some focused review in lessons, and give some class time for individual preparation.
- 3 **Provide, or review, essential information about the test as you present it.** You may need to remind students about the test content, format and marking system before giving out the papers, and sometimes run through the instructions with them after doing so in order to make sure that everything is clear – as well as wishing them good luck!
- 4 **Check and return tests as soon as you can.** This is so that you can discuss specific points while the test is still fresh in the students' minds.
- 5 **Plan how to deal with those who finish early, or late.** The institution may have a policy as regards this point: to let early finishers leave, for example, or allow extra time for slower ones. If not, and it's up to you, you will need to plan your own management of this issue: by preparing extra work to keep the faster workers busy, for example.

Pause for thought

Regarding tip 5 above: in a situation you are familiar with, how do you think the issue of students who complete a test earlier or later than the others can, or should, be dealt with?

Element

Whatever strategy you use – a prepared task for the faster finishers, for example, or extra time for slower – it's important to let students know in advance what this will be in your classes. I add an extra optional section at the end of my tests for the more advanced students who tend to finish early, which they can do as much of as they can in the time, and which earns them extra bonus points. This enables me to make the main test shorter, so that the slower workers are more likely to finish.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What is the difference between *formative* and *summative* assessment?
- 2 What are some disadvantages of the test as an assessment tool?
- 3 What other assessment tools might be used in English courses?
- 4 What are some important criteria for the design or selection of test items?
- 5 What are the advantages and disadvantages of multiple-choice test items?
- 6 In what different ways might reading comprehension be assessed?
- 7 Suggest two problems with assessing speaking. What can help?
- 8 Suggest some ways we can mitigate test anxiety.

Further reading

- Chapelle, C. A. and Douglas, D. (2006). *Assessing Language through Computer Technology*. Cambridge University Press.
(Discusses practical issues associated with computer testing, and provides guidance for teachers wishing to use it)
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(Discusses the various methods of assessing language, with particular attention paid to alternative methods such as self-assessment and portfolio assessment)
- Hughes, A. and Hughes, J. (2000). *Testing for Language Teachers* (3rd Edition). Cambridge University Press.
(Criteria for good test design, an overview of test items and guidance on the testing of younger learners)
- McKay, P. (2006). *Assessing Young Language Learners*. Cambridge University Press.
(Practical ideas for assessing the language of young learners)
- Underhill, N. (1987). *Testing Spoken English*. Cambridge University Press.
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- Redstone, C., Clemenstone, T. and Cunningham, G. (2013). *face2face Intermediate Teacher's Book 2nd Edition*. Cambridge University Press.
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14 The syllabus

Overview

- 14.1 What is a syllabus? Components of the language syllabus, core and optional.
- 14.2 Types of language syllabus. Some main types of syllabuses used in English teaching, with examples.
- 14.3 The CEFR and language syllabuses. The influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages on modern syllabus design.
- 14.4 Using the syllabus. Different ways teachers use the syllabus in their teaching.

What is a syllabus?

Preliminary note: what I have here called a *syllabus* is sometimes called a *curriculum*, particularly when referring to one which has been adopted as the approved syllabus for a national education system.

A syllabus is basically a list: a document which presents information on what topics or content are to be covered, and in what order, usually in a specified course of study. With regard to English language syllabuses, it may present information on what is to be taught:

- In order to reach levels specified internationally (e.g., by the CEFR);
- In a national school system;
- In order to pass a particular examination (e.g., IELTS);
- In a specific course (no matter what materials are used);
- In a specific coursebook.

Syllabuses may be synthetic or analytic. *Synthetic syllabuses* provide a set of isolated language items (grammatical structures or lexical items, for example), which are then combined in the teaching process to create meaningful units that can be used in communication. *Analytic syllabuses* work the other way round: they describe communicative abilities, tasks or functions (how to convey simple information, for example); the particular language features are then taught as contributors to the effective performance of such components. It is common today for syllabuses to do both: see the multi-strand syllabus described on page 197. This is particularly noticeable in modern coursebooks, but also seen in those with a wider application. The syllabus for English in schools published by the Ministry of Education in Israel, for example, is laid out as a series of 'can-dos' relating to communicative abilities and aligned with the CEFR (see Section 3), but includes also a grammatical syllabus and a list of lexical items divided into bands for the different levels.

Basic features of a syllabus

It has clear objectives, usually explained in an introduction. These objectives are then used as the basis for selecting and ordering the components.

It is **comprehensive**. The actual components of the list may be, in a synthetic syllabus, content items (words, grammatical features, topics), or in an analytic one, process items (tasks) or communicative 'can-dos' (standards). In any case, the syllabus attempts to be comprehensive and cover as wide a range of the target items as possible.

It is laid out in a **pre-specified order**. The items are usually organized according to level, components that are considered easier or more essential earlier, and more difficult and important ones later. But there are other possibilities: for example, the items in a lexical syllabus may be listed, for convenience, alphabetically within each level (although this does not, of course, imply that the items should be taught in alphabetical order).

It is a **public document**. It can be read not only by teachers and materials writers who are expected to implement it, but also by the consumers (learners, their parents or employers) and the relevant authorities (inspectors, school principals), by other interested members of the public (researchers, teacher trainers). There is therefore the aspect of accountability: the whole of the syllabus are answerable to their target audiences for the quality of their document. Further components are displayed by some syllabuses and not others. Some define the time frame: that the syllabus should be completed within a certain number of hours, for example, or requiring that certain items should be dealt with in the first year, others in the second, etc. A particular approach or methodology may also be specified. Some may list recommended materials (coursebooks, visual materials or supplementary materials) for all or some of a course.

14.2 Types of language syllabus

A number of different kinds of syllabuses are, or have been, used in English language teaching: the main types are listed below. The last is perhaps the most common today: the others have been influential in the development of language syllabus design in general, and you may still occasionally come across them.

- 1 **The structural syllabus**. This is based on a list of grammatical structures and items, such as the present simple, definite and indefinite articles, comparison of adjectives. It is the most traditional syllabus type, still in use in many places. Coursebooks, when defining the syllabus on which they are based, almost always include a structural syllabus in a prominent position. The structural syllabus has been criticized on the assumption that it is likely to lead to an over-emphasis on accuracy at the expense of meaningful communication.
- 2 **The lexical syllabus**. This comprises a list of lexical items (e.g., *girl, happily*), sometimes including multi-word expressions (e.g., *in any case, call it a day*) and collocational links (for example, *take + a decision, hard + work*). It also includes grammatical items such as *that* or the suffix *-ing*, but relates to them in very much the same way as a lexical item. There is some debate over what the 'words' listed in a lexical syllabus should be, the two main types being *lemmas* or *word families* (see 6 Teaching vocabulary).

A compromise suggestion is to list lemmas for elementary or intermediate syllabuses and word families for the more advanced (Brown et al., 2021).

3 **The functional-notional syllabus**. *Notions* are concepts that language can describe. General notions may include things like *number, time, place and colour*. Specific notions look more like vocabulary items: *man, woman, afternoon*. *Functions*, in contrast, are things you can do with language: purposes or outcomes of a specific language use; examples include *identifying, denying, promising*. The functional-notional syllabus was an early attempt to create an appropriate syllabus for the communicative approach. The idea was to get away from a focus on correct forms and move towards the use of language to express meanings. Today, it is mainly used as part of multi-strand or task-based syllabuses (see below).

4 **The situational and topic-based syllabus**. The situational syllabus takes real-life contexts of language use as its basis: sections are headed by names of situations or locations, such as 'Eating a meal' or 'In school'. A variation of this, the topic-based syllabus, lists particular topics such as 'Animals' or 'The family'. In either case, a fairly clear set of vocabulary items, and sometimes grammatical features, is indicated, which may be specified. Both situational and topic-based syllabuses are particularly suitable for courses in English for specific purposes: those targeting areas such as tourism, business, etc.

5 **The content-based syllabus**. This is a syllabus largely associated with CLIL – content and language integrated learning – which will be discussed further in 16: Teaching content. The list of what is to be taught and learned is defined in terms of the subjects or skills which are being taught through English rather than English itself; and the language – whether grammar, lexis, pronunciation, functions, notions, or any other language forms and meanings – will be that which emerges as necessary in order to engage with the content. The teacher may in practice take time out to focus on language forms, but these will not be included as such in the syllabus.

6 **The task-based syllabus**. This consists of a series of communicative tasks, where *task* is defined as an activity with a clear communicative outcome, rather than a linguistic one. For example, 'Get your partner to draw a picture similar to the one you have in front of you,' would be a communicative task; 'Write five sentences using the present perfect describing things you have done,' would not. The tasks may be ordered and classified in various ways (Robinson, 2007), but the main two types are pedagogical (not necessarily similar to real-life, but leading to communicative interaction, like the picture-drawing one above) and real life (aiming to replicate authentic interactions), such as one that involves role-playing buyers and sellers in a market.

7 **The mixed or multi-strand syllabus**. Increasingly, modern syllabuses are combining different aspects in order to be as comprehensive and helpful as possible to teachers and learners. Many people have come to feel that one kind of syllabus is unlikely to answer the needs of all those involved in using it: the researchers, the education authorities or heads of institutions, the teachers, the materials writers, the assessors and, of course, the students themselves. On the one hand, syllabuses based on lists of language items did not answer the needs of those looking for more communicative and meaning-based components. On the other hand, practitioners and materials writers feel they do need also to know what actual language (grammar, vocabulary and so on) needs to be taught, and find it difficult to translate general definitions of communicative goals into practice in terms of the design of texts and tasks.

The influence of other aspects of the CEFR on syllabus design has not been as clear as the distinction into receptive and productive skills has been around for a while, and the concept of interpersonal and transactional interaction also predates the publication of the CEFR; these have probably received more validation from their position as basic CEFR divisions, and appear in many modern syllabuses. The 'mediation' category is hard to grasp, and has not been adopted to the same extent. Time will tell if it is to be a separate, substantial and teachable aspect of language use.

Then there are the 'can-do' descriptors of learner performance at the different levels of defining language proficiency. National and local authorities designing a new syllabus (often called 'curriculum' in these contexts) have frequently adopted such definitions. Even if these do not include the modal 'can', their main items are clearly modelled on the CEFR and take the form of performance objectives like, 'Listen and comprehend short and simple instructions used in classroom activities'. CEFR-based curricula have been introduced or adapted in other countries: Ecuador, Malaysia, Israel and many others.

Their success, however, has been mixed. This, in my view, is because, as stated at the beginning of this section, the descriptions of communicative abilities at specific levels does not constitute a syllabus, only what successful outcomes look like. And even these outcomes are sometimes rather vague: what, for example is a 'simple' text as referred to in the first paragraph of this section? In any case, knowing what an outcome is does not tell you what the learner needs to do in order to achieve it, or what the teacher needs to teach; and this is precisely the information that a good syllabus should provide. Syllabuses based on the CEFR, therefore, have often needed eventually to be supplemented: with grammatical or lexical syllabuses, or with other types suggested in the previous section. Tools have been developed which can help design such syllabuses. For example, the English Vocabulary Profile (www.englishprofile.org/wordlists) and the English Grammar Profile (www.englishprofile.org/english-grammar-profile) provide lists of lexical items and grammatical features allocated to each of the CEFR levels.

14.4

Using the syllabus

Many teachers work in institutions where the syllabus is determined by an authority: a national curriculum, for example, determined by the Ministry of Education for use in state schools, or a syllabus for English for Academic Purposes established by a university.

How might you use an approved syllabus? Would you keep to it carefully, consulting it regularly? Or would you refer to it only rarely, to check yourself? Or would you ignore it? Here are statements by five teachers, describing how they use an approved syllabus.

Anna: The syllabus of my language school is very comprehensive. It includes grammar, vocabulary, functions, notions, situations, and it refers to material I can use. I use it all the time and could not do without it. When preparing a class or series of classes, I go first to the syllabus, decide what to teach next according to its programme, plan how to combine and schedule the components I have selected, and take the relevant books or materials from the library as I need them.

Paula: I teach English for Academic Purposes in a university. There is a syllabus approved by the institution, rather like Anna's, but we don't have to use it. I simply ignore it, because I prefer to do my own thing, based on the needs of my students. I use materials and activities from different sources (books for teachers, textbooks, supplementary materials, literature) to create a rich and varied programme that is flexible enough to be adapted to student needs during the course.

María: I teach in a state school and was trained in a state institution. They made us read the national curriculum in my teacher-training course, but I haven't looked at it since. What for? I use an approved coursebook which lays out all the language I have to teach, as well as giving me texts, exercises and ideas for activities. I assume the Ministry would not have authorized the book if it didn't follow the curriculum, so there's no reason for me to double-check if I'm teaching the right things.

Lilly: I have the syllabus, and look at it occasionally, but mostly I work from the coursebook that my school chose for the class. It's just that sometimes I get a bit fed up with the coursebook and want to do something different. So I do my own thing for a bit, and then use the syllabus as a retrospective checklist, to make sure I'm still reasonably on target with the content. After all, I'm being employed to teach a certain syllabus, so I can't stray too far.

David: I'm a new teacher, just qualified, and not very confident of my knowledge of English. The school can't afford books for all the children, so I'm supposed to base my lessons on the syllabus, and create my own lessons and materials. But the syllabus isn't very helpful to me: it's all about general standards ('The pupils at this level will be able to hold simple conversations'), and I really need to know what language to teach! Luckily, I have very helpful colleagues.

Pause for thought

If you are teaching, with which of the teachers above do you empathize with most? And why?

Comment

I taught in a public school in a country where English is not normally spoken outside the classroom. There is a national curriculum, and the textbooks used in the schools have to be approved by the Ministry of Education; so my position was nearest to that of María. I did sometimes look through the curriculum to check if there were things my textbook didn't cover that I might add.

In general, how teachers use the syllabus varies very widely between different countries and institutions, and depends on financial resources as well as on teaching approach. In situations where there are enough resources to invest in creating very detailed syllabuses and buying a wide variety of teaching materials, teachers may find it most effective to work mainly from the syllabus, using specific materials as they need them, as Anna does.

In other relatively affluent settings, there may be a policy of allowing teachers complete freedom in designing their teaching programme. In these cases, the syllabus may be non-existent or ignored, and teachers like Joseph may develop new, independent programmes working mainly on their preferences and students' needs. A competent and creative teacher teaching/learning experience. However, in most contexts the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Apart from an enormous amount of work for the teacher, the abandonment of a carefully pre-planned syllabus may result in gaps in the language content. This may not matter so much in a situation where the students are already very advanced, or if the students are studying in an English-speaking country and have plenty of exposure to the language outside the classroom. In other situations, however, it may make it very difficult to plan a systematic and effective teaching programme. Also, the lack of clear structure may make it difficult for teachers or learners to feel a sense of progress or evaluate learning outcomes. When one coursebook per student can be afforded, the book tends to take over the function of a syllabus, particularly if (as in the case of Maria) the book has been recommended for use by the same authority that drew up the syllabus. Here, the use or non-use of the syllabus to supplement the book depends on the personality of the teacher and their willingness to put in extra effort – as exemplified by Lily.

There are some situations, however, like David's, where even one book per student is an unknown luxury. In such cases, the teacher needs to rely heavily on the syllabus. If, as in David's case, the syllabus does not provide very helpful guidance, then the teacher has to resort to the help of colleagues or their own creativity. Note that sometimes the syllabus has an extra role to play: as a source of information and reassurance for teachers who are not confident of their own knowledge of English. In such cases, a multi-strand syllabus is very helpful.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What is a syllabus?
- 2 What are some basic features of all syllabuses?
- 3 Can you recall one or two optional features of a syllabus?
- 4 What may a multi-strand syllabus include?
- 5 In what kinds of situations may teachers prefer to work directly from the syllabus when planning their courses?
- 6 In what situations might the syllabus not be very helpful?
- 7 What other function(s), besides helping to plan a course, can the syllabus perform?

Further reading

Brumfit, C. J. (Ed.) (1984). *General English Syllabus Design (ELT Documents 118)*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

(A still very relevant collection of articles on principles of language syllabuses; particularly useful papers by Brumfit and Stern)

Curriculum Development in Language Teaching (2nd Edition).

(Comprehensive coverage of the main issues in syllabus design)

Curriculum Development in Language Teaching (2nd Edition).
Cambridge University Press.

(The stages of syllabus design, from needs assessment to evaluation, with discussion questions)

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15

Teaching/learning materials

Overview

- 15.1 The coursebook: approach, components, presentation.
- 15.2 How necessary is a coursebook? Advantages and disadvantages when selecting or deciding how to use it.
- 15.3 Evaluating the coursebook. Some criteria for evaluating a coursebook.
- 15.4 Using course materials. Some suggestions for how to add to, shorten or change course materials to make them more appropriate for a particular class.
- 15.5 Other materials and resources. Various kinds of materials that can supplement those provided by a coursebook.

15.1

The coursebook: approach, components, presentation

The most common type of teaching/learning materials used in English teaching worldwide is the *coursebook* or *textbook*. Here, I'll make a distinction between these two terms. *Coursebook* will be used to designate the book that covers all the texts, tasks and language points that will be taught in a course. *Textbook*, in contrast, is a more general term: it could refer to a coursebook, but could also be a book of grammar exercises, or of reading texts with comprehension questions.

Both are most frequently used in the form of conventional paper books. Online or digital course materials are on the increase, but the evidence is that a substantial majority of students prefer paper textbooks, at least at university level (Baron et al., 2017), and this may well be true of younger students as well.

Approach

A coursebook follows – or sometimes only claims to follow – a certain approach to language teaching and learning, leading to a preferred methodology, which is often explained in the introduction or the blurb on the back cover. This approach may or may not be implemented in the content of the book. For example, many modern coursebooks claim to follow the communicative approach, but in fact much, if not most, of their space is taken up with activities whose main aim is getting the language right – vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation – rather than engaging learners in communicative tasks.

Components

The main components in any coursebook are:

- the syllabus, usually laid out as a table of contents at the beginning;

reading and listening texts with following comprehension work;

reading and speaking tasks;

explanations of language points (usually grammar);

grammar and vocabulary exercises;

lists of new vocabulary.

It may also provide:

• transcripts of listening comprehension texts;

• a glossary of vocabulary items at the end of the book;

• extra practice exercises on grammar and vocabulary, (sometimes in a separate workbook);

• a teacher's book, or teacher's guide, in a separate book;

• a website, with further guidance or materials.

Presentation

An important aspect of the coursebook is how it is presented: what the page looks like, how easy it is to identify headings and navigate to different pages and texts. Most coursebooks these days are full colour, with plenty of pictures. Pages are often divided into two columns in order to get as much material as possible on each page.

Pause for thought

Have a look at a coursebook you know. Check out its approach, components and presentation. Did you find any components not listed here? Was anything missing? Do you have any particular comments?

Comment

I looked at a locally published textbook for use in schools (A2-B1-level teenagers)¹. Its syllabus is laid out using 'can-dos' modelled on the CERF (see 14 The syllabus), under the headings of reading, listening, speaking, writing, collaborative task, vocabulary and grammar. Its blurb on the back cover shows how it is coordinated with the national curriculum, which is CERF-based, but there is no indication of an explicit approach to language teaching: perhaps this is taken for granted in the local context. All the components mentioned above are there: vocabulary is particularly prominent, with lists of words and many vocabulary exercises. The page layout is spaced and easy to navigate, with a lot of pictures and coloured headings.

¹Modre, S. (2021). *Teamwork*. Eric Cohen Books.

15.2 How necessary is a coursebook?

Pause for thought

In the context of a teaching situation you are familiar with, whether as teacher or learner, what would your own answer be to the question in the heading of this section?

Comment

In my own teaching situation (public schools within a state education system), I could not have managed without the coursebook: I simply did not have the time to search for appropriate texts and tasks to give my students. Even today with the enormous quantity and variety of resources quickly and easily available online, it would take too long to search, copy and adapt. So my answer is: it was absolutely necessary, for me. But this does not mean that I taught only and fully what was in the book; and I allowed myself considerable liberties with how and how much, I used it. So I could do my own thing occasionally, knowing that I had a structured programme to return to. It is my experience that the students also prefer to have a coursebook. The classes which I have tried to teach using a selection of materials from different sources have complained of a sense of lack of purpose. Interestingly, they also said that they felt that their studies – and, by implication, they themselves – were not taken seriously. It seems that having a coursebook may carry a certain prestige.

Advantages and disadvantages

In some places, it is taken for granted that coursebooks are used as the basis for courses. In others, they may not be used at all, and the teacher bases their teaching on a syllabus, or their own programme based on an evaluation of the learners' needs, using personally selected teaching materials. A third situation is a compromise, where a coursebook is used selectively, not necessarily in sequence, and is extensively supplemented by other materials.

Below is a list of advantages and disadvantages of using a coursebook, whether print or digital.

Advantages

- **Framework.** A coursebook provides a clear framework. Teachers and students know where they are going and what is coming next, so there is a sense of structure and progress.
- **Syllabus.** In many places, the coursebook is used as a syllabus. If it is followed systematically, an appropriate and graded selection of content (language items or other aspects such as topics or tasks) will be covered (see 14 The syllabus).
- **Ready-made texts and tasks.** The coursebook provides texts and learning tasks which are likely to be of an appropriate level for most of the class. This saves time for the teacher, who would otherwise have to prepare their own.

Guidance. For inexperienced teachers, the coursebook can give useful guidance and support; it can even fulfil a teacher training/development function in that it provides ideas on how to plan and teach lessons, as well as explanations of language points and suggestions for how to activate students.

Learner autonomy. The student can use the coursebook to learn new material, and review and monitor their own progress autonomously. A student without a coursebook is likely to be much more teacher-dependent.

Disadvantages of a coursebook

- **Inadequacy.** Every individual class has their own learning needs. No single coursebook can possibly meet all of these satisfactorily.
- **Irrelevance, lack of interest.** The topics in the coursebook may not be relevant or interesting for your class. And they may date rapidly, whereas materials you choose yourself can be more up to date.
- **Cultural inappropriateness.** The content of a coursebook may be culturally inappropriate, which not only may make it irrelevant or uninteresting, but can also cause discomfort or even offence.
- **Limited range of level.** Coursebooks target a particular level and rarely cater for the wide range of levels of ability or proficiency that exist in most classes.
- **Possible negative effect on teaching.** Teachers may follow the coursebook uncritically and be discouraged from using their own initiative: they may find themselves functioning merely as mediators of its content instead of as teachers in their own right.

Further comments and conclusion

Through my own teaching, I have come to appreciate the advantages of using a coursebook as described in my comment on the **Pause for thought** on the previous page. But the experience of other teachers is different. Meddings and Thornbury (2009), for example, relate the story of a teacher who found himself bereft of all textbooks (and with no online resources available), teaching a programme based only on the needs of his students, and his attempts to address those needs – with excellent results. The Dogme approach, described in the same book, supports a materials-light approach: using materials as an auxiliary resource, certainly, but not allowing them to dominate or dictate the process of classroom teaching, which is essentially based on a dialogue between teacher and learner(s).

Coursebooks are certainly widely used – but this may not mean that they are necessary. On the positive side, their widespread use may be taken as evidence that coursebooks are useful or even important for effective teaching. More negative reasons could be that teachers are too lazy or unprofessional to make their own materials, or that the publishers are very good at marketing, or even that the authority that approves their purchase and use sees them as a means of controlling how learners are taught.

In any case, coursebooks are not about to disappear any time soon, and for many, the question in the heading of this section is purely academic. If your course is built on a coursebook, for whatever reason, the most important issue that you are likely to be interested in is not whether or not to use it, but how (see Section 4).

15.3 Evaluating the coursebook

If you are to use a coursebook, whether as the basis of your course or as an occasional resource, it is worth thinking about how you recognize a good one, and why you might reject or substantially adapt it. In other words, what are your main criteria for evaluation? These criteria may be general (suitable for any language-teaching materials) or specific (looking at the appropriateness of a set of materials for a certain course or group of learners). An example of a general criterion might be: 'clear layout and font', or 'positive regular review or test sections'. A specific criterion for a class of younger learners might be: 'attractive and colourful illustrations', or for a class of medical students: 'vocabulary and texts relevant to medicine'. The criteria suggested below are my own, but they are ideas suggested in a number of books and articles on the subject (see some useful sources in **Further reading** on page 219). They apply both to print and digital materials.

Read the list of criteria for evaluating language-learning coursebooks below. If you do not want to do the task in **Pause for thought**, then skip to the following **Comment**.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the list of criteria below. How important do you feel each criterion is for selecting a coursebook? Under 'Importance' use the following symbols to make your opinion: ✓✓ for 'essential' (without this I wouldn't use the coursebook); ✓ for 'quite important'; ? for 'not sure'; ✗ for 'not important'; ✗✗ for 'totally unimportant' (it wouldn't make any difference to me if it was there or not). Then, optionally, add further criteria you feel are significant, and note their importance.

Criterion	Importance
1 The methodological approach and objectives are clearly explained in the introduction, and implemented in the material.	
2 The approach is culturally acceptable to the target students.	
3 There is an explicit syllabus, which is covered systematically.	
4 The layout is clear and attractive, and the print is easy to read. If digital, then it is easy to navigate from page to page.	
5 The texts and tasks are interesting.	
6 The texts and tasks are varied in level and style, afford learning opportunities for different learner levels, learning styles, interests, etc.	
7 Instructions are clear.	✓
8 There are review and test sections.	
9 There are pronunciation and spelling explanations and practice.	
10 There are vocabulary explanations and practice.	

11 There are grammar explanations and practice.	
12 There are tasks that activate the students in listening, speaking, reading and writing.	
13 The material encourages learners to develop their own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning.	
14 There is adequate guidance for the teacher (teacher's guide, or teacher's notes).	
15 There are audio recordings available.	
16 There are visual materials available: posters, video, flashcards, etc.	
17 There is a coursebook website, with guidance and supplementary materials available.	
18 The material is easily available and not too expensive.	

Comment

1 **Approach and objectives.** This is important, but check that the objectives expressed in the introduction to the coursebook are in fact implemented. Sometimes they are not!

2 **Cultural aspects.** How important this is depends on your teaching context. Some communities are more sensitive than others.

3 **Syllabus.** Essential. Check what kind of a syllabus the coursebook has. This should be clear from the table of contents at the beginning (see 1.4 **The syllabus**). Does it provide coverage of all the items you think are essential? And are these items in fact covered in the material itself? You may need to make sure that the coursebook follows syllabuses which are relevant to your teaching situation: a national syllabus, for example, or one relevant to an international exam like IELTS.

4 **Layout.** This is vitally important. The material has to be not only pleasing to the eye, but also clear and navigable: both you and your students need to be able to find your way around it quickly and smoothly. The texts should be very clear and readable (so it is not a good idea to have overly decorative fonts, or pictures behind text, which make reading difficult, particularly for anyone suffering from dyslexia). The same applies to digital material: you also need to be able to move around it easily, and any hyperlinks need to work readily.

- 5 **Interest.** I would rank this as quite important. On the one hand, using imaginative teaching can make even the most boring texts and tasks interesting (and conversely bad teaching can kill the most interesting material that you will enjoy using, adapting as necessary for your class).
- 6 **Varied learning opportunities.** Quite important. This quality is one that is often missing in coursebooks. There should be some texts which are at different levels. Tasks should be designed to allow for performance at style, the type of participation or learning strategies they require, etc. The lack of such variation is not a reason to reject the book, but if it exists it is a positive feature.
- 7 **Clear instructions.** Essential. For a monolingual class of beginners, this may mean providing instructions and explanations in the L1.
- 8 **Reviews and tests.** The inclusion of these features may or may not be important to you. Review exercises and tests are sometimes provided on the course website rather than in the main materials themselves. Often, however, you will prefer to create your own. What you actually teach is never exactly what the coursebook provides: you may skip some bits and add others. A component is probably less essential than some of the others.
- 9 **Pronunciation and spelling.** How much emphasis is put on these depends on the approach in your teaching situation, so the evaluation here will also vary. Pronunciation problems can often be dealt with as they come up. Spelling is surprisingly rarely taught or practised in many coursebooks, so you may need to initiate work on it yourself.
- 10 **Vocabulary.** This is an essential component. The materials should provide plenty of vocabulary expansion and review activities.
- 11 **Grammar.** In many contexts, substantial grammar coverage is required, but in others it is not. So the evaluation is likely to range from 'essential' to 'not sure'.
- 12 **Listening, speaking, reading and writing.** Essential. Tasks activating the four skills are the main basis for communicative practice. The coursebook should provide texts and tasks that promote fluency and accuracy in the four skills in communicative situations, as well as opportunities for students to do mixed-skills activities.
- 13 **Learner independence.** Whether the materials encourage learner independence and autonomy is quite important, but it is a very difficult aspect to evaluate. Some things to look for are computer-based tasks which enable self-checking, and tasks that require initiative on the part of the students.

- 14 **Teacher's guides.** Teacher's guides are quite important, particularly – but not only – for novice teachers. The teacher's materials provide not only keys to exercises and audioscripts, but also useful tips on ways of dealing with texts and tasks.
- 15 **Audio and video recordings.** This is an essential component for oral input and listening comprehension. It's quite important that at least some of these recordings should be video.
- 16 **Visual materials.** Visual materials such as posters and flashcards, whether on paper or displayed digitally, are essential for classes of younger learners. They provide an enjoyable break from the printed pages of coursebooks. They focus attention and are likely to improve learning. For older or more advanced classes, they may be useful but less essential.
- 17 **Website.** The course website is a fairly standard component, even if the main book is paper. Often the audio/video recordings and teacher's guide can be found there, as well as supplementary exercises, tests and texts, and links to other useful websites. It is not absolutely necessary, but it may be quite an important added resource.
- 18 **Availability.** This is perhaps obvious, but essential. The most desirable coursebook in the world cannot be used if it is too expensive for your institution or students to afford, or if it is not easily available in your country.

Pause for thought

Have a look at a textbook you have used yourself, either as a teacher or as a learner. How would you evaluate it, using the above criteria?

Comment

Very often, even if your evaluation of many of the points above is fairly negative, you may have no choice, as a teacher, as to whether to use the book or not: the institution or some other authority may have chosen it for you. The evaluation, however, can give you a solid basis for deciding which aspects of it to supplement or adapt. Some ideas on adaptation are shown in the next section.

Using course materials

This section applies both to standard coursebooks, as discussed above, and to other kinds of materials, such as grammar or reading comprehension supplementary textbooks, worksheets, websites providing any of these, audio and video recordings, and more.

When looking through materials we are going to use in class, we need to be aware of what they do well and what is missing or could be improved. For example, if the coursebook does not provide enough reading texts or grammar practice, we might want to supplement it by using free-access material available online. But problems with specific components that you want to use within teaching units can only be solved by you yourself in the classroom. You may find it necessary to make substantial changes, deletions and additions. Here is a sample of problems that teachers in particular situations might encounter with coursebook texts or tasks. Note that no criticism is intended of the extracts in themselves; it's just that they may not, for various reasons, address the needs of a particular group of students.

Using the materials: some issues

Paolo (teaching in a primary school in Italy)
I have this grammar exercise in my book.

- 1 Venice is (beautiful) than London.
- 2 This school is (big) than that one.
- 3 This was (bad) day of my life!
- 4 Which is (heavy): a pound or a kilo?
- 5 Which supermarket has the (cheap) vegetables?
- 6 She was (popular) singer in the festival.
- 7 For me, mathematics is (difficult) than English.

I feel it's important to do lots of grammar practice with my students, but exercises like this one are rather boring: the students get fed up doing them, and they're pretty meaningless. Finally, they're too short: they don't give enough opportunities for (meaningful) practice.

Emilia (teaching in a private language school in Brazil).
I used this as a reading comprehension text.

Who was Robin Hood? Nobody knows. In the film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Robin was rich, but this probably wasn't true. We know that he was a popular hero in the 13th century. It's possible the real man was born before then. Who were the Merry Men? Little John and Will Scarlet were famous Merry Men. Who were the Merry of this group of men (and women). Why were Robin Hood and his Merry Men famous? They were famous for robbing rich people. But Robin Hood and his Merry Men weren't robbers – the money was for poor people.

(adapted from *Active Grammar 1*, Davis, F. and Rimmer, W. 2011)
It's interesting, and my students relate well to the topic, but it's a bit too short and easy for my class of 12-year-old students. They need more challenge.

Hugo (teaching in a university in France).

I wanted to get my adult students (about B2 level) to talk, and my coursebook suggested this activity:

- 1 Read the following situations. What would you have done?
- 2 I saw my best friend stealing something in the supermarket. Of course I didn't tell anyone – she's my friend.
- 3 A colleague in my office lied about the company accounts. I was the only one who knew he was lying. I sent my manager an anonymous note.
- 4 In our final exam at university, I saw a student in our year look at answers on a small piece of paper. I didn't say anything. It wasn't anything to do with me.

(from *Empower Upper-intermediate/B2 Student's Book 2nd Edition*, by Doff, A. et al. 2022)
But after they'd done the task (each said what they would have done), they stopped talking. How can I get them to talk more?

Iakumi (teaching in a boys' school in Japan)
I have this text in my book:

Tackling obesity

Obesity is becoming a major problem in many parts of the world. In Britain alone, there was a 30% increase in the number of people being admitted to hospital with problems related to obesity last year. An estimated 40% of British adults are overweight.

One way of tackling obesity is to eat less fat and to eat more healthy. An average man needs around 2,500 calories per day, while an average woman needs around 2,000 calories.

We need a balanced diet which consists of a variety of foods in order to maintain a healthy weight. A healthy diet should include approximately 35% fruit and vegetables; 35% carbohydrates, such as bread, rice, potatoes and pasta (or other starchy food); and 15% dairy products like milk and cheese; 10% proteins, for example meat, fish, eggs and beans; and only around 5% should be sweet foods – mainly cakes or biscuits – especially those that are high in fat and sugar.

In many countries, nutritional values are shown on food packaging. In Britain, there is a traffic light system to show more clearly how good or bad a particular food product is. Red next to 'sugar', for example, means that the product is high in that particular item; yellow means the product is neither high nor low in sugar; and green means the product only has a small amount of sugar in it. The traffic light system helps people to know immediately whether the food product is good for them.

Some people argue that foods that are high in fat, such as pizza and potato chips, and those high in refined sugar, like chocolate and sweets, should be taxed. This would make junk food too expensive for people to buy in large quantities. In Denmark, there is now a tax on products that contain more than 2.3% of saturated fat. This has led to a 20% reduction in the amount of fat in Danish food, because fast-food companies are rich and powerful.

The role of advertising should not be forgotten. Advertising junk food at times when children are watching TV was banned in Malaysia in 2007. This was designed to better protect them from the influence of advertising while they learn how to choose between treats and foods that are good for them. On the other hand, there have also been TV education campaigns to encourage people to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. It has been estimated that if people ate five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, 2.7 million lives per year could be saved.

Governments need to promote healthy eating and the importance of five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. Similarly, they need to fight obesity by discouraging people from eating fat and sugar. They must also encourage people to be more active by providing opportunities for everyone to get fit, no matter how rich or poor they may be. If governments can change people's habits, the world will be a healthier place in the future.

(from *Unlock 3 Student's Book 2nd Edition* by Westbrook, C., Baker, L. and Sowton, C. 2021)

The topic is quite interesting, but it's too difficult: some of the vocabulary is really advanced (*obesity*, for example), and the text is far too long.

Pause for thought

Before reading on ... What would you suggest to these teachers? What could they do with the tasks or texts in order to address the issues they bring up?

Comment

Adapting material from a coursebook means freeing ourselves from the assumption that materials should be used in the way the author seems to have intended, and allowing ourselves to change the instructions, or even the actual text, so that they are accessible to, and provide for more learning by, our students. Your ideas are probably based on such strategies, as are my suggestions below.

Paolo: boring, meaningless and too-short grammar exercises.
Here are some ideas for Paolo which will help add interest and length. Probably it's a good idea to do the exercise once very quickly as is, and then do one or more of the following:

- Tell students to close their books and try to recall all seven of the completed sentences practice – and it's actually meaningful, too, because as a rule we don't remember things that are meaningless. If they remember them, they probably understand them, too.
- For any sentence(s) students choose: tell them to ignore the adjective in brackets, and suggest any other comparative or superlative adjectives that make sense with the rest of the sentence. For example, the first sentence could be 'Venice is warmer than London' extra, more interesting, practice.
- Again, for any sentence(s) students choose: tell them to ignore the sentence endings, and invent their own, using comparatives or superlatives: so sentence 5 might be 'Which supermarket has the freshest fruit?' This adds meaning, more practice and is more interesting.
- Ask students to change selected statements (it doesn't work for questions) in whatever way they like in order to make them true for them. So for sentence 7, for example, they might say 'For me, mathematics is more difficult than Italian.' This is still practising comparative and superlative of adjectives, but adding more practice and a personal aspect.
- Tell students to ignore all the sentences, except for the adjective in brackets, and invent sentences using that adjective in the comparative or superlative to make true sentences. (Or, for fun, false sentences!) Again, you get more, and more meaningful and interesting, practice.

Paolo: short, easy reading passage

This is indeed quite an easy text, though you might need to teach your students words like *lauder*, *merry* (note that *merry* is a relatively rare word, a bit archaic, but *lauder* more useful). Some things you might do to make it more challenging are:

- Give students five minutes to work on their own, inserting as many adjectives and adverbs as they can in the passage. Then share the results. This immediately makes the passage longer and more advanced.
- Tell students to take pairs of simple sentences from the text, and combine them into one sentence; or a pair of parallel clauses, and combine them into one. They can change the wording as necessary. For example, 'In the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Robin was rich, but this probably wasn't true,' might be changed to 'Although in the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Robin was rich, this probably wasn't true.' This adds more advanced grammar.
- Send students to the internet to find out as much as they can about Robin Hood, write notes, and share the information they have found in the following lesson, either orally or in writing.
- Display the text on the board and invite students to insert whole phrases or sentences of at least three words, wherever they like, provided they make sense. This can easily be done if you have digital text – and is feasible even using handwriting on a whiteboard. If students have done the internet research, as suggested above, then the insertions could relate to what they have found out.
- Select specific words from the text (for example, *hero*, *real*, *rich*, *popular*, etc.), and tell students for homework to find out from dictionaries, thesauri or by searching online as many other words of similar meaning as they can for each.

Hugo: they stop talking.

The basic issue that students are asked to talk about is an interesting one, but the task invites only one response from each participant, which may or may not develop into a general discussion – in Hugo's class, it obviously didn't.

Here are two adaptations that could help, both of which require consensus and are therefore more likely to get the student to continue the discussion beyond initial responses.

- Delete the last sentence (or two sentences in the third bullet point), leaving only the description of the dishonest behaviour. Then tell students they need to agree on a new final sentence – what 'I' did in response – which should express their own agreed ideas on an appropriate response by the writer.
- Leave the passages as they are, but change the task. The group of students are the editorial team of a website which provides advice to people who write in with their problems. The writer in each case has written to say they aren't sure they responded rightly, and to ask the team for their response and advice. The team has to agree on the wording of a short letter in response.

Takumi: long, difficult passage

Takumi mentions two problems here: vocabulary and length.

Vocabulary

- Don't try to preteach all previously unknown vocabulary before reading – that would just overwhelm and discourage the students. They need to discover the rest of the text (such as, in this case, *obesity, tackle, carbohydrate*).
- Use the title of the article to initiate a discussion of the topic. Such a discussion may well throw up more useful vocabulary, and awareness of the issues to be discussed may make understanding the main text easier when they come to it.
- If you have a digital version of the text, then before presenting the passage, delete the difficult bits wherever you can without altering the basic message, and present the text the first time without them. Present the full text later.

Length

- Read the text bit by bit, so that the students are not faced with the entire text at one session. In the first lesson, work only on the first few sentences, perhaps simplified as suggested above, teaching new vocabulary as necessary. Challenge students to predict what more information will be provided later in this report; then continue reading, working on each paragraph on its own before progressing to the next.
- When you have finished working through the entire passage, read it aloud to the students again, to familiarize further.
- Only after the students know the basic content and sequence of argument of the simplified passage, let them read the original with the deleted items reinstated, and work on these as necessary.

Bottom line

The coursebook provides you with useful texts and tasks which you can use as the basis for your teaching programme. But that is essentially what it is: a good basis. The coursebook authors do not know your class: you do. You are the best person to decide how much of the material to use, and how. Be selective and critical, using your own professional judgement to decide where it needs to be changed and where it does not. As the examples above show, coursebook materials can be adapted (sometimes quite drastically) in order to create appropriate, learning-rich and interesting activities for your class.

15.5**Other materials and resources**

Whether or not you are using a coursebook, you will sooner or later want to resort to other types of material to enrich your teaching.

Reference books

In spite of the fact that online dictionaries, thesauri and grammars are used a lot, I find that I often also look up language items in my print editions, particularly the thesaurus. You probably need both.

The main type of reference book is, of course, the dictionary. A monolingual English dictionary such as the *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*, for example, or *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is traditionally seen as preferable to bilingual. Personally, I prefer to send students to look up words in bilingual ones: it's quicker and in many ways more reliable. Where the monolingual dictionary comes in useful is in vocabulary-expansion activities: sending students to look up words they know, for example, in order to learn more about them. Other useful reference books are the thesaurus (e.g., *Rogert's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*) and a good teacher's grammar (I usually use Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage*).

Textbooks

You will find it useful to have a variety of English-teaching textbooks on your shelves, but not stored digitally. These could include coursebooks designed for other courses, but also books focusing on particular aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, style and so on. If you are designing your own materials for a course, these will be invaluable as resources to dip into; or they can be used to supplement a coursebook where you feel something is missing or inadequately covered.

Teacher handbooks

Teacher handbooks are collections of practical suggestions for classroom activities to promote language learning. There are an enormous number of them available, as well as websites that provide ideas for lessons or individual activities. They are, however of very variable quality, and probably most of them not appropriate for your needs: they may focus on a specific student population which may not have much in common with yours, or suggest ideas that are not practicable in your classes. Searching for useful material can take a lot of time. Look for books or online resources coming from reputable publishers (the *Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers*, for example) or well-known organizations such as TESOL. Take every opportunity to browse through the teacher handbooks at teachers' conferences or in bookshops, and ask experienced colleagues which handbooks they have found useful.

Books and simplified readers for extensive reading

The importance of extensive reading has already been discussed in 10 Teaching reading. A library of suitable books is therefore essential for any institution where English is taught. It's not advisable to base this on online material, since even today it appears that most people prefer to use conventional books for reading for pleasure. There should be plenty of simplified readers, fiction and non-fiction, at different levels as well as unsimplified books for more advanced learners. Getting a group of students to read such books regularly is easier said than done, as many experienced teachers will testify. It requires ongoing monitoring of book borrowing and returning, and constant investment

in new books. However, it is certainly worthwhile: the expense is relatively small, and the benefits for language learning are substantial.

Worksheets and test papers

Teachers very often prepare worksheets for their students with extra reading or language practice, as well as class tests. It's true that there is an enormous number of worksheets and tests available on the internet: the problem is that, as with suggestions for classroom material discussed above, it takes a lot of searching to find what you want, and the worksheets you eventually find may need further adaptation before you can use it. Worksheets and tests prepared by teachers for classes within the institution, on the other hand, are likely to be useful also to other teachers in the same institution later. So it is worth storing both digital and paper forms of such materials for future use by others.

Pictures and other graphic material

Pictures are invaluable, particularly (though not only) for younger learners. The time is gone when teachers used to spend hours leafing through glossy magazines and colour supplements of newspapers to find suitable pictures: today, we can find and download all the pictures we need at the click of a mouse. These can then be glued onto card, or even laminated if they are to be used repeatedly, and filed. It is, of course, possible to display digital pictures on a projector or interactive whiteboard, or send them to students' own digital devices: but paper materials have the advantage that they can be easily handled, moved and exchanged rather than stuck to a computer screen. Bottom line: there is a place for both.

Corpora and corpus-based resources

It is very useful to have some of the major corpora readily available on the institution's computer system: to check out the frequency of a particular word, or how a vocabulary item collocates with other words, or in which varieties of English a particular word is more, or less, common. One useful source is *English Corpora* (www.english-corpora.org) which provides COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), BNC (the British National Corpus), GloWbe (the Global Web-based English), and others. Some useful online corpus-based resources are:

- Sketch Engine (sketchengine.eu), a very reader-friendly, quick way of finding out the frequency of a given word, its contexts of use and most common collocations;
- Vocabulary Profilers, which can identify the frequency of words in any given text (see 5 Texts, Section 4 for more details);
- Google Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>), which shows you whether a word, or phrase, is becoming more, or less, widely used over time.

Some writers on ELT have suggested that students be invited to check out such issues themselves by having direct recourse to a corpus, in what is called DDL (data-driven learning). There have been some good results in terms of learning outcomes (e.g., Lee et al., 2019). On

the other hand, the time taken to access information by studying a corpus is much longer than the time it would take for the learners to get the same information directly from a teacher or by looking it up online. It is doubtful whether the added learning value is worth the investment in time and effort.

Other digital resources available online

For a detailed discussion of these, see 18 Digital technology and online teaching.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What are some components that are very likely to be found in all coursebooks?
- 2 Can you think of at least three arguments in favour of using a coursebook, and three against?
- 3 What are some key criteria to use if you need to select a new coursebook?
- 4 What sorts of things can be done to improve a textbook grammar exercise that is boring and does not provide enough practice?
- 5 What might be done to make a difficult text easier for the class to cope with?
- 6 What are some important teaching materials and resources other than the coursebook?

Further reading

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(Various aspects of the design and use of materials, from the teacher's perspective)

Mishan, F. and Timms, I. (2015). *Materials Development for TESOL*. Edinburgh University Press. (Mainly targeting the materials designer; aspects of design and processes of production and evaluation)

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(A collection of articles about different aspects of materials development and use)

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16 Teaching content

Overview

- 16.1 **Different kinds of content.** The different types of subject matter included in English courses.
- 16.2 **Cultural content.** Various kinds of cultural content, and the fostering of intercultural competence.
- 16.3 **Teaching subject matter through English: CUL and EMI.** Associated issues and some guidelines on implementation.
- 16.4 **Literature as a component of the English course.** Advantages and disadvantages of the inclusion of literature in the course.
- 16.5 **Underlying messages.** Checking the underlying values-based or cultural implications of teaching materials.

Different kinds of content

By *content* I mean the subject matter that texts or tasks engage with, as distinct from the target language features, such as grammar and vocabulary. Here are some samples:

- **Zero or trivial content.** Bland, fairly neutral characters and events; superficially interesting topics with no cultural or other information or connection with real-world issues: for example, sentences about a fictional 'John and Mary' doing everyday activities; descriptions of conventional families; trivial anecdotes.
- **The students themselves.** Exploration of students' own experiences, knowledge, opinions and feelings: for example, activities that ask students to write about someone they know, or compare tastes in food and drink.
- **The local environment.** Treatment of institutions, people, places, events, etc. from the students' own town, country or background: for example, Greek students might discuss places they would recommend that tourists should visit in Greece.
- **Moral, educational, political or social issues.** Presentation of topics showing different points of view, and encouraging students to express opinions: for example, an article describing a social conflict, or a dilemma to which students suggest a solution.
- **An academic subject.** Topics based on other subjects on the school or university curriculum, such as science or history. In some cases, an entire school subject, or an entire university course, may be taught in English (for a more detailed discussion, see Section 3).

- **Occupation-linked content.** Subjects relevant to a particular area of employment, for example, business, tourism or medicine.
- **The English-speaking countries.** Discussion of institutions, etc. from countries where English is the predominant language. Materials might cover British or American history, culture and customs, famous people, etc.
- **General knowledge.** Information about any subject in the arts, sciences, history, current affairs and more; celebrities; natural phenomena; social and cultural topics.
- **Literature.** To some extent a part of culture, but important enough to be listed as a separate section: stories, novels, plays and poetry written in English or translated into English. See Section 4.
- **The English language itself.** Apart from explanations of the grammar or other features of the language, other topics may be included, such as the history and development of the English language, the etymology or morphology of words, other interesting linguistic phenomena.

Why different courses emphasize some types of content and not others depends mainly on the objectives of the course and the target student population. If your students are immigrants whose purpose is to integrate into an English-speaking community, then topics that are based on that community will be very important. If, on the other hand, they are learning English as an international language for general communication purposes, then the focus will be more on other subjects, such as general knowledge or international cultures. If the course is ESP, then the content will target the subject of the course: for example, engineering, medicine or tourism. If you are a schoolteacher and see yourself as an educator as much as an instructor in English, you may want to emphasize educational content: so you might prefer to choose material that emphasizes different educational issues or world or general knowledge.

Pause for thought

Thinking back to language courses (not necessarily in English) that you yourself have either taught or participated in as a learner, which of the subjects above do you remember as being predominant? Which were less used?

Comment

Most of the courses I am familiar with are based on mainly informational content – topics listed under ‘General knowledge’ above – very often laid out as newspaper articles. Subjects to do with the English-speaking nations were still included in courses taught 30 years ago, but are on the decline now, as English is today seen as mainly a tool of international communication. Literature is also taught, as it is a requirement for the national school-leaving exams. Finally, there is a substantial component of local-interest content: tourist attractions, for example, or local customs.

Cultural content

Our courses also include cultural content, although some of this may be embodied in underlying messages – how the surface subject matter is presented – as much as in the subject matter itself: see Section 5.

The term *culture* may refer to a number of different things; it is a notoriously difficult and complex concept to define. In its narrower sense (sometimes known as *higher culture*, or *culture with a capital C*), the term includes only artefacts created by members of a particular community that are seen as valuable: literature, art, music, etc. In its wider sense, it refers also to the behaviours, customs, attitudes and beliefs of a community. It would thus include things like dress, festivals, religion and conventions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In this section, I am using the term in this wider sense.

Cultural content of teaching materials and classroom process

The cultural content in an English course may come from four main sources:

- the home culture of the students;
- the culture of the English-speaking peoples;
- the culture of other communities in the world;
- global, or international culture.

Home culture. The topics relate to the students’ home country, such as those suggested under *The local environment* in Section 1. In a monolingual class studying in their home country, such content would include local issues, places, personalities, customs, festivals and so on. The way the materials deal with the content may also reflect the home culture: not only the actual texts, but also the design. For example, in some contexts it is unacceptable to show bare-armed or bare-legged women in illustrations due to religious beliefs. Both materials and classroom process will also conform to the *culture of learning* of the local community: they may, for instance, give fewer activities based on group work in classes where students prefer teacher-fronted process. Where the students all speak different languages and come from different countries, topics based on a home culture will usually need to be elicited from individual students, or groups of students from similar backgrounds.

The culture of the English-speaking nations. For most of the twentieth century, many English language teaching materials, especially at more advanced levels, included a large component of British and American culture. They included not only literature (see Section 4), but also texts about British or American customs or institutions. (The culture of other English-speaking countries was also occasionally referred to, but less often. This is perhaps partly because the major ELT publishers were (and still are) British and American, and local publishers tended to follow their lead.) It was assumed that the learner wanted to imitate an L1 English speaker, not only in language proficiency, but also in cultural knowledge and behaviours. Today, in most institutions in non-English-speaking countries, the goal is the use of English as an international means of communication (see 1 Teaching English today), and knowledge of the cultures of English-speaking communities is therefore less important.

Cultures of a range of different communities. This component is noticeably more important in modern materials. A typical coursebook today will include units on different countries and peoples, and cultural institutions and customs from various sources. One reason is simply that because of faster and more widely used communications and increasing travel, people are far more aware of events and cultures elsewhere. Another related reason is that today's students are likely to need English to communicate with other English speakers with a different L1 and a different culture, and so they need *intercultural communicative competence* (see below). A starting point for the development of such competence is awareness of the diversity of world cultures.

Global cultural norms. This is a rapidly developing area. *Culture with a capital C* has for some time been international. Museums displaying Asian or African art, concerts of music by European composers, and libraries with translated books from authors of all nationalities can be found in most countries. But it is a relatively recent phenomenon that certain norms and conventions (*culture with a small c*) have begun to be accepted and used worldwide. These include things like dress, politeness norms and forms of communication, particularly digital. They are used in contexts where it is likely that different cultures may meet, for example at conferences, at airports, in international businesses, at higher-education institutions and in tourist destinations. Home cultural norms are naturally maintained in more local contexts: the home, the town or village, in basic education, and community meeting-places. But in more international social interaction, global cultural norms have taken over. For example, formal dress for a man all over the world, is likely to be a suit, while informal dress for teenagers may mean T-shirts and jeans. Interactional politeness norms are also developing: for example, formal introductions will usually be accompanied by hand-shaking. In the area of written communication, generally-accepted norms are even more obvious: email conventions, for example, or the format of academic research papers or newspapers. All these are reflected in the content of modern coursebooks and English teaching.

Intercultural communicative competence

The concept of *intercultural communicative competence* has already been mentioned in **1 Teaching English today**. It refers to a person's ability to interact with others in a cultural context that is not their own, to be aware of and respect the cultures of other people, and to behave in a way that will be acceptable to them. The content of teaching materials and classroom process has a crucial role to play here. It can raise students' awareness about a range of aspects of cultures different from their own, and also develop attitudes of acceptance and respect for people from different backgrounds. This means including texts and tasks that look at different cultural norms, as well as drawing students' attention to cultural implications that they might not otherwise notice.

Cultural awareness does not, incidentally, relate only to the cultures of other people. One useful by-product of attention to the cultures of other communities is the raised awareness of features of one's own culture in contrast. Linked to this is increased sensitivity to how one's own cultural norms might appear to others. It is important for students to detach themselves from an ethnocentric point of view, to see their own community as part of a worldwide mosaic, and to begin to learn about the differences and relationships between them.

Pause for thought

What are some features of your own home culture which might be seen as different by people coming from other cultural communities?

Comment

As I mentioned in **1 Teaching English today**, one feature of my own interactional culture which I found I needed to change when I moved to a different country, was how I entered into a casual transactional dialogue – i.e., one whose goal was some sort of purposeful exchange of information – with a friend. At home, my interlocutor and I would simply say 'hi' and then move straight into the question or discussion that was the target of our interaction. In the new culture, this would be considered rude, and I was expected at least to greet with a 'Good morning/afternoon/evening', and even perform a 'How are you?'-type exchange before embarking on the business of the day. I found myself regarded as rather rude and abrupt, until I learned to adopt the local interactional conventions.

Teaching subject matter through English: CLIL and EMI

The use of texts which contain content which is useful to learn in itself, rather than just a medium to display language, has been around for some years. It began with CBI (content-based instruction), which has been taken a step further with CLIL (content and language integrated learning) and EMI (English as a medium of instruction). CLIL refers to the teaching of school curriculum subjects such as mathematics or biology in a language other than the L1, in order to achieve the dual aims of improving the students' knowledge of this language and learning the subject. In principle, the language of instruction could be any language other than the students' L1, but in practice it is usually English, as the main language of international communication. EMI is the term used to refer to courses – sometimes complete programmes – that are taught in English in universities where the normal language of instruction is another language. In such situations, there may be some language teaching through occasional error correction or explanation of new vocabulary, but in principle the main focus is the subject being studied, and the language is used primarily as the means of instruction and engagement with the subject matter.

CLIL is an initiative which began and continues to develop mainly in Europe, though it has also been implemented elsewhere. It is seen as an important means of achieving goals stated by the European Commission: to increase cultural and linguistic diversity in the school and to promote multilingualism among European students. Its use is based on the following assumptions:

- **Language acquisition.** Learners will acquire English well when using it communicatively to understand content.
- **Authenticity.** Using English to learn subjects will entail real-life, authentic use of the language.

- **Integration of English into the curriculum.** English will be integrated into the curriculum in general, rather than treated as a separate subject.
- **Motivation.** Students will be motivated to learn English when they are using it to learn content that they are interested in.
- **Further education.** Students will need English in many cases for further studies and school (e.g., EMI courses at university); CLIL will provide a good basis for this.
- **Diversification of learning.** CLIL will add variety and diversity to lessons, teaching and learning.
- **Increase in exposure to English.** Students will get more hours of exposure to, and use of, English, which will promote acquisition.
- **Different perspectives.** Studying a subject through English will provide different cultural and educational perspectives.
- **Increase in vocabulary.** CLIL will increase students' vocabulary, particularly that associated with the specific subject.
- **Improvement of oral skills.** Since lessons are primarily oral interaction, students' oral skills will be improved (particularly listening).

There are, however, some issues that need to be addressed. Where parents and education

- **Lack of teacher expertise.** Teachers who are experts in their subjects may not know English very well and may not be able to teach effectively in that language. English teachers, on the other hand, may not have sufficient expertise in other subjects to be able to teach them.

- **Level of subject teaching.** Even if the above does not apply, the subject may be taught and learnt at a lower level than it would be in the L1, because the students may not understand advanced English, and the teacher is forced to simplify in order to be understood.

- **Lack of teacher courses.** Only in recent years have some countries (Italy, for example) started to provide CLIL-oriented teacher preparation courses (Lopriore, 2020). In many places, there is still no focused guidance for teachers in this area.

These reservations apply also to EMI, but perhaps not so much: an increasing number of university teachers coming from a non-English-speaking community are fluent in English and have no problem teaching their subject in either that language or their L1. Hopefully this trend will continue and the time will come when it will be taken for granted that any university lecturer can teach in English as well as in their own L1.

Pause for thought

In a non-English-speaking country with which you are familiar, is CLIL used in schools? Is EMI used in universities or other institutions of higher education? What, as far as you know, is the attitude towards the integration of CLIL courses in the country?

Comment

In many countries, it is taken for granted that some courses are taught in English at university level, and the number of such courses is increasing. This is partly, but not only, in order to accommodate foreign students coming to study in the country. CLIL is slightly less universally used. In some countries, reservations as to the adoption of either model are at least partly due to the fact that the language of the country is felt to be under threat as a result of the expansion of English. In such cases, the authorities may feel it important to use the local language as the medium of instruction in educational institutions as a means of supporting and preserving it.

Research findings on CLIL

There does not seem to be any evidence to support the claim that CLIL students will learn the target subject less well than those studying it in their first language. Their grades appear to be similar to those of students learning the same subject in their L1 (Dallton-Juffer et al., 2010). As for English proficiency: CLIL students also show overall superiority, particularly in vocabulary knowledge (mainly, as one would expect, of items associated with the subject being studied) and listening comprehension. However, we need here to take into account the fact that participation in CLIL classes is very often voluntary, and participants tend to be those who are academically able and already relatively proficient in English (Broca, 2016).

Conclusions and discussion

Although both CLIL and EMI are increasingly implemented in schools and universities, it does not appear likely that they will completely replace conventional English lessons, for various reasons. For one thing, English medium instruction can only be used when the students' level of English is good enough to cope with it. Attempts to use CLIL to teach English to beginners have not, on the whole, been successful. In the Punjab, for example, English medium instruction was introduced at Primary level in 2009, but the results were so unsatisfactory in the younger classes that six years later Urdu was reinstated for grades 1–3. At earlier stages, focused English lessons are needed. Even at later stages, it appears that CLIL improves some aspects of students' English (listening comprehension, for example), but has less effect on others (general vocabulary expansion outside the subject being taught, for example), so instruction is needed to compensate for this imbalance.

Finally, there is evidence that optimal learning of English through content takes place when communicative use is supported by explicit teaching through explanation, focused practice, and error correction (see 7 Teaching grammar). The best solution seems, therefore, to be the continued provision of English lessons alongside the teaching of selected subjects through English; and even within CLIL lessons, it is recommended to include some explicit language teaching (Lyster, 2007).

The points discussed above can be expressed as practical tips for CLIL teachers, as shown on the next page.

Comment
I was taught French in school, and literature was one of the required elements in the syllabus. The same was true of school courses in Spanish or German or other languages. The works were chosen from the canon of classical literature, and I enjoyed reading them and I think benefited from both the linguistic and the cultural knowledge they conveyed. But of course, French was taught primarily as a national language, which is rather different from the rationale underlying English teaching today.

Advantages of teaching literature in an English course

- It can be enjoyable and motivating.
- It can widen students' horizons by providing knowledge about the culture which is the background to the text.
- It encourages empathetic, critical and creative thinking.
- It presents a wide range of human situations and conflicts.
- It provides examples of different styles of writing, and representations of various authentic uses of the language.
- It is a good basis for vocabulary expansion.
- It develops reading skills.
- It can provide an excellent starting point for discussion or writing.
- It raises awareness as to the creative potential of language.

Disadvantages

- A lot of literature is written in language that may be difficult for students to read (you can use simplified versions, but these are inevitably inferior to the original).
- Many literary texts are long and time-consuming to teach.
- The culture on which the literature is based is alien to students and may be difficult for them to relate to.
- By using texts as a basis for language teaching, you may spoil students' enjoyment and appreciation of them as literature.
- Many students may feel that literature is irrelevant to their needs (e.g., students learning English for business or other specific purposes).

If you do decide to teach literature, the problems of length, difficulty and alien content are very real ones. They can be solved by careful selection of texts or by using only part of a long text. In some cases, simplified or abbreviated versions can be used, if enough of the literary value of the original appears to be preserved.

Practical tips

- 1 Pause occasionally to focus on language. Feel free to pause in your instruction if the subject in order to take occasional time out to focus on a language point (to teach the words or focus on a student error).
- 2 Present new items using L1. Tell students what the L1 equivalents are for particularly subject-linked terminology the first time you introduce them. After that, use only the English words.
- 3 Correct mistakes. Correct students' errors of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as quickly as you can, but make sure they have noticed them (see 12 Feedback and error correction).
- 4 Create opportunities for students to speak. A lot of the lesson time will naturally be devoted to your own input of content information; however, make opportunities for students to produce language themselves: to answer questions at length, or to do group tasks or project work.
- 5 Create opportunities for students to write. Again, content teaching usually requires quite a lot of reading. Require writing assignments in the target subject in English as well. And again, correct language as well as content.

16.4

Literature as a component of the English course

Literature is not always included in English courses. It is, in a sense, a luxury item, not essential for social or work-related communication. If the main purpose of English teaching today is to enable students to use English as an international language for practical purposes – to form personal relationships, to run a business, to engage in further study, etc. – then it would seem that literature is not a relevant source of content. On the other hand, there are those who claim that it has a place in English courses for other reasons. As Geoff Hall puts it: 'Literature can be used to engage and motivate students, to get them to notice and work with language forms expressively, to explore new personal and imaginative worlds, and to communicate authentically' (Hall, 2016, p. 456). See the next page for a more detailed discussion of the pros and cons.

If we are to include literature, then which? It used to be taken for granted that this should be classic British or American fiction, drama or poetry. Later, this was expanded to include more modern English literature, and works written by authors from other countries where English is an official or major language, such as Canada, Nigeria or India. More recently the range has been widened still further to include translated literature. Today, given the function of English as the tool of international communication, it would make sense to choose works from as wide a range of sources as possible, including all these categories.

Pause for thought

When you were learning a new language in school, did you study its literature? If so, what were the benefits and problems? If not, do you think you would have liked to?

Practical tips

- 1 **Choose literature you like.** If you can choose which literary works to teach, select ones that are favourites of your own. You will probably teach them better and enjoy the process; students are also likely to learn and enjoy them more.
- 2 **Don't do much language work.** Use the literary text mainly for discussion of meanings and interpretations. Don't milk it for grammar and vocabulary to teach, as you do with other kinds of texts. Doing so may reduce its literary value and student enjoyment.
- 3 **Don't over-analyse.** Let the literature make its own impact as much as possible. While doing discussion and analysis, try to involve the students and elicit their responses rather than telling them. Note that too much pre-reading work on themes and context can dilute the impact, as can detailed literary analysis later.
- 4 **Do teach style.** The exception to tips 2 and 3 above is the aspect of style. If there are stylistic features that contribute to the impact (drama, aesthetic impression, humour, etc.) of the work, then this is an ideal context for teaching about them.
- 5 **Re-read at the end.** Finish your teaching of the work by re-reading the entire piece (if it is short) or a significant section of it (if it is long). The students should be left with the literature itself echoing in their minds, not the discussion!
- 6 **Look for other versions.** Enrich the study of a particular work by adding adaptations or different versions. Show them the movie of a book, or a video of a poem being read. Alternatively, compare the literary text with a modern book or movie which adapts or reinterprets the plot and characters of the original.

16.5

Underlying messages

The content of material we teach often carries underlying messages that go beyond factual information. These may be related to religious or political beliefs, or attitudes towards certain kinds of people, nationalities or cultures. It is very important to be aware of such subtext for two major reasons. First, for your own professional integrity: you want to be sure you are teaching what you intend to teach, and not unconsciously expressing support for attitudes you do not approve of. Second, because students who identify with groups who are discriminated against in content may feel disadvantaged and learn less well: for example, female students using materials which consistently present the male as superior. Favourable or unfavourable attitudes may be expressed in various ways. One is a hidden bias: for example, learners are implicitly asked to identify with people who belong to a specific group, or who express opinions that reflect a particular stance. Another is invisibility of opinions that are disapproved of, or of a discriminated-against group: for example, if only young adults are shown in illustrations in materials, with little or no representation of the middle-aged or elderly. A third – rarer, but easier to detect – is explicitly discriminatory statements: for example, implying that one language is superior to another.

Many prejudices which we reject intellectually are very deeply ingrained in our thinking so much so that we may betray them without realizing it. I often, for example, find

myself automatically using masculine pronouns in examples of grammar, although I consider myself a committed feminist! It often takes a conscious effort to counteract such tendencies. Indeed, both teachers and coursebook writers these days are far more aware of the possible hidden messages of course materials and make efforts to ensure that the underlying messages are acceptable.

Here are some ways materials betray bias, and how you can detect it.

- 1 **Sexism.** Illustrations or texts show women doing work that is associated with home or family rather than a profession. Grammar exercises tend to use masculine pronouns or subjects.
 - 2 **Ageism.** Illustrations in a book for adults show mainly young adults, with relatively few middle-aged or older people.
 - 3 **Cultural orientation.** The texts and exercises are based on a specific culture, or promote a particular kind of lifestyle. For example, Western textbooks have been criticized for promoting a middle-class and materialistic culture, including things like prestigious professions, hotels, airports, expensive leisure activities, and so on.
- On the other hand, there is a problem of excessive efforts to avoid bias that results sometimes in unrealistic scenarios. For example, a picture may portray a bus driver as a woman to avoid stereotyping, but in the real world, bus drivers are in fact mostly men. It can be tricky to avoid being criticized for stereotyping, on the one hand, and for being unrealistic on the other; sometimes this may result in rather bland, uninteresting content.

Pause for thought

Take any coursebook or English-teaching website and check it out for any of the above. For example, have a look at interactive grammar exercises online and count the number of masculine versus feminine pronouns; or look for the age-span of the adults portrayed in a coursebook for adults.

Comment

I looked at a book published in 2019 (which shall be nameless!), which targets an international market of English adult learners, and asked the computer to count the number of occurrences of (single whole-word) *he* as compared to (single whole-word) *she*. The result was 1,806 occurrences of *he* as opposed to 954 occurrences of *she*. I then checked a coursebook for teenagers, and found more or less equal numbers of males and females in both texts and illustrations, and no particular occupational bias. In the first case, the inequality is certainly there, but I might not have been aware of it without a numerical check. In the second, the survey provided a reassurance that the balance is acceptable.

Classroom implications

If you are using materials that display some kind of orientation that you do not find acceptable, what might you do about it? Some possibilities:

- Omit texts or tasks that you find inappropriate.
- Ignore the bias, and try in your teaching to make sure that your own input and teacher-led activities are more balanced in content.
- Compensate by adding extra material of your own which supplies the deficit and makes for a better balance.
- Draw your students' attention to the inappropriate content, and lead an open critical discussion to raise their awareness of it.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Can you remember at least seven different kinds of topics that are used in English courses?
- 2 What kinds of things does the term *culture* include?
- 3 What are the main sources of the cultural content we find in course materials?
- 4 What is *intercultural competence*?
- 5 What is the difference between CLIL and EMI?
- 6 Can you suggest some advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of CLIL in schools?
- 7 Can you list at least three arguments for and three against using literature in your English course?
- 8 How are underlying messages to do with cultural, social or political values conveyed through teaching materials?

Further reading

Alkhalafah, T. A. (2017). What is the place of English literature in ELT classrooms? A review of related studies. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 6(7), 192–197.

(An overview of the issues relating to the use of English literature in the teaching of English, with some recommendations)

Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

(Discussion of some general issues, followed by a variety of practical literature-teaching techniques, relating to a range of literary genres)

Contazzi, M. and Ixian, J. (1999). Cultural mirrors: materials and methods in the EFL classroom. In Hinkel, E. (Ed.), *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (pp. 196–219). Cambridge University Press.

(A readable summary of issues to do with culture and intercultural competence in English-teaching materials, with recommendations)

Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

(A good text to use to teach yourself how to teach literature: comprehensive, readable, with plenty of illustrative tasks accompanied by suggested answers)

Dale, L. and Tanner, R. (2012). *CLIL Activities: A resource for subject and language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.

(Practical ideas for use in CLIL lessons)

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Overview

17.1 What is classroom discipline? A definition and description of some aspects of a disciplined, smooth-running classroom process.

17.2 What teachers can do to create a disciplined classroom. General guidelines and practical tips for making sure lessons run smoothly.

17.3 Dealing with discipline problems. Some practical ideas for how to deal with teacher-student conflicts and discipline problems in the classroom.

17.1

What is classroom discipline?

Classroom discipline can be defined as the situation that exists when teacher and students accept and consistently observe a set of rules relating to classroom behaviour in order to facilitate smooth and efficient teaching and learning. Many teacher-preparation courses avoid the term *discipline* – because it sounds rather old-fashioned and seems to imply an authoritarian classroom regime – and prefer to focus on *classroom management*; but they are not the same thing. Classroom management has to do with the way teachers organise the interactions that take place during a learning activity: how they run question-and-answer sessions, for example, how they move students in and out of group work, how they open and close lessons. It is important, but it is only one of the means through which classroom discipline, as defined above, can be achieved.

What does a disciplined classroom look like in practice? Here are some possible characteristics.

- 1 Learning is taking place.
- 2 It is quiet.
- 3 The teacher is in control.
- 4 The teacher and students are cooperating.
- 5 Students are motivated.
- 6 The lesson is proceeding according to plan.
- 7 The teacher and students are aiming for the same objectives.

If you do not wish to do the task shown in **Pause for thought** on the next page, then read on to the **Comment** below it.

Pause for thought

Which of the features listed on the previous page seem to you, in the light of your own experience as student or teacher, characteristics of a disciplined classroom? Do you have any reservations about any of them? Make a note of your responses, and then read on.

Comment

- 1 **Learning is taking place.** The question of the relationship between discipline and learning is crucial. It seems fairly clear that in a disciplined classroom, it is easier to activate students in the way you want, and that time will be probably spent on-task, rather than wasted on organisational problems or disruptive behaviour. However, I have seen well-disciplined classes in which little or no learning was taking place, simply because the tasks had themselves little learning value (see **4 Tasks**). So a disciplined classroom does not, in itself, necessarily entail good learning. On the other hand, the converse is probably nearer the truth: there is unlikely to be much learning in a totally undisciplined classroom. We might sum up by saying that discipline is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for good learning to take place.
- 2 **It is quiet.** It is tempting to claim that this is irrelevant. What about well-disciplined classes where noisy pair- or group work is going on? However, think about the following points. First, cooperative work involving talk takes up only a part of lesson time, probably a minority – what about the rest? Second, imagine walking down the corridor of a school, listening at the door of each classroom, and hearing noise in some and quiet in others. If you had to guess which were the better-disciplined ones, what would you say? The bottom line is that disciplined classes may or may not be quiet, but undisciplined ones are always noisy. Therefore, there is arguably a positive association between quietness and discipline. The teacher needs to ensure that the class is quiet enough for students to hear the teacher and each other, and to complete tasks without being disturbed.
- 3 **The teacher is in control.** Yes, definitely. However, the fact that a teacher is in control does not necessarily mean that they are standing in front of the class telling everyone what to do. The students may have been given the initiative in a particular activity. Nevertheless, it was the teacher who took the decision about the handover of initiative, and they may, at any point, take it back. As it is often said, 'The classroom is not a democracy'. The underlying responsibility for the control of any disciplined classroom has to be in the hands of the teacher. How authoritarian or liberal, rigid or flexible they are in using this control is another question.

- 4 **The teacher and students are cooperating.** A smooth-running lesson is the main evidence of discipline in the classroom, and the participants have to cooperate to produce this. Such cooperation may occur because it is part of the culture of learning, an expected norm in the educational context; or it may be because of the authoritative personality of the teacher; or because the students fear punishment if they do not cooperate. Whatever the reason, smooth ongoing cooperative work is a clear indication of a disciplined classroom.
- 5 **Students are motivated.** It is fairly easy to imagine a class of unmotivated students which is disciplined, or a class of motivated students which is, perhaps temporarily, out of control. So this feature is not as clear or necessary as the previous one. The association between motivation and discipline is one of probability: if the class is motivated to learn, it is more likely to be disciplined.
- 6 **The lesson is proceeding according to plan.** Again, we have a case of probability rather than certainty. It is true that some lessons that are improvised or changed as they proceed may be disciplined, but on the whole, a lesson which is mostly going according to plan is more likely to be so. The teacher knows where they are going, activities are well prepared and organized, and the awareness that the sequence of events is clearly organized boosts teacher confidence and student trust, which in their turn also contribute to good discipline.
- 7 **The teacher and students are aiming for the same objectives.** Clearly, if students are aware of the objectives of a lesson and accept them (or occasionally even help to plan them), the lesson is far more likely to be disciplined. On the other hand, the students may be totally unaware of the objectives of the lesson and still happily cooperate with the teacher. But if they have their own agenda that contradicts the teacher's, the result is likely to be conflict. A shared knowledge of and agreement on lesson objectives probably therefore contribute to smooth process.

17.2

What teachers can do to create a disciplined classroom

Some teachers are gifted with charismatic authority: they walk into a classroom and are immediately in charge; the students willingly listening and doing what they are told. Some teachers have this gift, most do not. The good news is that the classes of teachers who do not possess natural authority (and I speak as one myself!) can be equally smoothly run: we just have to work at it harder.

Pause for thought

Do you remember a teacher with charismatic authority from your school days, or later? Did you feel you learned well from them? Do you have any further thoughts on this issue?

Comment

I remember a charismatic visiting lecturer in a teacher-training course who held me, and the other trainees, spellbound during his talk, and received rapturous applause at the end; but later I found it difficult to identify what useful content I had in fact learned from his session. A more positive example is a colleague I observed in my early years of teaching, and remember being envious of her effortless control of the adoring students in her class! She was, in this case, also a very conscientious and successful English teacher.

Below is a list of some factors that are conducive to a disciplined classroom, and what you can do about them.

Classroom management skills. As defined earlier, these include things like opening and closing lessons, running question-answer sessions, organizing group work, giving clear instructions. Novice teachers usually model their classroom-management techniques on those used by their own teachers when they were in school: but they quickly find out that many of them are not as easy as they look! You need to learn how, for example, to give instructions so that they are clear but not too long-winded, and how to make sure that students have understood them; the different methods of dividing students into groups; varying methods of eliciting responses and how these work with different classes (Scrivener, 2012).

Selection of an appropriate methodology. If students feel that they are learning through procedures that are appropriate for them, they will be willing to cooperate. If they feel they are being made to do activities that they feel are irrelevant, too childish, or in any way unsuitable to their own learning culture, one result is likely to be discipline problems.

Good interpersonal relationships. This does not mean that you have to love – or even necessarily like! – your students. But it does mean that you need to maintain an attitude of respect and goodwill towards them, and try to encourage similar attitudes between the students themselves.

Good planning. A carefully and clearly organized lesson is likely to contribute to good discipline. It is not usually a good idea to improvise a lesson as you go. Good planning does not mean abandoning improvised variations: it means having a solid basic programme which may or may not be changed as the lesson proceeds (see 2 The lesson).

Student motivation. This is a key factor, and one that can be enhanced by teacher action. The more interesting and motivating the learning activity, the more likely it is that students will be cooperative and stay on-task (see 4 Tasks).

Some tips for maintaining classroom discipline

On the next page are some tips for beginner teachers (adapted from Wragg, 1981, p. 22) based on responses from new teachers to the question 'What advice on classroom discipline did you find most helpful?' So they are probably all useful, and cover all the factors listed above.

- 1 Be firm with students at the start; you can relax later.
- 2 Get silence before you start speaking to the class.
- 3 Know and use the students' names.
- 4 Prepare lessons thoroughly and structure them firmly.
- 5 Be mobile; walk around the class.
- 6 Start the lesson with a bang, and sustain interest and curiosity.
- 7 Speak clearly.
- 8 Make sure your instructions are clear.
- 9 Have extra material prepared (e.g., for slower-/faster-working students).
- 10 Look at the class when speaking, and learn how to scan (keep an eye on what is going on in all parts of the room).
- 11 Make work appropriate (e.g., to students' age, ability, cultural background).
- 12 Develop an effective questioning technique.
- 13 Develop the art of timing your lesson to fit the available period.
- 14 Vary your teaching techniques.
- 15 Anticipate discipline problems and act quickly.
- 16 Avoid confrontations.
- 17 Clarify fixed rules and standards, and be consistent in applying them.
- 18 Show yourself as supporter and helper to the students.
- 19 Don't patronize students; treat them with respect.
- 20 Use humour constructively.

Pause for thought

Read through the list and decide which are the ten most important tips for you. You can, of course, add any you think are missing.

Comment

The 20 items above are listed in order of importance, according to the original respondents' opinions. In other words, the most useful ten tips for them were items 1–10. I personally agree with most of the original respondents' priorities, but not all. Your own list, if you did the task above, was also probably different. The choices made by an individual depend very much on personal experience and an awareness of one's own strong and weak points as a teacher.

The next step: student self-discipline

Although the teacher has responsibility for classroom discipline initially, the ultimate goal is for students to take on or at least share this responsibility. Self-discipline depends on the maturity of the student to some extent, but it can be promoted by the teacher. The way to do this is not simply to try to hand over responsibility to the students for running the lesson – this teaches little, and can be disastrous. It is more a matter of fostering a general mindset based on learner autonomy: that the learning of English is essentially their responsibility, not just an outcome of doing what the teacher says.

We have already seen how such a mindset may be supported by, for example, the use of individual work (3 Classroom interaction) or getting students to design their own tests (13 Assessment and testing). In the area of discipline, it may be fostered by including the students in decisions on the running of lessons or on policy with regard to discipline problems: see some ideas in the following section.

Dealing with discipline problems

Below are some useful practical principles for dealing with problems with student behaviour in class. These are based on my own experience as a teacher who had to learn the hard way how to teach unruly classes of adolescents in a country to which I was an immigrant, and whose language I did not speak very well. They are, therefore, most relevant to this age group, but they may also be found useful when dealing with younger or older students.

Before the problem arises

The teachers who are most successful in maintaining discipline in class are not those who are good at dealing with problems, but those who know how to prevent them from arising in the first place. I suggest four main strategies for this. Some of these have already appeared as brief practical tips in the previous section, but are here discussed in more detail.

- **Make an agreement.** At an early stage, work out a written agreement, or contract, with the class, stating clearly what is and is not acceptable. It should describe student participation during lessons, and the penalties for unacceptable behaviour. You can start by suggesting yourself what the rules and penalties should be, but give the class an opportunity to discuss and change them before finalizing.
- **Plan the lesson carefully.** When a lesson is clearly planned and organized, there is likely to be constant momentum and a feeling of purpose, which keep students focused on the current task. This prevents gaps when nothing particular is going on, which may be filled by distracting or counterproductive activity. Moreover, the awareness that there is a clear plan contributes a great deal to your own confidence, and to your ability to win the trust of the students.
- **Instruct clearly.** Problems often arise due to student uncertainty about what they are supposed to be doing. Even though instructions take up a very small proportion of lesson time, they are crucial. You need to clarify precisely what the task involves and what the options are (see 4 Tasks). This is not incompatible with student-teacher negotiation about

what to do. However, too much hesitation and mind-changing can distract and lose students, and reduce their confidence in the teacher's authority, with obvious implications for discipline.

- **Keep in touch.** You need to be sensitive to what students are doing. Scan the classroom constantly so that you can immediately pick up any lack of attention on the part of individual students. This achieves two things. First, students know you are aware of them all the time, which encourages participation and personal contact on the one hand, and discourages deviant activity on the other. Second, you are able to notice immediately if a student loses interest or gets distracted, and do something about it before it becomes a problem.

When the problem is beginning

Students are beginning to chat quietly between themselves; one student is obviously not listening; another is starting to do something that is not connected to the task. Teachers often ignore minor problems like this, in the hope that they will go away by themselves. Occasionally they do, but more often they don't, and are likely to escalate. In most cases, it is advisable to respond promptly and pro-actively to any emerging problem you detect.

- **Deal with it quickly and quietly.** The best action is a quiet but clear-cut response, keeping the problem as low-profile as possible. For example, if a student has not opened their book in response to an instruction from you, it is better to go up to them quietly and open the book yourself than draw the attention of the whole class by a reprimand or loud, repeated instruction. Over-assertive reactions can lead to the very escalation you wish to avoid.

- **Don't take it personally.** This is a difficult instruction to follow sometimes, but an important one. Inexperienced teachers of adolescents are often upset by remarks that were not intended personally, or allow unpleasant conflicts to continue annoying them long after the student has forgotten they ever happened. Try to see the problem, not the student, as the object to be attacked and dealt with. Don't let the student pull you into personal conflict.

- **Don't use threats.** Threats are often a sign of weakness; use the formula 'If you ... then ...' only as a real, factual option that you are ready to put into practice, not as a weapon to make an impression or intimidate.

When the problem has exploded

The explosion may be an unacceptable level of noise in the classroom, a confrontational, rude comment by a student, or a refusal by the class to do something you have asked them to do. In some cases, it may take the form of unacceptable behaviour between students: bullying, or even physical violence. The priority here is to act quickly in order to get the class to return to smooth functioning as quickly as possible. Often it is preferable to take a decision fast, even if it is not the best one, than to hesitate or do nothing. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into a public confrontation. Confrontations mean time-wasting arguments that are likely to complicate rather than solve the problem. Stop the problem in its tracks with one of the ideas below.

Explode yourself. Often a quick, loud command will do the trick, with a display of anger. This is provided, of course, that you do not really lose your temper or become aggressive! The trouble with displaying anger is that you cannot do it too often, or it loses its effect.

- **Give in.** For example, if students refuse to do homework you might say, 'All right, don't. Instead, let's ...' This is a perfectly respectable option, which is unfortunately rejected by many teachers who feel they risk losing face. Its advantage is that it immediately defuses the situation and, if done quickly and decisively, will not be seen as dishonourable surrender! It also puts you in a position to demand something from them in return! But again, it cannot be used too often.

- **Make them an offer they can't refuse.** Sometimes you find that students are pushing you into a confrontation, and you cannot give in but do not wish to impose your decision by assertive commands. You need to look for a way of avoiding the confrontation by one of the following strategies: postponement ('Let's come back to this tomorrow at the beginning of the lesson. Remind me.'). compromise ('I'll tell you what: you have to do all the assignments, but I'll give you extra time to finish them ...'); or arbitration ('Let's discuss this with the class teacher, and accept their decision ...').

- **Call in assistance from a higher authority.** Calling in the class teacher, school principal or other authoritative figure may appear to lessen your own authority. However, if none of the previous strategies have worked, then it is better to call for help than to let the situation escalate. This is particularly true if you have a situation of bullying or violence between students. If you do this, then make sure that later you hold a follow-up discussion with the class in order to come to an agreement with them on measures to prevent the problem from happening again.

Pause for thought

Read through the descriptions of episodes below and think about or discuss the following questions with colleagues:

- What caused the problem?
- What could the teacher have done to prevent it?
- Once it had arisen, what would you advise the teacher to do?

Episode 1. The teacher of a mixed-level class of 13-year-olds is working through a class reader in an English lesson. He asks Dina to read out a passage. 'Do we have to do this book?' says Dina. 'It's boring.' Some members of the class smile, one says, 'I like it,' others are silent awaiting the teacher's reaction. (Adapted from Wragg, 1981, p. 12.)

Episode 2. The teacher is explaining a story. Many of the students are inattentive, and there is a murmur of quiet talk between them. The teacher ignores the noise and speaks to those who are listening. Finally, she reprimands, in a gentle and sympathetic way, one student who is talking particularly noticeably. The student stops talking for a minute or two, and then carries on. This happens once or twice more, with different students. The

teacher does not get angry, and continues to explain, trying (with only partial success) to draw students' attention through occasional questions. (Adapted from Reinhorn-Lurie, 1993.)

Episode 3: The teacher is explaining how to do a worksheet. His explanation has carried on so long that John, having lost interest, begins to tap a ruler on his desk. At first, the tapping is not too noticeable, but John begins to tap more frequently and noisily, building up to a final climax when he hits the table with a loud bang. The class falls silent and looks at John and the teacher to see what will happen. (Adapted from Wragg, 1981, p. 18.)

Episode 4: The teacher begins by giving out classroom books and collecting homework books.

Teacher (to one of the students): This book's very thin.

Student 1: Yeah, 'tis, isn't it.

Teacher: Why is that?

Student 2: He's been using it for toilet paper, sir. (Uproar) (Adapted from Wragg and Wood, 1984, p. 32.)

Episode 5: The students have been asked to interview each other for homework and write reports. In this lesson, they are asked to read aloud their reports. A few students refuse to do so. The teacher tells these students to stand up before the class and be interviewed by them. They stand up, but do not take the questions seriously. They answer with jokes, or in their L1, or not at all. The teacher eventually sends them back to their places and goes on to the next planned activity, a textbook exercise. (Adapted from Reinhorn-Lurie, 1993.)

Comment

Episode 1 (Dina refuses to read, says the book is boring). The causes of this were, possibly that the book is indeed boring; or that Dina is looking for a way to avoid from work. It is difficult to see how the teacher could have foreseen or prevented the incident. Now the priority is to neutralize the challenge and get the class back on task. The most appropriate answer to Dina's question is probably a postponement: 'Yes, we do have to do this book; we'll discuss whether it's boring later. Please read.' This commits the teacher to discussing the book later with the class. But this situation will be inflated and managed by the teacher, which is a totally different situation from what would have happened had the teacher allowed himself to be drawn into an argument in the original lesson. Another secondary question arises here, and that is whether you should insist on a student reading aloud if they don't want to. You may, as suggested above, insist on the nominated student reading, with no exceptions. But there may be very good reasons for allowing students not to read aloud if they don't want to (and reading aloud is of questionable learning value; see **5 Texts, Section 3**). It may be better to adopt a ground rule that a student does not have to read aloud if they don't want to than to face opposition from those students who hate doing it.

Episode 2 (students keep chatting during teacher explanation). This situation is very common and is probably caused by a lack of firm and consistent rules in the classroom, or by the teacher's failure to insist on them. As a result, a number of students are learning little or nothing from the lesson. The teacher should have insisted on quiet and attention from the start, and stopped each murmur as it began. Possibly she is afraid of losing popularity, as her reprimands lack attack and are quickly ignored; the result being that constant inattention and chat become an acceptable and normal situation for the students. To reverse the situation when it has got this far is extremely difficult. It may be necessary to hold a serious discussion with the class at the beginning of the next lesson, agree on new ground rules and insist on them from then on.

Episode 3 (John bangs a ruler while teacher is explaining). Here, the incident was caused by the teacher's over-lengthy explanation, the boy's impatience, and the failure of the teacher to notice and stop the disturbance when it started (perhaps by going to John and quietly removing the ruler, promising to return it later). Most people's intuitive reaction when the class has fallen silent would be to reprimand John. However, a more effective response would probably be to use the silence to instruct the class firmly to start work on the worksheet, promising to deal with any further problems in response to raised hands. Once the class is working, the teacher could talk to John, make it clear that his behaviour is unacceptable, but that the incident is now over and he should be working. A further word or two with him after the lesson may make it less likely that he will repeat the behaviour.

Episode 4 (student is cheeky to teacher about a notebook with pages missing). The immediate cause of this incident, given the confident and cheeky character of members of the class, was the teacher's mistake in getting into a public argument with one of them in the middle of an organizational routine involving all the class. The argument then escalated rapidly into a full-class crisis. The teacher should have finished distributing and collecting books and dealt with the notebook problem later, privately. Now that the class is in uproar, the priority should be to abandon the individual problem, and concentrate on regaining order and finishing the book collection and distribution as quickly as possible.

Episode 5 (students refuse to read aloud their reports). The cause of this was the refusal of the students to read out their work, and the mistaken response of the teacher. It was fairly obvious that if these students refused to read out their work from where they were sitting, they would also not cooperate if standing before the class. The fact that they were a group, reinforcing each other's responses, only made things worse. Only one student should have been nominated to stand up and answer questions, and it should have been the one who was least likely to make fun of the task. Given the very uncomfortable situation of students actually making fun of a teacher-directed task, the reaction of stopping it and going on to the next bit of the lesson was the right one, although late. However, the teacher should talk to each student later, alone, in order to make it clear that this behaviour was unacceptable and to try to prevent it from happening again. As with Episode 1, there is also the

problem of students not wanting to read aloud. Again you need to decide whether this type of reading is compulsory or optional. Either way, if the reading text is a composition by the student, it is often a good idea for you to read it out yourself. You can make it sound much better than the student can, and the fact that you are presenting the composition to the class is a subtle compliment to the author.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Can you remember, more or less, how *classroom discipline* is defined here?
- 2 What are three or four characteristics of a disciplined classroom?
- 3 What is the connection between classroom discipline and learning?
- 4 What, apart from classroom management skills, should the teacher pay attention to in order to ensure that the classroom will be disciplined?
- 5 List as many of the short tips under *Some tips for maintaining classroom discipline* that you can remember (there were 20 in all).
- 6 What things can you do in advance to try to ensure that discipline problems do not arise?
- 7 What are some options when you have a discipline crisis in the classroom, such as students rudely refusing to do what you ask?

Further reading

- Charles, C. M. (2010). *Building Classroom Discipline* (10th Edition). Boston: Pearson Education.
(Practical and readable, written for trainee or practising teachers; a summary of various models of classroom discipline and guidelines for practical application)
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., Morrison, K. and Wyse, D. (2010). *A Guide to Teaching Practice* (5th Edition). Routledge.
(A widely read and practical guide to various aspects of school teaching)
- Scrivener, J. (2012). *Classroom Management Techniques*. Cambridge University Press.
(A collection of techniques for managing various aspects of classroom interaction)

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- Reinhorn-Lurie, S. (1992). Unpublished research project on classroom discipline, Oranien School of Education, Haifa.
- Scrivener, J. (2012). *Classroom Management Techniques*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wragg, E. C. (1981). *Classroom Management and Control*. Macmillan.
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18 Digital technology and online teaching

Overview

- 18.1 Digital literacies.** Some skills and awarenesses that students need to develop for effective and safe use of digital technology both on- and offline.
- 18.2 The place of digital technology in the classroom.** A brief overview of some basic issues: the hardware; using internet resources; fundamental considerations in selecting digital tools for use in the classroom.
- 18.3 Teaching different aspects of language using digital technology.** Practical ideas for enhancing learning of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary using digital technology.
- 18.4 Teaching online.** Teaching language through videoconferencing: issues and suggestions.

Preliminary note. The particular websites and apps mentioned in this chapter may have been renamed or even have disappeared by the time you read this; you may need to find updated ones through a search engine.

Digital literacies

In order to make best use of the learning opportunities that online digital technology offers, students need to possess not just one but a number of digital literacies. In this section, I'll summarise those that seem to me most important for language learners: for a longer and more detailed list, see the first chapter of Pegrum et al. (2022).

Print literacy

At its most basic level, print literacy is the same literacy as that needed to read books and other kinds of paper-based publications. Research indicates that most students still prefer reading longer texts from paper rather than from a screen (Baron, 2017), and that their comprehension tends to be better when based on reading from a print version (Mangen et al., 2013). My impression is that this applies to the wider population as well. (I myself prefer reading from a screen, but am aware that I am in the minority!) In any case, everyone today needs to know how to cope with online reading, including ease of reading different design formats (infographics, for example) and the use of hyperlinks to move between different texts.

Print production literacy is the ability to use a keyboard fluently and accurately to produce written English text. Most students develop this skill gradually as they get used

to using a keyboard as well as pen and paper for their writing, but it can be improved by learning to touch-type using one of the many available online courses.

Editing literacy means using online tools appropriately for editing; not just the word-processing tools of boldening, italicizing, enlarging, contracting, deleting, cutting and pasting, inserting and moving text, but also the more sophisticated annotating tools such as inserting margin- or footnotes, or using editing tools such as *track changes* in Microsoft Word.

Hyperlink literacy involves knowing when it is worth clicking on a hyperlink in order to follow it up, and how to return to the main text later, as well as how to insert your own hyperlinks. More importantly, it means being able to follow up links to other texts and return from them without losing awareness of the sequence of thought of the main text; a new demand on the ability to read fluently which was rarely needed before digital text.

Texting literacy is the ability to create text suitable for smartphone texting using tools such as WhatsApp. This includes a knowledge of the most popular emojis and their meanings, as well as commonly used abbreviations such as *U* for *you*, *4* for *for*. Note, however, that there appears to be a decrease in the use of such abbreviations parallel to the increasing use of text prediction, automatic correction and speech to text (STT) technology, why bother to shorten a word if the texting tool can write out the full one for you?

Search literacy relates to the effective use of search engines. With the enormous, and daily increasing, number of websites that include any particular search word, students need to know how to focus their search in order not to be faced with hundreds of thousands, even millions, of websites to browse through. Techniques include the use of quotation marks to mark the beginning and end of a multi-word sequence; the use of the minus sign to eliminate search words and the capitalized *OR* to indicate you want either one word or another. Other more advanced options are available from, for example, Google's Advanced Search (or the 'Advanced search' option within Google Scholar).

Prompt literacy is a new literacy needed today to be able to deal with Generative Pre-trained Transform (GPT) tools effectively. Whether and/or how we let our learners use GPT to compose text is a question I've already discussed in 11 Teaching writing. But if they do, they need to know how to compose a prompt in order to elicit what they want. Some guidelines:

- Make a prompt as detailed as possible, relating to content, style (e.g., 'academic' or 'informal'), specific things to include, specific things to exclude, level of language, overall length, whatever further detail they can think of.
- Use 'regenerate' to get alternative texts.
- Get a revised text, by directing the GPT tool to make specific changes/additions/deletions to the original.
- Check through any text produced by GPT to make sure it is what they intended, and to verify facts.
- Don't ask GPT to produce quotations, references, facts or evidence they can't check: it will produce convincing responses that may be wrong.

Critical information literacy is the ability to relate critically to information provided online, without assuming that it is necessarily true. When the internet first started to be widely used as a source of information, there were people who claimed that this meant we did not need to teach students facts any more, only provide them with the tools necessary to find them on the internet. Today, the opposite is true: it is vital for students to possess factual information about a variety of subjects. There is so much information available on the internet – some true, some untrue, some a mixture – that unless the student starts off with at least some reliable knowledge about the field, they may find it difficult to disentangle truth from fiction.

The number of websites providing unreliable information – whether for commercial or political reasons, or maliciously, or simply for fun (the so-called 'spoon' websites) – has increased to such an extent that a whole set of new terms has been coined to describe or discuss them: *fake news*, *fake websites*, *spoofing*, *truthiness*, *post-truth* and more. Students need to be aware that a website stating as fact something that appears surprising probably needs to be checked out by trying to answer some or all of the following questions:

- Is the content likely to be true according to my previous knowledge of the area?
 - Is the parent website a reputable public institution?
 - Does the website provide sources of information?
 - Does it represent commercial or political interests?
 - Does the information excite an immediate positive or negative emotional reaction?
 - Does the information excite an immediate political interest underlying the content?
 - Does there seem to be a commercial or political interest based on the information it presents?
 - Is the website trying to persuade you to spend money based on the information it presents?
 - Did it reach you through social media?
- If one or more of the answers to questions 1, 2 and 3 are 'no' and most of the rest are 'yes', then the website is suspect. However, some spoof websites are very carefully constructed to tick at least some of the 'reliable' boxes, so you may be thrown back on your own common sense, real-world knowledge and judgement (see the **Pause for thought** below).
- The Snopes website is dedicated to checking out the reliability of information provided on the internet and is worth a visit.

Pause for thought

Look at the well-known spoof website 'free octopus' (<https://zapatopi.net/freeoctopus>). What have the designers done to make it convincing?

Comment

The website is cleverly designed to target conservationists ('Help save the ...'), provides deepfake illustrations and some authentic hyperlinks (e.g., to the Olympic rainforest). Have a look at the parallel Wikipedia entry.

Personal literacy means taking care of one's personal privacy, and keeping safe (the problems of the very wide use of online resources is the dangers associated with undisciplined internet surfing. As soon as a user accesses and uses a site that requires an email address and a password, they leave a digital footprint, and the information may be available to third parties. Phishing messages from a source claiming to be a bank or other reputable concern can elicit more information by requiring details of, for example, a credit card or passport. However elicited, personal information can later be used for trolling or cyberbullying, or for identity theft, which can be exploited to make purchases or engage in transactions without the knowledge or permission of the original user. For a school to ban the use of smartphones or outlaw specific sites will not solve the problem. Students need to know that they should not reveal personal information, that passwords should be opaque (not to use their name or birthdate, for example) and regularly changed, that emails or text messages from sources they don't recognize should be deleted; and so on.

Pause for thought

A very useful activity related to personal literacy when using social media, suggested in Pegrum et al. (2022), pp. 218–219, provides a series of scenarios and invites teenage students to say what they would do in each of the cases. Have a look at the four examples shown below and discuss what the answers might be before checking the following **Comment**.

- 1 Someone has been posting unpleasant messages on a social media platform under your username. You don't know who it is. What do you do?
- 2 You have been exchanging private messages on a social media platform with a friend you haven't met. He is the same age as you and has similar interests. He sends you a new photo of himself, and asks you to send him a new photo of yourself. What do you do?
- 3 Your friends are talking about a new social networking site they are all using. When you go to sign up yourself, you see that the website wants a picture of you, your email address, your home address and your mobile phone number. What do you do?
- 4 At a recent party, your friend took some photos of you that you don't like, and he has now shared them on social media, tagged with your name. What do you do?

Comment

The answers suggested by the authors are as follows:

- 1 It's likely that your account has been hacked, so immediately change your password (and your username as well if you wish). Then post publicly disclaiming the unpleasant messages. If the messages are threatening or libellous enough, the police may get involved and may be able to track the origins.

- 2 If you send photos of yourself to a stranger, they may use them in contexts you are not happy with. More generally, it's important to realise that when you post photos on social media platforms, they may belong to the platform, not to you. This means your photos could be used by the platform for advertising or any other purpose without your explicit permission.
- 3 Never enter your personal details on a website without being aware of the privacy policy, and what the site can do with your information. There have been several internet scams where users enter their mobile phone number and then agree to the terms and conditions on the site, only to receive expensive daily mobile phone messages – which they have agreed to pay for by agreeing to the terms and conditions.
- 4 Many social media platforms allow you to untag (remove your own name from) a photo. This is the first step. Then contact your friend and ask him to remove the photo. If he refuses, you may be within your rights to demand this, depending on the rules of the platform and the law in your country.

The place of digital technology in the classroom

Hardware

The trend today is away from heavy desktop computers and towards lighter personal digital devices: laptops, tablets and smartphones. The latter are forbidden in many classrooms, for obvious reasons; but more and more teachers are coming to realize the potential for learning that they can offer: the use of language-learning apps, searching for information on the internet, writing activities and more. And for less well-endowed institutions or individuals, the feature phone is a more affordable version of the smartphone which still provides most of its essential functions.

Other types of hardware used in language teaching today include the interactive whiteboard (IWB) and headsets for extended reality (ER), including virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). The IWB has been around for a while, but on the whole, results in terms of leading to better learning or making things easier for the teacher do not seem to justify the considerable financial investment involved, since most of its functions can be supplied as easily by using a normal whiteboard, doubling as a screen for a computer-linked projector. If it is already there, however, it's clearly a useful – and fun! – tool. It can be used to involve students, but on the whole, its use tends to result in a more teacher-led process. As to ER headsets, you will find some interesting ideas on how to use ER in the classroom on YouTube videos. However, at the time of writing, this technology is not widely used in language teaching. This is not so much because of the expense (headsets are relatively cheap, and some AR activities can be done using a smartphone), as because at the moment ER does not seem to make an obvious added contribution to learning outcomes. However, this may change as the technology develops and teachers become more experienced in using it.

Using Internet resources

When using the digital technology in your teaching, you may wish to download different kinds of content from the internet: recordings, graphic material, written texts. But you need to be cautious, as some may be copyright, and not legally usable without permission. Many such items, however, are freely available for use by teachers in their classrooms, though there may be conditions attached, such as acknowledging the source. Check out Creative Commons and OER Commons on the internet.

To use or not to use: do we have a choice?

Sometimes there are situations where there is no choice as to whether to use digital technology or not. For example, integrating digital technology into teaching might simply not be an option in a situation where the necessary equipment and facilities are not available, or affordable. Conversely, its use was obligatory, wherever it was available, during the COVID pandemic, when the only way many students could attend lessons was through online videoconferencing tools like Zoom. But in most situations today, there is a choice: the hardware is there, the software is easily available and usually cheap or free; the question is if, how and when to use it.

Deciding if/how/when to use it

Both low-tech and high-tech can be beneficial, in different situations. There is a place for typing in text to a computer as well as for handwriting on paper; there is a place for reading off a screen, as well as for reading from a book or journal; and so on. No evidence has been produced, as far as I know, to show that using technology, in and of itself, is conducive to better language acquisition (Macaro et al., 2012). And there is some indication that very extensive use of computers in school can actually be detrimental to learning (OECD, 2015). But where it is well used, it can help both teachers and learners, in class and outside it.

The crucial question is whether the use of a particular digital tool is worthwhile in terms of learning outcomes. This can be expressed in questions like the following:

- How much time, effort and money are required to prepare, set up and run it, relative to the learning or motivational benefits?
- What did I sacrifice or omit from the lesson in order to include the digital component, and was it worth it?

What we need to remember is that digital tools are just that: tools. It is how they are used that is important, not their existence itself. In other words, it is the appropriate application of the technology, rather than the technology itself, which today can make a significant contribution to effective English teaching.

Solutions looking for problems?

Hence, 'Should I be using digital technology in my teaching?' is the wrong question. There is no value in using digital technology for its own sake. A more useful question is: 'I have a certain problem to solve in my teaching: can the technology help me?' Similarly, an expert in high-tech who develops a new digital tool and asks 'How can this be used to

help language teaching?' is also asking the wrong question. Digital tools should not be seen as solutions looking for problems.

One example of solutions being applied to problems instead of the other way round is the use of corpora in language teaching: what is called *DDL* (data-driven learning). *Corpora* – enormous databases of spoken or written language in use – are an essential tool for establishing, for example, the frequency of a particular word or expression, or the most common collocations for a given word. And they have furnished the basis for some important linguistics research. It has been suggested, therefore, that there is a place for using corpora in language teaching: getting students to check out hypotheses about language – collocational links, for example – by checking through corpus-based concordances (lists of sentence-length contexts for a given word). Research on DDL has, on the whole, been in favour of its use (e.g., Gilquin and Granger, 2022); but the question is whether the same information could not have been accessed more quickly through a dictionary or information from a teacher, and whether the improvement in learning outcomes warrants the substantial investment of time and effort.

Issues that the technology can help with

For this reason, the organizing principle of Section 3 on practical uses of the technology is not types of digital tools and how they can be used, but the other way round: some key aspects of language acquisition and how the use of the technology in the classroom can facilitate them or help solve related teaching problems. The section will thus pull together some suggestions already made in earlier chapters, and add more.

Pause for thought

Can you think of an example from your own learning of any subject where digital tools definitely helped you in your learning, better than the equivalent low-tech tool would have done? And why? Conversely, can you think of an example where low-tech was better?

Comment

In my own learning, I could not do without technology as a means of keeping up to date with the latest research and reading. If I had to rely on paper books and journals, this would be a lot more expensive and involve time-consuming ordering of books or travelling to libraries. On the other hand, I learned Spanish from face-to-face lessons with a teacher immeasurably better than I did using an online language-teaching program.

Teaching different aspects of language using digital technology

This section relates to uses of digital technology in teaching and assessing listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary.

Listening

The most important source of listening practice is arguably that which learners get by listening to their teacher (see 8 Teaching listening). But this needs to be supplemented by the use of online recordings in order to provide experience of different kinds of speech accents and interactional contexts. The internet provides an enormous range and variety of such listening texts; the problem, of course, is how to find and select appropriate ones.

On the whole, it is better to use video rather than audio recordings in the classroom in most authentic listening situations the speaker is visible, and it is much easier to understand someone whose face you can see. So use movies, recorded lectures like TED talks or shorter video extracts rather than podcasts for listening practice. Note that on both YouTube and Vimeo there is a useful facility on the 'settings' menu which enables you to change the speed of the speech, so you can slow it down if necessary to make it easier for your students to understand. You can also display or hide subtitles and/or the transcript. If you can't find exactly what you want, you can make your own videos from a text using AI (artificial intelligence) tools like Fliki or Steve AI. You might combine digital with low-tech: for example, show a cartoon or video clip of a story, but turn off the sound and compose your own voice-over, to make sure the text is appropriate for the level of your students.

The exception to the recommendation to use video is when you are preparing students for an exam where you know they are going to be tested using audio recordings, in which case the examination authority normally will provide practice recordings for preparation.

Speaking

Chatbots – for example, chat.D-ID – are AI tools which enable learners to converse with a convincingly human-sounding interlocutor. There are also the virtual assistants like Alexa (Amazon), Cortana (Microsoft) and Siri (Apple) who will answer questions and make suggestions, though they cannot at the time of writing develop a full human-like discussion.

Such tools cannot function as a substitute for practice in real conversational English – which in my view needs to be based primarily on real interaction with a human interlocutor – but can usefully provide a basis for short supplementary speaking tasks. For example, the learner can be asked to elicit from a digital assistant information on a set of topics – 'Can you tell me about ...?' 'Give me some information about ...?' – or answers to a set of questions, or suggestions to solve a given problem. Such activities can be done in class, using smartphones, or they can be done at home and recorded. Note that such tasks can only be completed successfully if the learners are speaking comprehensible English, so they provide reassurance to the speaker as to the comprehensibility of their speech.

Technology can also help with providing opportunities for real interaction with a human interlocutor in English: Tandem, for example, pairs speakers from different linguistic backgrounds to help them learn each other's languages. Finally, videoconferencing tools like Zoom can provide a platform for conversations between teacher and student in the one-to-one or small-group classroom.

The other important digital tools to support the teaching of speaking are the recording and video recording tools: Audacity, for example, for audio, or ScreenPal, Loom or Captivate for video. Learners can thus record conversations with an AI interlocutor in a chatbot, as suggested above, or they can record any conversations or interviews they are asked to do for homework. Perhaps most importantly, they can record oral presentations. Presentations are an important component of many English courses, particularly in EAP or business English courses, where graduates will need to give lectures or presentations as part of their future jobs. In the past, such presentations were always given in class, which was very time-consuming, stressful for the presenter and often rather boring for the audience. Today, screencasting tools mean that they can easily be recorded, and then watched and assessed by the teacher later.

Reading

From the teacher's point of view, the main change in the teaching of reading has been the increased choice and accessibility of reading texts. Time was when a teacher who wanted increased choice and accessibility of reading texts. Time was when a teacher who wanted to choose readings for a class was either limited to those available in textbooks, or had to search through books and make photocopies. Today, the amount of reading material available at the click of a mouse is mind-boggling; as with listening texts, the problem is not finding, but scanning through and selecting.

A second, more recent, change in the teaching of reading as a result of digital technology is the increased ease of creating original texts through GPT. An appropriate prompt to tools like GPT-4 or Bing will produce an entire text which you have not actually written, but which is composed according to your requirements. You need to make sure that your prompt is very specific (see 'Prompt literacy' in Section 1). If you are teaching a mixed-level class, for example, you can tell GPT to make a longer and more advanced version of a text, or a shorter, simpler one for different students to work on. You will still need to check it through (this goes for any AI-generated text), but this tool saves you an enormous amount of work. For younger learners, it's easy to develop your own text into digital book form with illustrations through tools such as Storywizd.ai or Tome.

An example of a particular use of GPT for the creation of texts is to support the process called *narrow reading*. If a class has read a text that includes a number of vocabulary items that you want students to acquire, it is useful to get them to read another text later that uses the same items in a different context. Finding or composing such a text, however, used to be time-consuming and difficult; today, with the help of GPT, it can be produced in a few seconds.

From the reader/learner's point of view, two digital tools which make reading a lot easier are text-to-speech and translation. A learner can easily get the computer to read aloud or translate either single words or complete passages – a 'text to speech' tool and translation into a large number of languages is built into modern versions of MS Word, for example. Adding extensions like Read Aloud or Google Translate to a browser will, again, enable the learner to click on any word and immediately access how it sounds when read aloud and/or how it translates into their first language.

Writing

Interpersonal communication in the twentieth century was mostly spoken; either face-to-face or through the telephone. Today, a lot of it is in writing, through email, texting, social media or other forms of computer-mediated communication. Hence there is a rise in the importance of learning to write. It is still essential to be able to handwrite, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future; but most writing is today done through the keyboard.

The most obvious form of interpersonal written online communication is email, but this is used less for language teaching these days than text-messaging tools such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and others. These readily lend themselves to real-time interactive written communications such as questions and answers between students, or queries to the teacher. For example, you might practise question forms by getting students to send questions through a messaging app to each other during a lesson; each answer has to be accompanied by another question which is answered, and so on. Other types of interaction involve the students responding in different ways to a particular text, cue or picture; these can take place perhaps more conveniently on blogs set up through, for example, WordPress.com, or through typing into word-processing programs like MS Word, and then submitted to the teacher online, through uploading to a school website or as an email attachment.

A learner can take advantage today of automated writing evaluation (AWE) tools such as Grammarly or Write and Improve, which scan a text, locate errors such as misspelling or grammatical mistakes, and suggest corrections. Note that GPT can do the same. The use of AWE has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the learner can, without resorting to a dictionary or grammar, find out what their mistakes are, at the level of accuracy of things like spelling, grammar and punctuation, and correct them before submitting the assignment. On the other, if the assignment needs to be assessed, it is difficult for the teacher to know if the fact that a piece of writing is error-free does in fact prove that the learner is able to write at this level. Also, note that AWE tools cannot evaluate very well more general aspects of a piece of writing such as coherence, relevance, organization and so on. Even more problematic is the use of machine translation (MT) tools (Google Translate, DeepL, or, again, GPT) which can today produce results at a level close to the performance of an expert human translator. For this reason, many institutions ban the use of MT, and severely penalize those students who are found to have been using it.

If writing is not done for assessment, however, but rather for learning purposes, both MT and AWE tools can be useful. MT can be used, in a monolingual class, as a basis for some interesting translation-based exercises: analysing, for example, the differences between the translations made of a specific passage by Google Translate as compared to those produced by DeepL, or comparing students' own translation of a sentence with an MT version. The corrections suggested by AWE can result in substantial learning of specific language points, as well as improvement in students' writing. Note, however, that the use of such tools does not eliminate the need for teacher checking: even Grammarly occasionally corrects non-existent mistakes, or fails to correct existing ones. In other words, AWE – like many other digital tools – can save work for a teacher, but cannot entirely replace them. When the teacher is personally providing the feedback, the process can be made a lot easier by the use of appropriate technology: through annotating or track changes tools in

a word processor or, even more quickly and easily, through recording oral feedback using one of the screencasting tools mentioned earlier.

Mixed skills

Finally, technology can help with the use of two or more skills together to reinforce each other or support comprehension. For example, text-to-speech, or speech-to-text tools are easily available, using Gboard or the relevant command on MS Word; alternatively, there are specific programs targeting text-to-speech or text-to-speech (for example, VEED or SpeechTexter, respectively). So if students are having trouble understanding an audio text, they can access the written version, or ask the computer to read aloud a text as they read it silently themselves. Or they can speak into a microphone and check that what they are saying is comprehensible and can be transformed into written text. For comprehension work also, mixed-skills tools are invaluable: for example, tools like Edpuzzle can insert occasional reading or writing tasks into video recordings or films.

Vocabulary and grammar

Many of the tools mentioned above relating to the four skills are clearly also relevant to the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Some others that specifically target lexical and grammatical accuracy are the following.

Dictionaries and grammars. Online dictionaries have the advantage that they are not only easy and quick to use, often with hyperlinks that will provide you with more information about a word and associated phrases, but also provide spoken versions – a vast improvement on the sometimes rather opaque phonemic representation in print dictionaries. On the other hand, there is some evidence that the use of paper dictionaries leads to better retention of new vocabulary (Chiu and Liu, 2013), so don't discard them completely! Grammars are also available online: for example, my own favourite, *Practical English Usage* (Swan, 2017).

Vocabulary work. The digital equivalent of word cards or vocabulary notebooks can be found in tools such as Quizlet and Wordwall. The advantage of these over their paper counterparts is that the programs are able to create games, activities and tests that use the listed words or expressions for varied types of review. These can be planned for classroom use, or assigned for homework. Other tools like Visuwords™ or WordArt display vocabulary connected to a basic theme, through word clouds or networks.

Language exercises and tests

Test questions which can also furnish the basis for exercises, either done interactively with a teacher or online with optional self-check facilities, can be created through Google Forms, Microsoft Forms or Quizizz. Socrative is another useful tool, more appropriate for use within a lesson than for homework. In all of these, questions may be either closed (multiple-choice, for example) or open (short or full-paragraph answers). A very useful combination is to get a GPT tool to compose an exercise (you can tell it what kinds of questions to ask and what items you want to include), and then transfer this exercise into programs like Wordwall or Socrative for students to actually do (and, if wished, check their own answers).

Pause for thought

Scan through this section and highlight in blue all those tools which you have experience using, and have been successful in green those which you don't yet have experience of but would like to try out; in yellow those you don't think you are likely to use; in red those which you have tried out and were not very successful at whatever reason.

Comment

As I wrote earlier, there is no virtue in using technology for its own sake; we need to be critical and selective, and to learn from experience. And it is just as important to know what tools to avoid as to know which ones to adopt. Just because another teacher has used something successfully does not mean that you, or I, will also find it effective in our classrooms. It's often difficult to judge this in advance – particularly as the websites are obviously keen to sell their product, and present a perhaps over-optimistic picture of what you can do with it and how effective it is for language learning! So it's often a good idea to try out a new tool in class at least once to see what the results are, and only then decide whether or not to continue using it in the future. Many websites allow you a free experimental period before they start requiring money, or provide basic free versions which can be upgraded to paid premium ones.

18.4 Teaching online

Online teaching compared to face-to-face

During the COVID pandemic, many schools moved entirely to online teaching due to the rules on social distancing enforced in many countries. There is evidence that such teaching produced, on the whole, lower learning outcomes (Dodgson, 2020; Moser et al., 2020). This of course was particularly true in countries where the necessary hardware and internet access were inadequate, or mainly confined to urban areas (British Council, 2021), but it was observable even in places where the technology was widely available.

There are, of course, exceptions: teachers and students who felt that the learning process is at least as successful as face-to-face. See, for example, the first item in the anecdotes below. My own experience chatting to teachers and students during the pandemic, and observing student behaviour, corresponds broadly with the above assessment. Here are some anecdotal snippets.

- A gifted secondary-school student told me she was relieved to be learning online, since time in the face-to-face lessons was often wasted on discipline problems; online, the teacher could get on with the substance of the lesson without distractions.
- An elementary-school pupil suffering from mild ADHD simply opted out, and did not participate in the online lessons, even when sitting in front of the screen while the lesson was going on.

- An elementary school teacher expressed relief at the prospect of returning to face-to-face.
- A university-level student admitted that the main reason he preferred online sessions was the convenience of not having to travel, the comfort of sitting at home, and the time saved.
- In a Zoom session held with a group of teacher trainees for whom the session was compulsory, two or three turned off their cameras and did not respond to questions; and one was (with his camera on but microphone off!) clearly chatting with someone off-screen for most of the session.

Pause for thought

What is your own experience of teaching and learning online? Overall, do you prefer distance learning, or face-to-face? Or does it depend? On what?

Comment

My own preference is for face-to-face, both as learner and as teacher. I like to have the feeling of personal interaction with my teacher or my students in the same room. The exception is where I'm learning mostly factual information. Then the interaction with the teacher is not so important, and I can get a lot of the material simply by reading off the screen.

Why are the results of distance learning often disappointing?

It seems likely that distance teaching/learning is in general less effective in most contexts than face-to-face. This is not just because of technical problems, but also, and mainly, because using a platform like Zoom, teacher and students can see only a small square two-dimensional picture of each other's head-and-shoulders; this picture may be very small, perhaps not always visible if the group is a large one; and many students prefer to turn off their cameras, in which case they will not be seen at all. The physical presence of participants enables:

- enhanced visibility and clarity of facial expression;
- communication through body language;
- the chance to rearrange positions of the teacher and/or learners;
- the possibility of using interactive procedures such as fluid mingling;
- scanning of the entire class by the teacher to check up on attention and learner activity.

The whole, moreover, is more than the sum of its parts: being physically together is in itself conducive to real communication. This is the reason why, incidentally, for high-stakes political or business negotiations the negotiators prefer to fly to other countries in order to meet up face-to-face rather than discuss issues online.

Then there is the phenomenon of 'Zoom fatigue': the fact that teaching for long hours online is tiring, much more so than conventional classroom teaching. Reasons for this include:

- the difficulty of listening to and understanding oral input for long periods, which may or may not be clearly audible, with only minimal support from facial expression and none from body language;
- the lack of physical mobility;
- the stress deriving from having to look at one's own face for extended periods (though in fact some platforms allow you to hide your own picture if you wish);
- the fact that online teaching appears to require rather more preparation than does conventional classroom teaching.

Increasing the effectiveness of online teaching and learning

In any case, distance teaching/learning through videoconferencing is here to stay (think the question whether it is more or less effective than face-to-face is academic, and it may be being used for a variety of other reasons: because, as during the pandemic, face-to-face is not an option; because there are too many student participants to fit in a classroom; because the students and/or the teacher live too far away; because it does not require travel; because it is cheaper).

The most important question is therefore: given that we shall continue, at least some of the time, to teach online, what can make our teaching more effective?

Some basic factors are the following.

Control of the technology. Clearly this is fundamental: inability to use digital tools effectively can ruin even the most promising lesson plans. This does not just mean being able to log in to the chosen platform and use cameras and microphones, but also seamless integration of other interactive tools available. These include the chatbox, the whiteboard and possibilities of drawing or typing on it, breakout rooms and polls – all of which are included in the Zoom package and other videoconferencing platforms.

Synchronous versus asynchronous. A *synchronous* online session is the conventional webinar where teachers and students are both attending the session together, in real time. In *asynchronous* online teaching, there is no set time for a lesson: the teacher records material, or gives assignments which the students can study in their own time, and submit their responses as they are ready. Asynchronous tasks are virtually homework, and the interaction with the teacher is less direct. In the context of language teaching, particularly in schools, synchronous lessons on the whole probably lead to better learning than asynchronous, though there is a place for a combination of the two, particularly in the context of higher education. They can be combined in what is called the *flipped classroom*: students study the material in advance, through a video recorded by the teacher or through reading, and then the actual lesson is devoted to discussion or developing the information studied. The flipped classroom is not very widely used in schools, mainly because it has been found that many schoolchildren simply do not do the pre-lesson study task. The same sometimes happens even in higher education. As soon as a substantial minority of the class fail to prepare, the whole procedure is doomed to failure. Where the students can be relied upon to do the preparation, however, it can work well (particularly for subjects which rely heavily on factual knowledge: history, for example).

Rules. Some basic rules need to be established with the learners in online lessons to make sure they run smoothly. Some of these are similar to those that apply to any lesson (see 17 Classroom discipline); some of them are specific to online ones. Online rules that teachers have told me are useful include things like:

- Keep your camera open during the lesson;
- Turn off your microphone except when you are called on, or volunteer, to speak;
- Use the chatbox only for contributions that are relevant to current lesson activity.

Lesson planning and preparation. Teachers' experience indicates that successful online lessons require rather more preparation than conventional ones. A major reason for this is that, for many students, the online framework is less engaging, and there is the constant risk of boredom and wandering attention. The lesson, therefore, needs to be composed of a variety of different kinds of content, including plenty of images (see ideas on using pictures based on digital sources in 19 Learner differences 1: age, Section 2) and active participation by students (see the next paragraph). If online tools such as those mentioned earlier in this chapter are used, they need to be selected and made ready; their link located on your screen so that they can be activated smoothly at the click of a mouse.

Interaction. With online teaching, it is too easy to fall into lecture mode, using perhaps a PowerPoint or Canva presentation with the share-screen facility. Students are likely to get bored if they have no opportunity to respond and contribute. With relatively small groups – 20 students or fewer – it is possible to run a full-class discussion; but with larger groups such discussions are likely to result in the neglect of most of the members of the group, who may cease to attend. Some better possibilities for interactive process that activate all the participants, or most of them simultaneously, are to use the following tools:

- The chatbox for responses, particularly if these are open-ended. Some examples: 'Write in the chatbox as many adjectives as you can that might describe a road', or 'Write up ideas for questions that might get the answer *maybe*.' Such brainstorming is an excellent way of keeping students busy and attentive as they gather at the beginning of the lesson.
- Break-out rooms for small-group discussion tasks. These cannot go on for too long – five to ten minutes is usually plenty – and should have a clear goal. Note that on most platforms, you cannot share-screen at the same time as you have breakout rooms, so you will need to send the instructions separately, or write them into the chatbox.
- Polls (the inbuilt 'poll' facility in Zoom, for example, or other tools such as Poll Everywhere for questions requiring limited response, or Mentimeter). These are good for survey-type activities, eliciting students' feedback, preferences or experiences, as well as for closed-ended language exercises.
- Questions and tasks interwoven with a Canva or PowerPoint presentation. You might, for example, use ClassPoint to insert interactive tasks between slides, with the possibility of immediate or delayed feedback.

Combination with face-to-face

Online teaching can be combined with face-to-face, usually in one of three models: the flipped classroom (as described above under 'Synchronous versus asynchronous'), where the follow-up lesson is face-to-face; blended teaching/learning; and hybrid teaching/learning.

Blended teaching/learning. Blended teaching/learning takes place when some of the lessons are online and some face-to-face. Students may, for example, attend one lesson a week online, and the rest face-to-face – or vice versa. This is a situation which we are developing in many institutions as a result of having to use distance learning during the COVID era. While many, perhaps most, teachers and students prefer the conventional classroom, they are also more aware than previously of the potential benefits of the online teaching/learning experience, have amassed considerable expertise in using the technology, and are happy to combine the two.

Hybrid teaching/learning. This term is not to be confused with blended teaching/learning. It refers to the situation where the lesson is being taught by a teacher in a conventional classroom, but some of the students are in fact elsewhere, participating online. This seems like a good solution for times when some students can attend and others not, but it is very tricky. Cameras, screens, microphones and loudspeakers need to be carefully placed so that students who are physically in the classroom can see and hear those online, and vice versa, and so that all can see any teaching materials the teacher is using. There are also limitations on how much the teacher and students can move around the classroom, and on types of interactive tasks that can be used. See Nicky Hockly's more detailed discussion of this issue (Hockly, 2022, pp. 27–28).

Review: Check yourself

- 1 How many kinds of digital literacies can you recall? Which, in your view, are the most important?
- 2 What is the main criterion for determining whether or not to use a particular digital technology in the language classroom?
- 3 What are some useful digital tools to help your students improve their speaking and writing?
- 4 What are some useful digital tools to help your students improve their listening and reading?
- 5 What can be done to increase the effectiveness of online language teaching using a webinar tool such as Zoom?

Further reading

Hockly, N. (2022). *Nicky Hockly's 50 Essentials for Using Learning Technologies*. Cambridge University Press.

(A brief, clear and accessible summary of the main issues in using the technology in language teaching.)

Pegrum, M., Hockly, N. and Dudeney, G. (2022). *Digital Literacies*. Routledge.

(A comprehensive overview not only of digital literacies, but also of the various uses of digital technology for language teaching. A number of practical activities are suggested to support the learning of digital literacies for language learners.)

Russell Stannard (teacher training videos)

www.youtube.com/channel/UCkJOFE0q71J4GFx4brmg

(A set of YouTube videos giving wide-ranging and practical advice by an expert on the use of digital technology in language teaching.)

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Overview

19.1 **Differences between younger and older learners.** A discussion of the critical period in language acquisition, and some language-learning characteristics typical of younger/older learners.

19.2 **Teaching young learners.** Practical guidelines for the teaching of young learners.

19.3 **Teaching adolescents.** Adolescents' own opinions about how they like to be taught, and some practical implications.

19.4 **Teaching adults.** The teaching of adults compared to that of adolescents and young learners; some common types of adult courses.

19.1

Differences between younger and older learners

It is commonly assumed that young children learn languages better than older ones. This is largely based on the observation that in immigrant families, young children normally become – apparently effortlessly – highly proficient in the new language. Research on children who did not have the opportunity to acquire language at an early age ('wolf children', or congenitally deaf children who recovered their hearing at a late age) ('Wolf' (CPH), young children have a natural ability to learn languages which deteriorates when they get older; though when exactly this critical period ends is a subject of debate.

The CPH has been the subject of much controversy and criticism (see, for example, Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). In any case, the evidence summarized above has commonly been used to justify starting foreign-language instruction in schools as early as possible; but this conclusion is not in fact supported by the research. A longitudinal study of children learning English in Barcelona comparing early with late starters in English courses in schools showed that even given the larger number of total hours that younger beginners had studied, their ultimate achievement was no better than that of the older colleagues (Muñoz, 2006). This result corresponds to the findings of Swain and her colleagues in extensive studies of students in immersion courses in Canada (Swain, 2000).

Pause for thought

What are your own feelings about starting English lessons early in schools?

Comment

In my country, English lessons are increasingly introduced – usually one or two a week – in the early years of primary school, while all the rest of the curriculum is taught in another language. When I ask the question on the previous page, I get a lot of different answers, depending on who is being asked. Parents, school principals, teachers of other subjects usually assume that starting English early in schools is a good thing. The majority of English teachers and other ELT professionals, on the other hand, are strongly opposed. Their opposition is not only because of the reasons given below, but also because the teachers who are leading these English lessons are usually not English teachers, but the class homeroom teachers. These may or may not be fluent in English and in any case do not have much knowledge of effective language-teaching procedures.

Younger learners learn less well in schools where English is taught as an additional language than they do when learning in an English-speaking environment as immigrants. Why is this?

1 Young children learn well in immigrant situations for a number of reasons which have nothing to do with natural language-learning ability. First, once they enter the education system of the new country, they have a huge number of daily hours of exposure to the target language, as contrasted with the two, three or four hours a week which are available to the learner of a foreign language in school. Second, they are extremely motivated: for a child entering a kindergarten or school in a new country, learning the language is a matter of survival; whereas a foreign language learned in school is for the learner merely a subject on the curriculum. Third, their engagement with the language is largely through one-to-one communication with local speakers of it, most often children of their own age – as opposed to being one of a class of 20 children or more with one teacher.

2 Older students learn faster. Research on children learning an additional language showed that, given the same amount of exposure to the foreign language, the older the child the more they learn (Muñoz, 2006). The fact that younger children learn much more slowly does not matter in an immigrant situation because they have plenty of time to be exposed to and practise using the language: it does, however, make a big difference if their learning depends on school-based instruction for a limited number of hours per week. Older children learn faster, mainly because of their superior cognitive abilities: it is commonly observed that school students who are best at English also tend to be good at other subjects. The conclusion has to be that language learning in school is not so much a function of a specific and independent predisposition to learn languages well, but is associated rather with the cognitive ability that enables students to learn all sorts of subjects successfully: how well they can understand, remember, problem-solve and think critically and creatively. Moreover, these abilities increase with age, up to adolescence. In other words, the older and/or more cognitively developed the child, the more likely they are to be able to learn English well in school.

So the answer to the question 'Do younger learners learn languages better?' is yes, if they are in a total immersion situation where they have extensive exposure to the language, high motivation and plenty of time; but no, if the context is school-based lessons where another language is spoken outside the classroom. In school-based lessons, the older they are, the more they will benefit from instruction. So it is probably unwise to insist on children starting English in the early stages of primary school in a country where another language is spoken outside the classroom, and preferable to invest language-teaching hours at a later stage, when learners can make better use of them.

However, since the assumption that in foreign language learning younger is better is widely believed, the Ministries of Education in most countries require an early start to English teaching, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Given that in many places children do start to learn English early in school – most commonly from the age of eight or nine, but sometimes earlier – we need to explore how young students learn, and to consider how best to teach them. It is necessary, therefore, to look at the differences in the ways younger and older students learn languages.

- 1 **Implicit versus explicit learning.** Children learn best through implicit learning: imitating, memorizing, acquiring intuitively through repeated exposure and production in enjoyable or interesting activities (see Section 2 on the next page for some examples). However, this kind of learning, though effective in the long term, takes a lot of time. The older a student gets, the better they will be able to use explicit learning processes: understanding and applying explanations, deliberate learning of lists of vocabulary, testing hypotheses, focused practice (DeKeyser, 2012). These are efficient, time-saving strategies; they do not replace the more implicit processes involved in comprehension and production of communicative content, but rather supplement them, and lead to more cost-effective and ultimately successful learning.
- 2 **Discipline and cooperation.** Adult classes tend to be more disciplined and cooperative – as anyone who has moved from teaching children to teaching adults, or vice versa, will have found (see Section 4). This may be because as they get older, people learn to appreciate the value of self-restraint and disciplined cooperation in order to achieve long-term gains. Younger learners are more impatient, and less tolerant of tedious practice or difficult tasks with no immediate reward.
- 3 **Concentration span.** Teachers often notice that they cannot get young children to concentrate on certain learning activities for as long as they can get older learners to do so. However, the problem is not the attention span itself – children will spend long periods of time on activities that really interest them – but the fact that older learners are more likely to be willing to continue to focus attention on doing something of no immediate interest to them because of its long-term benefits. One implication for teaching is the need to give careful thought to the (intrinsic) interest value of learning activities for younger learners.
- 4 **Motivation.** Most young learners and adolescents are learning English because they have to: it is part of the curriculum at school, or their parents have decided to pay for tuition. They may have little awareness of the reasons for learning, and neither young nor adolescent students have much choice as to where, how or by whom they are taught. So their motivation is likely to depend either on extrinsic factors such as test results and grades, or on intrinsic ones such as the interest-value of the texts and tasks.

Teaching young learners

Younger learners are defined here as those in the early classes of primary school, up to age ten or so.

Pause for thought

What are some pluses and minuses of teaching classes of younger learners, in your view?

Comment

Younger classes are those I most enjoy teaching. This is largely because I love seeing my students succeeding in their learning – and with younger classes, since they are usually beginners, you can easily perceive at the end of the year how much they have progressed. But it is also because of the lift you experience during lessons, when watching them enjoy things like performing dialogues and plays, playing games, completing age-appropriate tasks and so on. On the other hand, large classes of younger learners can be difficult to control, and sometimes things get out of hand (see 17 Classroom discipline).

Some useful guidelines to bear in mind when teaching younger learners are the following:

The use of learning tasks that help implicit learning. This means providing lots of exposure to meaningful language, with opportunities to learn such language by heart, play with it or use it to convey messages. And it means less, or no, use of abstract explanations, language analysis or exercises based on application of rules.

The arousal of motivation through activities and materials that will grab and maintain learner interest. We can't rely on long-term motivation to learn English; the students will need to be motivated by the enjoyment or interest generated by the activities themselves.

Lessons that are planned to include a variety of relatively short components. Learning tasks can vary in different ways: stirring (more exciting) activities versus settling (calmer) ones; ones that demand physical activity versus ones done sitting down; collaborative versus individual or teacher-led interaction. They also vary as to the skill being used: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Some practical ways in which we can implement these guidelines are through using visual stimuli, stories, games and language play.

Visual stimuli

Lack of aural stimulus is relatively easy to tolerate: even young learners will work for a while in silence without needing something to listen to. However, this is not true of visual stimuli. Sight is a very dominant sense; so much so, that if young learners are not given something to look at that is relevant to the current learning task, they will probably find (and be distracted by) something that is not. The most obvious type of visual material for

children is a picture, and the more clearly visible, interesting and colourful the better. Pictures are very useful as the basis for language tasks and can be used for describing, interpreting, dictating, comparing, and more. On the whole, professionally drawn pictures or photographs are most commonly used: those in the textbook, or coloured posters, or pictures downloaded from the internet and projected on a screen.

But there is also a place for the teacher's own quick drawings on the board. Don't be discouraged from drawing because you feel you are not good enough! Even utility and inartistic drawings by the teacher are appreciated by young learners. Or use tools like AutoDraw, which interprets your rough sketch and makes it look professional. If you are looking for a very simple image, then modern versions of Microsoft Word provide a wide variety of icons, drawings and photographs under its *icons* and *pictures* tabs.

For more complex or detailed pictures, there are also AI text-into-image tools like DALL-E or Stable Diffusion that will create pictures in response to a verbal description; but it takes time to get exactly what you want, and probably you are better off typing a brief description into Google Images and then scrolling through until you find something you like. You need to be aware, however, that there may be a problem of copyright with some pictures published online: see page 250.

Videos, particularly brief video clips, are also very attractive to children. Tools are available to help you edit video recordings or insert questions or task (edpuzzle, for example). There are plenty of video versions of children's stories available online through YouTube or Vimeo, though the language of the text may be too difficult or spoken too fast. A useful strategy to deal with this issue is to turn off the sound and supply your own voice-over at a level and speed appropriate to your students.

Finally, young learners enjoy drawing their own pictures, to illustrate written compositions in response to activities like 'Picture dictation' (students draw, instead of writing, the meanings of words or phrases that the teacher dictates). They can also draw on the board. This not only provides student-created visual stimuli, but also gets them on their feet for some welcome physical movement. Note that you can have two or three students at the board – or drawing on an online whiteboard – simultaneously: it doesn't have to be one at a time.

Stories

Stories are one of the simplest and richest sources of language input. Young children enjoy and benefit from stories told in language they can understand.

Folk tales are particularly appropriate for younger learners. It doesn't matter if they already know the plot: they will enjoy hearing and understanding the English version. Folk tales often involve repetition of similar phrases or sentences in a series of similar events that build up to a climax, as in *The Gingerbread Man*, or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. (See Taylor, *Using Folktales* (2000), for a collection of folk tales with suggestions for how to use them in teaching.) Many modern stories for children include the same kind of repetitive cycles (Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, for example). This kind of repetition is very good for language learning, and after a while, the students can themselves join in and chant the key phrases with you as you get to them.

A very effective combination in teaching is pictures and stories together; telling the class stories from picture books, for example. If you can project the pictures on the screen as you tell the story, so much the better; but in a conventional classroom it's usually simpler just to turn the book round to display the pictures as you go.

Many picture books with stories suitable for young learners are, however, intended for L1 English speakers, and the language of the stories is therefore likely to be too difficult for the students. A solution is to improvise the story in your own words, based on the pictures, rather than reading aloud. This allows you to add, repeat, paraphrase or occasionally translate, in order to make sure that your students are following. Narrating in this way in the classroom also allows you to maintain more eye contact with the students so that the storytelling becomes – as it should be – a form of personal interaction between storyteller and listeners. It also makes it easier to stop and elicit responses.

Games

Children in general learn well when they are active; and when action is channelled into an enjoyable game, they are often happy to invest a lot of time and effort in playing it. However, games in a language lesson need to be carefully designed so that they do contribute to language learning as well as being fun. Some games are largely a waste of time. In popular word games like 'Hangman', 'Wordsearch', 'Wordle' and others, learners spend most of the time searching or randomly guessing rather than actually engaging with meaningful English (see a more detailed critique of 'Hangman' in 4 Tasks). Other types of games waste time in other ways – distributing and gathering in boards, cards, dice and/or counters for board games, for example – so that almost as much time is spent on setting them up as on playing them. Finally, there is the problem of preparation time. Many online games take more time to prepare than they actually take to play in the classroom: I stopped using 'Kahoot!', for example, for exactly this reason. (Though such preparation may be worthwhile if you know you will use the result several times.) The good news is that there are hundreds of games that are easy to set up, learning-rich and enjoyable. Here are three of my own favourites.

1 **Guessing games.** There is a huge variety of guessing games that can be used for language learning, focusing particularly on *Yes/No* question forms.

- **What's in the picture?** (The picture is hidden, or students are shown a blurred version, or a small corner of it, or a quick glance before it is hidden.)
- **I spy with my little eye something beginning with [a letter]** (but of course it doesn't have to be something that you can actually see at that moment, it could be any noun).
- **What do I have in my bag?** (Students guess what you have in a bag; objects can include all sorts of things brought from home.)
- **Who am I?** (Choose a celebrity or someone all the students know.)
- **What's my job?** (Perhaps give a hint through mime.)
- **What am I doing?** (mime)
- **Twenty questions.** (Give a hint, and then the students have 20 questions to enable them to guess the answer.)

- 2 **Interpretations.** Draw an abstract doodle on the board and invite students to say what they think it represents. The idea you think most interesting or original wins, and the student gets to draw the next doodle and judge the suggestions. Or display a picture of a character, and invite students (in groups, or in the full class) to build a picture of a character based on what they look like: name, age, nationality, family, occupation, interests, ambitions, problems, past history, etc.

- 3 **Name them.** Students are put in pairs and each student is given a copy of the picture shown below. In turn, each student chooses a character, decides on a name for them, and tells their partner what it is ('You see the man in the black hat, he's smiling ... his name is Peter'). The condition is that students are not allowed to look at their partners' pictures. They can write in the names on their own pictures, but the identification of the character to be named has to be done entirely through talking. After a certain time, stop them. Students lay their pictures on their desks and check that they have given the same names to the same people. As an optional follow-up, ask them to tell each other what colour the faces, clothes and other things in the picture are, and colour in accordingly.



Language play, songs, chants, rhymes

There are many very useful activities that are based on enjoyment of the sound of the language and/or amusing or piquant meanings rather than serious communicative purpose (Cook, 2000). So, for example, we might introduce young learners to the onomatopoeic noises animals make in English, as compared to the noises the same animals make in their own language. Or play with rhyming phrases (e.g. 'a blue shoe', 'Silly Billy') or alliterative ones (e.g. 'a happy hippopotamus', 'a lonely lion'). Or write acrostic poems (poems where each line begins with a letter of a word written vertically down the left-hand side of the page). (See Holmes and Moulton, (2001), for this and other good ideas for poetry writing by younger learners.)

Other types of language play involve learning sequences of language by heart and then performing them: songs, chants, rhymes and so on. The most obvious of these uses is songs. Like stories, songs are enjoyed by younger learners and are a rich source of language.

However, unlike stories, the enjoyment of songs is not dependent on understanding. Children can enjoy hearing and singing songs that make no sense to them, so you do need to make sure that they know what they are singing about! If you are singing songs regularly, check every now and again that they remember the meanings of problematic words or phrases. A useful strategy is to get them occasionally to say or chant the words of the song rather than singing it. This will focus them on the spoken rhythm of the lyrics and make it easier to transfer the words and phrases learnt through the song into their own speech.

For the reason given above, I find that chants are actually more useful for language learning than songs, and can be very enjoyable. Carolyn Graham has popularized the use of what she calls 'jazz chants' in English teaching (see, for example, Graham, (2006), or watch her on video on www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_nPUuhyCs). Jazz chants are designed to replicate the sound of natural speech, but because of the rhythmic quality are enjoyable to perform. They can be done in different ways: very loudly, very softly; very fast, very slowly; starting softly and getting louder (*crescendo*), or the reverse (*diminuendo*); in a high or low tone; and so on. They can also be accompanied by appropriate actions or mime, as in the example below.

I can jump,	(jump)
I can hop,	(hop)
I can clap,	(clap your hands)
And I can stop!	(freeze like a statue)
I can jump,	(jump)
I can hop,	(hop)
I can run,	(run on the spot)
And I can stop!	(freeze like a statue)

(from *Activities for Very Young Learners* by Puchta, H. and Elliott, K., 2017)

Traditional or modern rhymes, tongue twisters, brief dialogues or other chunks of language involving pleasing, humorous or dramatic combinations of words or phrases can be taught and used in the same way as chants.

19.3 Teaching adolescents

Adolescents learn faster than do children (see Section 1), and they may use more conscious, explicit strategies for language learning. However, motivation may not be very high: most of them are still learning because they have to rather than because they want to, and may therefore be reluctant to invest effort. There is the added factor of adolescent-specific problems of identity, relationships, physical change and so on, which may make it more difficult for them to concentrate. So adolescent classes may be more difficult to motivate and manage, and it takes longer to build up trusting relationships.

One useful and reliable source about how to teach adolescents is the adolescents themselves. Their opinions can be elicited through questionnaires, such as the one shown on the next page. If you don't want to do the **Pause for thought**, read on to the **Comment** below it.

Pause for thought

What would be your own responses to the questions below? Make a note of what you would answer to each one. What do you think would be the responses of a member of your family. Then read on to the Comment below.

Questionnaire

Write a tick in the appropriate column.

A good teacher ...	Very much agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Disagree a lot
1 ... dresses nicely and looks good.					
2 ... cares a lot about their teaching.					
3 ... controls the class firmly.					
4 ... treats students with fairness and respect.					
5 ... is warm and friendly to students.					
6 ... knows and uses student names.					
7 ... is interested in each student as a person.					
8 ... will change the lesson plan if that's what the students want.					
9 ... lets students mark their own tests.					
10 ... lets students take over and run the lesson.					
11 ... makes sure students have fun in lessons.					
12 ... gets students to work hard.					
13 ... always gives interesting lessons.					
14 ... finds time to talk outside the classroom if a student needs help.					

(Questions 1, 8, 9, 11 are adapted from a questionnaire in 'Pupil appraisals of teaching' by E. C. Wragg and E. K. Wood, in Wragg (1984), pp. 230-232.)

Comment

The questionnaire was administered to two classes of 15-year-olds in the school where I taught, and their responses are described below, together with my own comments.

1 A good teacher dresses nicely and looks good.

There was agreement, but it was not unanimous. On the whole, I found that students care a lot less about their teachers' appearance than I would have expected. Moreover, in the Wragg and Wood survey referred to on the previous page, it was found that only a very small minority expected the teacher to be very smartly dressed. So we probably do not need to worry too much about appearance. However, note that this would depend also very much on the surrounding culture and what is expected in the institution.

2 A good teacher cares a lot about their teaching.

Most of my respondents agreed, some strongly. It seems that our professional commitment is very clearly communicated to students, though how well we prepare lessons, how quickly and thoroughly we check assignments, how much attention we pay to the progress of individual students and so on.

3 A good teacher controls the class firmly.

This was strongly agreed with. Most students like to feel that the teacher has authority and is clearly in control. Interestingly, you may feel a contradictory message coming across in many classes: the students may appear to be opposing you, but in fact they are relieved if you are consistently firm with your demands. There is a subtle distinction between being bossy (which students do not like) and being firm (which they do). See 17 Classroom discipline.

4/ A good teacher treats students with fairness and respect. /

5 A good teacher is warm and friendly to students. These two statements both relate to the kind of relationship students expect to have with you, and were both predictably agreed with by most adolescents. The interesting point here is that the first statement scored significantly higher than the second. Most adolescents think it is more important for you to respect them than for you to be their friend. The one, of course, may sometimes lead to the other, but what needs to be established first is respect and fairness as the basis of a teacher-student relationship.

6/ A good teacher knows and uses students' names. / A good teacher is

7 interested in each student as a person. These two statements apparently relate to the same teacher characteristic, and were both agreed with. My respondents, however, were noticeably less enthusiastic about the second than about the first. Adolescent students certainly want you to identify and relate to them as individuals. However, they do not necessarily want you to be too interested in what

may be seen as private territory. Be careful with adolescents when dealing with personal matters. Sometimes they may welcome your interest, but at other times it may be embarrassing or distressing.

9/A good teacher will change the lesson plan and do something else if that tests / I like it when the students want / A good teacher lets students mark their own these relate to the idea that students should themselves take responsibility for some learning decisions. Although many of my respondents were very mixed, and to 9 there was complete disagreement. In the Wood survey referred to earlier, students actually identified 8 as a characteristic of a bad teacher. My own conclusion would be that adolescent students expect you to take the decisions. This does not mean that they should not be consulted and their opinions taken into account, but the ultimate responsibility for decisions about classroom management, lesson planning and assessment is seen as the teacher's.

11/A good teacher makes sure students have fun in lessons / A good teacher gets students to work hard. These two questions relate to how serious and learning-focused the students think lessons should be. My students agreed with both statements, but they gave a higher score to the second. Students like to enjoy themselves, but are very aware that they are in lessons to learn English. In the vast majority of cases, they judge their teachers, ultimately, by how much they learn from them; not by how much they enjoy their lessons. Furthermore, as they get older, they understand more clearly that good learning requires effort.

13 A good teacher always gives interesting lessons. Predictably, most respondents agreed with this one fairly enthusiastically. This is all very well, but they do not, naturally, consider whether it is reasonable to demand that all lessons be consistently interesting! Both teachers and students need to be realistic in their expectations.

14 A good teacher finds time to talk outside the classroom if a student needs help. This was agreed with almost unanimously. Our responsibility as teachers is not just to give lessons, but to do all we can to make sure that the students learn English. If this means setting up brief meetings to chat to or advise individual students outside lesson time, then it is important to try to make the time to do so.

Teaching adults

The teaching of English to adults has increased in recent years, as more and more people realize how important it is for them to know English. In theory, the number of adult learners should decrease in coming years, as English is now taught in most schools worldwide as a compulsory subject and required for many school-leaving exams. But the fact is that many students leave school with a relatively low level of proficiency in the language. This could be for various reasons: they may not have learnt well, or they may have been badly taught, or they may have had to leave school early to get a job. And as the relative number of older people who have retired from work grows in many countries, there is also an increase in English courses for seniors.

The bottom line is that the demand for adult classes in English seems unlikely to fall in the foreseeable future: on the contrary.

Advantages and disadvantages

The teaching of adults is in some ways easier than the teaching of children and adolescents. Adults are usually learning voluntarily and are very aware of the need to make progress. This means that they are likely to be disciplined, motivated and willing to invest effort in both class- and homework. All of this makes it much easier for the teacher, who does not usually have to worry about discipline or motivation problems. Adults are also able to learn through more sophisticated conscious learning strategies, such as finding and applying explanations, making their own lists of vocabulary to learn and so on.

On the other hand, adults are also likely to be more critical and demanding, and ready to complain to the teacher or the institution if they feel the teaching is unsatisfactory. This critical attitude is reinforced if they are paying for the lessons themselves, in which case they want to feel that they are getting their money's worth. To put it another way, a teacher of adults, particularly in private language schools, may be seen as a hired coach rather than an authority or educator as they are in school. Some tact may be needed in activating and giving feedback to adults, particularly those who are in management posts and are used to having authority over others. They may find the role of student, acknowledging the authority of the teacher, difficult to cope with, especially when they make mistakes and are corrected, or when their work is assessed and criticized. And they may find it very stressful speaking in English in class, where they are suddenly unable to express themselves as fluently and authoritatively as they can in daily life. We need, therefore, to make sure we treat these students respectfully and supportively when giving feedback or inviting participation.

Teaching methods

As mentioned earlier, adults tend to learn the language well through conscious learning strategies. They benefit from explicit descriptions of language, explanations of grammar, and detailed definitions of meanings. They appreciate opportunities to apply language rules in focused exercises. Many are also interested in learning about the language: for example, the etymology of particular words, comparisons between American and

British English, or contrasts with their own language. However, they also need plenty of communicative practice, in all four skills: how much, and in what balance, will depend on the type of course: see **Types of courses** below.

Many adult classes are relatively advanced. This means that you are likely, even with a monolingual class whose L1 you know, to be able to conduct the entire lesson in English. Their level, combined with high motivation, means that you can normally get through material, including a reserve that you can use if you finish everything you had planned.

Types of courses

The main types of adult English classes which you may be required to teach are listed below. **General English.** Most courses for adults are aimed at improving general proficiency: the students have found that the amount of English they learnt at school is inadequate for their present needs, or for potential future employment. Such courses are often run by private language schools or institutions such as the British Council, and might prepare students for one of the international exams (such as IELTS).

English for Academic Purposes (EAP). These are courses that are provided in universities or other institutions of higher education. The students may be learning English because the university is itself located in an English-speaking country, so all the courses are run in English. Or they may be studying at a university in a non-English-speaking country but need a high level of academic English, both written and spoken, in order to access the research literature, to write papers for international journals, hear and understand lectures given by experts from abroad, or participate in international conferences. Also, the number of courses given in English (EMI) in universities all over the world is increasing (see **16 Teaching content**). The emphasis is on the acquisition of academic vocabulary, and on the development of a formal and correct English written and spoken style, rather than communicative informal conversation.

Business English (BE). This is another field which is on the increase. Most university business management programmes worldwide will include BE courses, and many large international corporations run in-house courses for their employees. Teachers of such courses are expected not only to teach English to a high level, but also to be knowledgeable about the principles, practice and terminology of modern international business.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These are courses that are often run in language schools or vocational training courses that focus on English for a particular occupation; English for tourism, or English for nursing, for example. Their materials are based on tasks and situations that are likely to occur in the course of work in the target occupation, and are expected to provide useful vocabulary. The emphasis is less on the production of accurate, formal English and more on effective communication in situations that the students are likely to encounter in their professional practice.

Other. There is a wide range of other types of specific-focus courses available to adults today: conversational English; written English; translation; and, of course, English for the teachers of English themselves!

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Suggest three reasons why immigrant children learn the language of the new country well.
- 2 List some differences between the way young children learn a new language and the way older students do.
- 3 What are some important principles to remember when teaching younger learners?
- 4 Why are pictures important in the teaching of younger learners?
- 5 What should you take care to check when choosing or designing a game for use in the classroom?
- 6 What are three or four clear preferences expressed by teenagers about the way they like to be taught?
- 7 What are some common characteristics of adult learners that make it easier, or more difficult, to teach them than younger learners?

Further reading

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(Ideas for teaching adult academic classes, with ready-made photocopiable material)
- McKay, H. and Tom, A. (1999). *Teaching Adult Second Language Learners*. Cambridge University Press.
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(A useful collection of games, which can be used at all ages)

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Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion

Overview

- 20.1 **Diversity in groups of learners.** The different ways in which students vary within a single group.
- 20.2 **Problems and advantages.** Some common teaching difficulties which arise in heterogeneous classes, and possible advantages.
- 20.3 **Practical principles.** General guidelines for the teaching of heterogeneous classes, illustrated by ideas for classroom procedures.
- 20.4 **Teaching high and low achievers.** Catering for more advanced students and (particularly) those who are lagging behind.

Diversity in groups of learners

In some institutions, classes are supposedly 'homogeneous' in that their members have done a test which assigns them to a particular group at a specific level. However, even in such groups – and how much more so in places where no such process takes place – students vary enormously, in a number of different ways. All classes are to some extent heterogeneous: there will always be diversity.

Pause for thought

What is 'diversity' in the classroom? In how many ways are students different from each other? Make a list of all the ways that they are different which would have an effect on how they need to be taught. Then compare your list with the one on the next page.

Comment

A lot of the items in your list will be the same as mine, but you may have added more, or omitted ones that I listed. The most obvious ones have to do with language ability or level; but others, such as learning preferences, personality, motivation and expectations, are also significant, and may substantially affect the way we need to teach.

Aspects of learner heterogeneity

Gender. In some mixed-gender classes, you may find differences between students that are gender-linked. This to a large extent depends on the surrounding culture, and how differently boys and girls are educated.

Age or maturity. Adult classes may be composed of students of widely varying ages. Even in schools within an education system where students in any one class are usually all the same age, they may have different levels of maturity, particularly in adolescent classes. This will make a substantial difference to the way they prefer to learn, how motivated they are, and more.

Proficiency in English. Members of a class will vary in their level of proficiency in English. This may be because of the amount of instruction they have received, their success or failure in previous courses or because they have had more, or less, exposure to English in the past outside the classroom.

First language and other known languages. Students may know only the dominant language of their own country, or they may (also) know other languages spoken by a local community, or in the home, or learnt in school.

General knowledge. Students also vary as to the amount of general world knowledge they have, based on their own life experience and the information they have learnt, either in school or through extra-curricular activity.

Intelligences. According to Gardner's (2011) theory of multiple intelligences, each student has a different combination of various types of intelligence (mathematical, spatial, linguistic, etc.). The theory has been criticized as being unscientific, but it provides a useful way to look at and value the differing abilities of different students.

Abilities and disabilities. Some students have particular talents or abilities: they may remember well, or be creative or very good at logical problem-solving. Others may have particular disabilities: they may be hearing- or sight-impaired, for example, or have learning disabilities like dyslexia or conditions like ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder). In some cases, the disabilities may be so severe that a student may be diagnosed as SEN (special educational needs), and need the support of trained professionals.

Personality. Students vary a lot in their personality: shy or confident, friendly or withdrawn, dominant or submissive, talkative or quiet, and so on. This will influence not only the way they learn but also the way they relate to you and to other students.

Learning style. The popular division into 'visual', 'aural' and 'kinesthetic' (VAK) learners does not seem to be supported by research evidence (Lethaby and Harries, 2016), but it remains true that individual students differ in the way they prefer to learn. For example, some prefer to learn on their own, others like to work collaboratively; some learn through doing, others are more reflective and receptive (Kolb, 2014).

Attitude and motivation. Some students come to the classroom with a positive attitude to language and studying, others do not, and for many different reasons. For example, they may or may not feel it is important to know English; they may have had positive or negative experiences with learning it in the past.

Tastes and interests. Students enjoy different kinds of books, television programmes or films. They have different leisure-time activities and may be interested in different school, or extra-curricular, subjects.

Cultural and linguistic background. In many places, you may find yourself teaching students who come from different countries, or from different cultural groups within the country where the school is located.

Learning experience and culture of learning. The way students behave in the classroom will depend to some extent on their previous experiences learning English, which may vary widely. They may be used to different cultures of learning.

Expectations. Linked to many of the previous items are the different student expectations: how they expect the teacher to behave in the classroom, for example, or what sorts of learning tasks they expect to be set, or how much homework they will need to do.

When teaching any class, catering for different abilities and levels is the most prominent problem for the teacher, and so this is inevitably the focus of much of the material in this chapter. But it is important to remain aware of the other differences between the students in our class, as listed above, and take care to foster an atmosphere of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

20.2 Problems and advantages

Problems

Below are five teacher statements describing learning problems they have with their heterogeneous class.

Mark: 'I can't make sure they're all learning effectively; the tasks I provide are either too difficult or too easy for many of them.'

Sara: 'The material is unsuitable; the texts in my coursebook are targeted at students at a particular level, and some of my students need easier or more difficult material.'

Tania: 'I can't activate them all: only a few students – the more proficient and confident ones – seem to respond actively to my questions.'

Peter: 'They get bored: I can't find topics and activities that keep them all interested.'

Ella: 'I have discipline problems in these classes; I find them difficult to control.'

If you don't wish to do the Pause for thought below, then read on to the Comment on the next page.

Pause for thought

Which of the problems above do you think are the most important? With which teacher do you personally most sympathize?

Comment

Mark's problem is crucial. Our main job is to make sure that all students are included in the learning process. If some of them are not, then we have a major professional challenge. In principle, the solution to the problem is what is called *differentiated instruction*: providing individualized teaching appropriate to different students. This is often interpreted as preparing different tasks appropriate to the varying abilities of the members of the class, which is fine in theory, but not very practical for teachers who are already working hard to prepare all their material. See **Section 3** for some alternatives.

Sara's problem of level of materials is a very real one. Many of the exercises in coursebooks are clearly aimed at a particular level, and the texts are also often presented with very few options or ideas for making them more, or less, challenging (see **15 Teaching/learning materials, Section 4** for some ideas on adaptation).

Active participation is also a challenge in heterogeneous classes, as Tahira says. Inevitably, the moment we ask a question, it will be the more advanced and confident students who volunteer answers, and it is sometimes difficult to involve the others as well. We need to think of ways to provide opportunities for the less able or confident students to participate without competing with their more assertive classmates (see **Individualization in Section 3**).

Peer raises the issue of students getting bored. There are two main reasons for student boredom in these types of classes. One is the varied interests of different students and their different learning styles: a topic and/or task that are fascinating for some members of the class may be totally uninteresting for others. The second problem is associated with the different levels. In order to help the less able students, a teacher must occasionally provide easier tasks, or take time to explain things that the rest of the class already know. In either case, the students who need more challenge or already know the material may get bored and will consequently learn little.

The discipline problems which worry Ella arise as a direct result of the boredom discussed above. When students are waiting for slower workers to finish a task, or to understand what the teacher is explaining, they are very likely to start talking or otherwise disturbing the class. The lower-level students may also start disturbing the class because they don't understand what is going on or are unable to participate in a class activity because they don't know the necessary language.

Advantages

Classes of very diverse learners are seen mostly as a problem. However, they have their advantages as well, and some of these can be used to help solve the problems. For example:

Human resources. Such classes provide a richer pool of human resources than more homogeneous ones. Between them, the individuals have far more life experience and knowledge, more varied opinions, more interests and ideas – all of which can be used in classroom interaction.

Educational value. There is educational value in the close contact between very different kinds of people: classmates get to know each other's cultures, experiences, opinions, and so increase their own knowledge and awareness of others as individuals. If there are people from very different cultures in the group, then this contact may go some way towards challenging stereotypes and helping students to understand and respect each other's cultures.

Cooperation. The fact that the teacher is less able to pay attention to every individual in the class means that for the class to function well, the students must help by teaching each other and working together. Peer-teaching and collaboration are likely to be common, contributing to a more inclusive, warm and supportive classroom climate.

Teacher development. These classes can be seen as very much more challenging and interesting to teach, and provide greater opportunity for creativity, innovation and general professional development on the part of the teacher.

Practical principles

The practical principles described in this section may not be able to completely solve the problems described earlier, but they can go some way towards addressing them and increasing inclusivity. They do not necessarily involve a large amount of preparation or the creation of new materials. Rather, they are based on a slight tweak in the way tasks are designed or presented, or simple adaptation of textbook materials.

Variation

In a heterogeneous class – particularly a large one – you cannot possibly be actively teaching all the students all the time. There will be times when you are neglecting the students who like to work in groups in order to provide activities that allow for individual work. There will be others when you are neglecting more advanced students in order to concentrate on helping the others to catch up. In other words, however much you favour inclusion, there will be occasional temporary exclusion of individuals within a particular learning procedure. Realistically, this cannot be completely avoided. What you can do is make sure that you give time and attention to the different groups of students in a balanced way, so that the inevitable occasional neglect of individuals is fairly distributed. You can achieve balance by ensuring that you vary your lessons in the following ways:

- **Level and pace.** You can sometimes use more demanding texts and tasks, at other times easier ones; and similarly, work sometimes at a faster pace, sometimes more slowly.

- **Type of classroom interaction.** Some students like working with their classmates like working alone; others prefer to interact directly with the teacher. Try not to get a routine of doing a lot of teacher-led work and very little individual work, or a lot of group work but little that is clearly teacher-led. Make sure that there are opportunities for all three types of interactional organization (see 3 Classroom interaction).
- **Skills and learner activity.** Keep a balance between the four skills, between tasks that require more reception and/or reflection, and those that require more production and activity.
- **Topic.** Usually, the topics will be determined by the coursebook; but if you notice that the coursebook tends to use just one kind of topic, and some of the class are getting bored, try to find out what they are interested in and bring in new topics to supplement the book.
- **Task.** Vary the tasks, not only in the skill used, but also in the kind of mental activity that require: applying rules, analysis, creativity, puzzle-solving, game-like challenge and so on.

Interest

Inevitably, as mentioned above, we will be sometimes working at a speed or level which is inappropriate for some of the students. These students may then become bored and stop participating, or even start misbehaving. The trick is to try to keep them all engaged, so that even if the task is inappropriate for their level, preferences or interaction style, they will continue to participate because they find the task interesting. An interesting topic does not help very much, because there are not many topics that all the class will find interesting. It is also very easy to kill an interesting topic by using a boring task. However, the opposite is also true: the most boring topic can be made interesting by using it in a stimulating task. To take a brief example: the topic of cardinal numbers (*one, two, three*) is fairly boring. However, suppose we do the following: ask students each to choose a number which is significant for them (for example, the year of an important event in their lives, the number of brothers and sisters they have or their phone number), and then to tell their classmates what the number is and invite them to guess its significance (revealing the right answer later if it isn't guessed). This activity is likely to be interesting for everyone, including students who already know the numbers and do not need to practise them. In this case the interest is based on **personalization** (which is discussed in more detail later); but there are other task-design features which also help to maintain interest (see **Interest in 4 Tasks, Section 4**).

Individualization

Individualization relates to students' learning level and includes strategies which enable them to learn at an appropriate pace and level, even when they are doing a routine teacher-led or coursebook exercise. When leading a question-answer session based on a language or comprehension exercise, for example, the conventional procedure is **IRE: Initiation** (the teacher asks a question or gives a cue), **Response** (students volunteer responses) and **Feedback** (the teacher comments on student responses) (see 3 Classroom interaction for more detail on this). Such patterns are sometimes called **lockstep**: everyone

is expected to be doing the same thing at the same time. There is no latitude for learner individualization: no choice as to which question to answer, for example, or how long to take working on it, or whether or not to work collaboratively. Consider, when leading a question-answer session like this, the following options:

- 1 Invite students to read through the questions, to choose one to which they are fairly sure they know the answer and raise their hands to volunteer the answer to it. And then another. If there are any questions to which nobody knows the answer, provide it yourself and explain.
- 2 Tell students to spend a few minutes working on the questions individually or in pairs, as they choose, and after they have done as much as they can in the time you have allotted, invite answers as in 1 above.
- 3 Invite students to work as in 1 or 2 above; then display or distribute the answers: students self-check.

In this way, students are able to choose which questions to answer, and take as much time as they need to work on the ones they select. The slower-working students will do fewer, faster-working ones will do more, but each is working according to their own pace and ability.

Another useful individualized procedure is 'Pass it on'. An exercise or worksheet or vocabulary task is distributed: for example, the one shown below.

Opposites

Write in no more than four opposites of the words below.

boring _____ high _____ day _____ full _____
 noisy _____ white _____ happy _____ go _____
 long _____ under _____ up _____ boy _____
 small _____ outside _____ sit _____ slowly _____

Each student writes in any four opposites, taking as long as they need to, and then raises the sheet and looks to find someone else who has also finished and raised the sheet. They exchange sheets and fill in another four; and so on. An alternative is to say, 'Fill in as many as you can until I say "Stop!"', and then exchange; again, students do as much as they comfortably can in the time, then move on. Either way, there is a choice as to which items to respond to and how quickly or slowly they work; and the less-advanced students are not stressed by the fact that there are some items to which, perhaps, they do not know the answers. And all the students are actively participating, all of the time. At the end, the teacher provides the answers. Any worksheet which requires a number of different responses would work as a basis for this activity.

(For more on individual work, see 3 Classroom interaction, Section 3.)

Personalization

Personalization relates to the whole person, not just proficiency or speed as in individualization: personality, interests, experience, opinions and so on. You might tell your students to imagine that they are six years old and that their parents have asked to buy them a pet: they can choose a cat, dog or pony; small, big or medium; white, black or brown: which would they choose? Distribute the table below, and ask each student to mark their preference.

I want a ...			
Do you want a ...?	small	white	cat
	big	black	dog
	medium	brown	pony

Then invite the students to get up and mingle: meet a classmate, and ask what their pet will be, then another ... the goal is to find at least one classmate who wants exactly the same – more than one, if possible.

At a more advanced level, you might, as suggested at the beginning of 2 The lesson, give students a selection of metaphors for the English lesson, invite them to choose the one they feel is most appropriate, and to explain why.

Collaboration

Collaboration in this context means working together in order to achieve a better outcome than a single student could on their own. Allowing students to work together on completing a task encourages peer-teaching, supportive relationships, and is likely to include more of the students in active participation.

Collaboration is often interpreted as meaning group or pair work. But in fact there are other kinds of collaboration that accord with the definition above. Class brainstorming, for example, where all members of the class can contribute to a pool of responses to a mingling described above under *Personalization*.

Group or pair work is, however, probably the most common form of collaboration, and is an essential tool to get students to practise talking in English. The negotiation of meanings that commonly occurs in such work also facilitates language acquisition in general.

Not all tasks are suitable for group work. If you put a stronger student with a weaker one to collaborate on doing a written exercise, for example, the stronger one will probably do most, sometimes all, of the work, and may wonder 'what's in it for me?'. Group or pair work is best used either for tasks that involve negotiation and consensus, or for those where a larger number of students will always get better results, regardless of their level: brainstorming, for example, or recalling a number of items. See, for example, *Recall and share* as described in 11 Teaching writing, Section 5.

Open-ended

Closed-ended cues have one right answer: for example, in order to practise the present perfect, you might give the sentence-completion cue: *Sue won't be here today. (Her car / break down)*. The students are required to write the response: *Her car has broken down*. Students who are at a lower level are likely to be excluded, since they have not yet mastered the relevant verb forms or vocabulary, so they will either not respond at all, or are likely to get the answer wrong. The more advanced students are also neglected, because the item is easy and boring, and provides them with no opportunity to show what they can do or to engage with language of an appropriate level.

Open-ended cues, on the other hand, provide opportunities for responses at various levels. In this case, we might rephrase the above cue as follows: *Sue won't be here today. What do you think has happened?* The students can make up reasons at various levels of proficiency: *She has fallen ill, she has forgotten to come, she has overslept, she has had an accident*. The less advanced can listen to other learners' responses and use them as models before volunteering ideas of their own. In either case, the target grammatical feature is practised (and a lot more than it would have been in the original). Some added benefits are that more students get to participate, that there is some latitude for expression of personal experience and opinion, and that the whole exercise becomes much more interesting.

Closed-ended textbook exercises can often easily be adapted to make them open-ended. For example, you can delete the cues in a gapfill or sentence-completion exercise so that students can fill the gaps with whatever they like (as long as it makes sense and is in acceptable English). Or you can delete one of the columns in a matching exercise and ask students to invent the matches themselves (see some examples of such adaptation in 15 Teaching/learning materials, Section 4).

Core plus optional

The idea here is to have a compulsory core task which is easy enough to be successfully completed by all members of the class, plus an extra component which is longer and more challenging, but clearly defined as optional. In this way, all members of the class can be included in engagement with the basic task, while there is enough extra work to keep the more advanced or faster-working students busy, challenged and learning at an appropriate level. Almost any classroom task to be done by individuals can be presented in this way. The key phrase in the instructions is *at least*: 'Do at least five of the following questions (more if you can)'; 'Find at least five vocabulary items to put in each column (more if you can)'; 'Write a story of at least 100 words: if you can, then make it longer.' Sometimes an extra task can be added explicitly, with the instruction *if you have time*: 'Finish this exercise for homework; if you have time, do the next one as well.' This can easily be done with listening comprehension, for example. Instead of giving the class comprehension questions on a spoken text, ask them to listen to a description or report containing quite a lot of factual material (you could, for example, describe members of your own family!) and tell them that their task is to write down at least four facts they have learnt from their

listening. At the end, ask them if they have at least four facts. In my experience, they almost all have more, and are eager to tell you what they are.

A problem that teachers bring up here is, 'How do I get students to work according to their full potential? Given the choice, surely they will opt for the easier "compulsory" work?' I have only rarely come across this problem in my classes. On the contrary, if I have a problem, it is that the less advanced students try to do too much. I am not sure why this is. Perhaps they prefer challenge and interest to easiness and boredom. It may also be partly from considerations of self-image ('I wish to see myself as the kind of student who does more advanced work'). In any case, usually these motives seem to be more powerful than the wish to take easy options. If, however, you do have students who do less than they should, you probably know who they are and can tell them in advance that you expect them to do the optional as well as the core task.

The 'core plus optional' principle can also be applied to tests. One of the problems with classroom tests is that not only are they too easy for some and too difficult for others, but also that some students finish early and are left with nothing to do – and it is not always possible for them simply to get up and leave. They can, of course, be asked to read or get on with some other learning task. However, it is simpler to add an extra optional item, which is more challenging and flexible in the amount of time it may take. They could be asked to compose more questions on a reading text and answer them, to write a story, to express their opinion on a text and so on. The problem is then how do you grade this extra item? It is only fair to allow 100 percent of marks on the core components. The optional ones would then receive a bonus of 10 or 20 marks. This sometimes produces grades of, for example, 110 percent, but I don't think this matters in a class test for formative assessment (see 13 Assessment and testing). The main point is to give the students who invest extra work some kind of acknowledgement of their effort and achievement.

Pause for thought

Have a look at a textbook you are familiar with. How flexible are the tasks, in the sense of being accessible to different kinds of students in the class – particularly with regard to level? Are any of the ideas listed above used in them?

Comment

In the coursebooks I looked at, I found that there is quite a lot of variation and interest, in the sense that there is a range of use of the different skills, different topics, use of individual, group and teacher-led work and interesting texts and tasks. But the individual tasks are on the whole inflexible: there is one right answer to most of the exercise items, and no suggestions as to simpler or more complex ways of doing tasks in the Student's book. Sometimes, however, the teacher's book gives some ideas, so this is worth checking out.

Teaching high and low achievers

High achievers

Some students complete tasks easily and to a high level, and are in danger of feeling bored and frustrated when working on material which is below their level or with other students who are less proficient. Often the last two strategies suggested in the previous section (*open-ending* and *core plus optional*) can help to keep such students on-task and learning. But you might find that you need occasionally to give them extra, or alternative, work to do, such as projects or extensive reading of books of their choice. On the whole, however, the high achievers are very much less problematic than the low achievers, to whom most of this section will be devoted.

Low achievers

If students are not doing very well in your class, this could be for one of the following reasons, or a combination:

- They may have learnt badly before joining your class and are unable to catch up, in spite of their best efforts.
- They may be unmotivated, see no point in learning English and refuse to invest effort in it.
- They may have done badly in most subjects up to now and are convinced that they cannot do well in English: a problem of self-image.
- They may suffer from a clinical condition that limits their functioning in some way: they are sight- or hearing-impaired, or find it difficult to control and coordinate physical movement.
- They may have a specific learning disability, such as reading disabilities of various kinds or ADHD.
- They may have personal emotional problems based on their home background or social conflicts.

Most of us are not qualified to diagnose the more specific disabilities. Nevertheless, if you see that a member of the class is not doing very well, is disturbing the lesson a lot, or otherwise behaving abnormally, you need to try to find out why, and may be able to take steps to help them. If a student is hearing-impaired, for example, you need to know that they need to sit near the front, and you need to speak very clearly, facing them. You may need expert advice on how exactly to relate to students with specific mental or physical issues. Consult the classroom teacher if you are in a school, or the parents, or any previous teachers of the individual student, or a professional with appropriate clinical qualifications. Where the learners are assigned to different classes according to entry levels – as described at the beginning of this chapter – the differences between the higher and lower achievers are likely to be manageable. In schools within a country's education system, however, students are in a specific class primarily because of the age group they belong to; the differences in level may be extreme and very difficult for the teacher to cope with. In such situations, the low achievers are sometimes taken out and taught in separate groups. Teaching such groups is very challenging: not only are the individual students having difficulties, but also the group itself is still likely to be very mixed. The tips on the next page can help, and you may be able to apply some of them to under-achieving students who are studying in a general class.

Practical tips

- 1 Find time to relate to students individually. This includes checking and commenting on their written work regularly, and having occasional chats outside the lesson. These are important for any class, but particularly for one composed of lower achievers. Moreover, here they are more feasible, because these classes tend to be small in size. Students need to know you are aware of them as individuals, not just as them and are monitoring their progress.
- 2 Make sure the tasks are success-oriented. Adapt coursework tasks and tests to add your own, that are clearly doable by the students. This may mean providing differentiated tasks and tests (see *Core plus optional* in Section 3 above), but the principle is to make sure that the students can, with a bit of effort, succeed. Having done that, you will be justified in making demands, as described in the next tip.
- 3 Make demands. Keep your expectations high. One of the main problems with under-achieving students is that they have often simply accepted that they are failures and don't expect to do well. So an important teaching goal is to convince them that they can succeed. You will quickly learn what they are capable of. Don't just say, 'Oh, it doesn't matter, don't worry about it,' when they fail to do a task. When designing tasks and tests, set a standard for success that is appropriate for the students, as described in the previous tip, and then insist that they achieve it, conveying the message 'you can do it'.
- 4 Give praise where it is deserved. It is, of course, important to boost the students' confidence by praising them often, but make sure this is not indiscriminate. Over-frequent, unearned compliments soon lose their value and are ignored by students. Only give a compliment when the students have actually succeeded as a result of effort, and when both they and you know that the praise is deserved.
- 5 Use a coursebook. In some cases, it may be appropriate to write or select specific materials for such groups rather than using a coursebook. However, where most classes in the institution are using a coursebook, the students may interpret this as discrimination: 'Other classes get coursebooks, why don't we? The teacher obviously doesn't think we're up to it.' The use of a coursebook conveys the message that you expect the students to complete a programme and syllabus, and make systematic progress. You can always supplement the coursebook with extra materials or skip bits of it as necessary.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Why is 'heterogeneous' or 'diverse' a better way to describe these classes than 'mixed level' or 'mixed ability'?
- 2 Recall at least seven ways in which individual students differ from one another in a heterogeneous class.
- 3 Suggest at least three problems in achieving inclusivity and providing learning opportunities for all in the classroom.
- 4 What kinds of tasks are suitable for group or pair work?

- 5 What does open-ended mean? How can you transform a closed-ended classroom exercise into an open-ended task?
- 6 What does *core plus optional* mean? Can you give an example?
- 7 Suggest at least three reasons why some students might be performing below the expected class level.
- 8 List four practical things you can do to help low achievers make progress.

Further reading

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Overview

- 21.1 The first year of teaching.** Possible initial problems and suggestions on how to overcome them.
- 21.2 Lesson observation.** Critical evaluation of lessons; using an observation evaluation form.
- 21.3 Ongoing development.** Professional development through reflection, writing and collaborative work with colleagues.
- 21.4 Development through reading and further study.** Reading, courses and conferences as tools to facilitate more advanced professional development.
- 21.5 Further development.** Your own contribution; giving presentations at conferences, publishing in professional journals.

21.1 The first year of teaching

For many teachers, the first year is hard (but it gets better later). If your first year is smooth and easy, you are one of the lucky ones. However, the need to overcome a variety of professional problems as you begin to teach results in a great deal of learning, perhaps the most effective learning there is. What you can learn from courses or books like this one is limited: there are some competencies and aspects of professional knowledge that you learn only from experience.

Pause for thought 21.1

Either a) think about your own first year teaching: how was it, and what did you learn? or b) if you haven't yet started teaching, ask an experienced teacher what their first year was like and what they learnt from it.

Comment

My first year of teaching English in a (non-English-speaking) country to which I had recently moved was in a primary school. I had two classes of 10- and 12-year-olds. I had a fairly hard time. Lessons rarely went smoothly. I had trouble getting the students to do what I wanted, and they were often cheeky. There were, it is true, some positive aspects: an end-of-year play that children and parents enjoyed; the awareness that the students were progressing; the occasional sparkle in the

eyes of a child who had succeeded in a task or suddenly become aware how much they knew. However, I also remember investing an enormous amount of time and effort in preparing lessons and materials, much of which was, I felt, wasted; feelings of disappointment and sometimes humiliation. The turning point was an event at the end of that first year. I went to the class teacher of one of the classes I had been teaching and told him I thought I was unsuited to be a teacher and I wished to leave. He told me to think less about my own feelings and to look at the students. 'Ask yourself,' he advised me, 'what they have got out of your teaching. Not only how much English they have learnt from your lessons, but also whether their motivation and attitude to the language have improved.' He said that if I honestly thought they had not progressed and that they didn't like learning English, I should leave. I stayed.

What can help?

A mentor. Your school should allocate an experienced teacher to you as a mentor for your first year. If they do not, ask for one. A mentor's job is to keep in touch with you continually, and be ready to meet you regularly to chat and discuss any problems. The problems may be practical, such as how to use the school's website or manage contact with parents or employers. Or they may be about classroom management or difficulties with particular students. Some mentors actually observe lessons of new teachers and give feedback, or invite the new teachers to see theirs. In any case, having a mentor means that you are not alone, and it can considerably reduce stress to know that there is someone available to consult and share with.

Reflection and discussion. Take time at the end of the day to think about things that went particularly well or badly, or any particularly interesting events or experiences. Some teachers actually keep journals, which helps a lot to structure thinking and get the most out of it. It is even better if you have someone to talk to. This could be your mentor, but it is perhaps better to talk to someone you feel comfortable with: another new teacher who is going through similar experiences, a friend, your partner or a family member.

Staff meetings Make sure you participate in staff meetings. The topics discussed may be administrative matters (whether to buy new computerized equipment or software, cover for a colleague who is going to be away on maternity leave, etc.). However, they may also discuss issues you can learn from: criticisms from parents, for example, or particularly problematic classes. And your participation, even if at first you do not actively contribute, will be appreciated and will help you feel part of the teaching team.

21.2 Lesson observation

Lessons may be observed for various reasons and by various people.

- **Observation for appraisal.** The appraiser observing your class may be an inspector representing the Ministry of Education checking teaching standards, or a senior member of staff representing your employers, who are considering whether to extend your teaching contract or to promote you. Appraisal will probably take into account

the opinions of your immediate superior, other members of staff and perhaps the record of the classes you have taught. Less commonly, students might be asked for their opinions. But almost always the major consideration is your actual teaching as evaluated through observation.

- **Observation for teacher development.** In this case, lesson observation and evaluation are a source of learning and development for the observing or observed teacher. You need to be observed by a trainer, mentor or colleague and then get feedback that will contribute to your professional development. Or you may yourself observe an experienced teacher in order to learn from their professional abilities in action. Asking a colleague to observe one of your lessons and give feedback is an excellent strategy for development, but there are some difficulties to be overcome: most of us feel uncomfortable about being observed and cannot function naturally when we know an observer is in the room. It takes some courage to deliberately open yourself to criticism in this way. And there is always the problem of finding time. Nevertheless, it is worth doing. One possibility is to make a mutual arrangement with a like-minded colleague: 'I'll observe your lesson, you observe mine, and we'll share feedback.'

Criteria for lesson evaluation

Whether you are observing another teacher, or someone else is observing you, it is important to be aware of the major features the observer may be looking for. The following are some possible criteria for evaluation:

- 1 Tasks and activities have clear goals in terms of learning (including review or practice).
- 2 Tasks and activities are appropriate to the level of the students (challenging but do-able).
- 3 The teacher's speech is clear and comprehensible to the learners.
- 4 The learners are attentive and on-task.
- 5 The learners get and understand appropriate feedback from the teacher.
- 6 The learners are motivated to participate.
- 7 The lesson is varied.
- 8 English is used communicatively.

Pause for thought

Note by each item above ✓✓✓ (essential), ✓✓ (very important), ✓ (quite important), ? (not so important, or not sure), and note your reasons.

Comment

Probably all these are important, but there may be situations where 7 and 8 may be less relevant. On the whole, I have found that even academics at a high level may be appropriate to devote an entire hour to one task – reading and discussing

a research article, for example. Communicative use of English; again, this is normally desirable, but it may happen that a teacher once in a while wishes to devote a large proportion of the lesson to activities such as those based on contrastive analysis or translation, or on accuracy-oriented work.

In principle, the definition of a good lesson is one that has led to good learning outcomes. The problem is that it is very difficult from observation to establish that such learning outcomes exist. However, if the tasks and activities are clearly facilitating learning and appropriate to the level (items 1 and 2), the teacher's input is clear (3) and the students are on-task (4) and receiving appropriate feedback (5), then it is very likely that there will be learning. Items 6–8 are less essential, perhaps, but clearly facilitating factors. Students may learn in spite of not being motivated, or from a not very varied sequence of activities, or from tasks that are not communicative; but they are certainly more likely to succeed in their learning during a lesson if these conditions exist.

Lesson observation forms

In some cases, detailed lesson observation forms are used with lists of aspects of the lesson to assess. Below are a few samples of items adapted from a variety of online observation checklists.

	Yes	Somewhat	No	Comment
The teacher was well-prepared.				
The lesson started and ended on time.				
A variety of questioning and activation techniques was used.				
The teacher responded appropriately to students' input.				
The teacher used the board appropriately.				
The teacher provided activities for collaborative group work.				
The teacher prepared and used appropriate visual materials.				
The teacher used both print- and digital resources.				
The teacher asked questions that elicited higher-order thinking skills.				
... etc.				

The actual checklists are normally much longer than this, with typically 30 or more items to be related to (try searching online for 'lesson observation checklists'). In an attempt to cover all aspects of a good lesson. It is, however, very difficult for observers to fill in such forms. First, if they try to complete them during the lesson, it is distracting while considering how to fill in one section, they may miss something going on in the classroom that may be relevant to another; and if the form is filled in later, not everything may be remembered. Second, this type of form, however long, cannot be entirely comprehensive. It may not direct attention to some significant or interesting points for example, how the teacher opened and closed the lesson. And there remains the problem of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts: even if a teacher scores well on 'technical' observable aspects such as organizing group work, appropriate use of the board or of digital or print materials, the lesson as a whole may turn out boring and lacking opportunities for real learning. During the lesson, it is most convenient to make notes on a more open form, such as the one shown below. It simply asks for the events, their timing and any comments or questions that occur to the observer at that point.

(Name of teacher, class, date)		
Time	Lesson component	Comment

Sometimes there may be a specific focus to the observation. If you are being observed by a colleague, you could ask him or her to focus on a particular aspect of your teaching that you find problematic (e.g., how you move around the classroom, or how the students are responding). Or your trainer may ask you to focus on a similar specific feature, or set of features, when observing an experienced teacher.

Feedback

Observer feedback is a vital source of teacher development, so it is important to schedule a feedback session after the lesson. This does not have to be immediately after, if the observer has to rush off to another lesson, but it should be on the same day if possible. Feedback sessions need to involve two main components: frank criticisms, both positive and negative, from the observer; and input by the teacher being observed, concerning their own performance. Some observers focus too much on one or the other, so that the session may be limited either to a lecture by the observer, or an unhelpful elicitation session ('What did you feel about the lesson ...?') based mainly on input from the teacher being observed. So whether you are observer or observed, try to make sure that both kinds of input are included.

The feedback should include substantial and detailed, not vague, comments. Comments such as 'a well-planned lesson' or 'you need to improve your questioning skills' are not very helpful to the teacher who has been observed. If you are being observed, ask for actual examples of what they mean, and if it is a negative criticism, then also ask for practical, specific suggestions for change.

Here are some practical tips for the teacher being observed and for the observer.

If you are being observed:

- 1 **Tell the class.** Remember to tell the class in advance that an observer is coming, and that they are going to observe your teaching, not their learning. This is a courtesy, but it also may work to your advantage, as the class is likely to cooperate in presenting a good lesson to the observer.
- 2 **Plan a routine lesson.** Don't try to do unusual things that you think will impress your observer. Include familiar lesson components that you feel confident that you know how to manage.
- 3 **Thank the observer.** If the observer is giving you feedback in order to contribute to your own development, remember to thank them at the end of the feedback session.

If you are observing a lesson:

- 1 **Take notes.** You won't remember everything you have observed or want to discuss after the lesson, so you need to take notes and look through them later.
- 2 **Sit at the side of the class.** If you sit at the front, you will find it difficult to observe the teacher, and you will distract the class. If you sit at the back, you won't be able to see clearly what the students are doing.
- 3 **Thank and chat to the teacher afterwards.** Even experienced teachers find it stressful to be observed! Thank them, share with them what you have learnt from the observation, and ask them about anything that was not clear to you.

21.3 Ongoing development

Ongoing teacher development during work at school is important not only for your own sense of progress and professional advancement; in some cases it may even make a crucial difference between job satisfaction on the one hand and burnout on the other. Observation and feedback (see Section 2) can help, as can further study (see Section 4). However, the main tools for professional development are available within your own teaching routine: your own teaching experience and your reflections on it; discussion with other teachers in your institution; feedback from students.

Personal reflection

The first and most important basis for professional progress is simply your own reflection on daily events. This mostly takes place inside the classroom, but also occasionally outside it. Often this reflection is spontaneous and informal, and happens without any conscious

intention. Travelling to and from your classes, or at other odd moments when you have nothing particular to occupy you, things that happened in the classroom come to mind and you start puzzling about what to do about a problem, work out why something was successful or rethink a part of your lesson plan. This sort of spontaneous reflection is the necessary basis and starting point for further development. Such spontaneous reflection, however, can help you only up to a certain point. Its limitations are rooted in its unsystematic and undisciplined nature. You will find your thoughts are rooted in into less productive channels (irritation at an argument with a colleague or student, for example, and what you should have said if you had thought of it). Also, you may not have access to all the information you need to draw useful conclusions, for you may not have a brilliant idea, you may not remember it later.

In order to address these problems, you will need at some stage to write something down. This may be a brief note on a piece of paper or on your phone, calendar or taska systematic journal writing is even more productive: entries are made regularly in a notebook or in a computer document, recording events, plans, reminders, thoughts or ideas. Journals can be re-read later to contribute to further reflection and learning. Another advantage of writing is that putting things into words forces you to work out exactly what you mean. E. M. Forster famously said: 'How can I know what I think until I see what I've written?' Many people (myself included) only discover what they really think when they have to express it in writing (see Section 5). In a sense, writing is thinking, but thinking that must be disciplined, rational and able to be communicated to a reader, even if that reader is only oneself.

Discussion with colleagues

Another problem with the personal reflection described above is that it means you can only use your own experience. Experience is indeed the main source of professional learning, but there comes a point when it is not enough. Even the most brilliant and creative of us can learn from others things we could not learn on our own. Informal discussions with a colleague you feel comfortable with can contribute a lot to your own development, as well as boost morale. What you share may be negative or positive. You may want to find a solution to a problem, admit a failure or get an idea for how to teach something; or you may wish to tell someone about an original solution you have found to a problem, share your pleasure at a success or discuss a new teaching idea you have had. a problem, share your pleasure at a success or discuss a new teaching idea you have had.

Sharing problems. Unfortunately, teachers often feel uncomfortable about sharing problems: perhaps because of a sense of shame, or inhibition, or a fear of losing face. However, once such feelings are overcome, the results are likely to be rewarding. Colleagues will rarely criticize you; they are far more likely to be sympathetic, recall similar incidents from their own experience and suggest solutions. Even if they cannot provide solutions, the act of sharing and the awareness that other people have similar problems relieves tensions.

Sharing successes. In some institutions there is a feeling of rivalry between teachers which stops them revealing professional secrets to one another for fear of being overtaken in some kind of professional race. And sometimes you may feel shy of boasting about things that went well. However, sharing good ideas is helpful to everyone, so find opportunities to do so. Colleagues are unlikely to feel you are boasting if your goal in telling them is frankly stated, and they are given the choice whether to listen or not: 'I had a marvellous experience today – I've got to tell someone about it. Have you got time to listen?'; or 'You remember that problem we were talking about the other day? I think I have an idea about how to solve it – can we find time to talk?'.

Pause for thought

If you have teaching experience, can you recall informally sharing problems or successes with a colleague? What was it like, and what were its results?

Comment

In my school, we had a regular weekly meeting, where we could share problems, successes, new ideas, or tests or worksheets we'd composed, and it was really helpful, besides contributing to a sense of team solidarity. More recently, I consulted a colleague about digital resources which I felt I didn't know enough about, or was using inappropriately, and was delighted to get an enormous number of practical ideas, useful references, caveats and tips I could immediately put into practice.

Student feedback

It is relatively unusual for teachers to ask their students for feedback on their teaching: maybe because teachers have a fear of undermining their authority or of losing face. This is a pity. Students are an excellent source of feedback on your teaching: arguably the best. Their information is based on a whole series of lessons rather than on isolated examples, and they usually have a fairly clear idea of how well they are learning and why. Moreover, they appreciate being consulted and usually make serious efforts to give helpful feedback. In my experience, the process tends to improve rather than damage teacher-student relationships. Questions to students should be phrased so as to direct their appraisal towards themselves as well as to you, and should encourage constructive suggestions rather than negative criticisms. A structured, written questionnaire, such as the one shown on the next page, ensures that students will provide relevant information. With less advanced students whose language you know, the questionnaire can be written in their L1.

Student questionnaire

- 1 On the whole I feel I am learning very well / fairly well / don't know / not very well / badly.
- 2 I find the lessons interesting / moderately interesting / boring.
- 3 Things I would like to do MORE of in our course: *pronunciation practice / vocabulary / grammar / listening / speaking / reading / writing / homework / group or pair work / individual work / other (say what):* _____
- 4 Things I would like to do LESS of in our course: *pronunciation practice / vocabulary / grammar / listening / speaking / reading / writing / homework / group or pair work / individual work / other (say what):* _____
- 5 In order to get the most out of the course, I need to try to _____
- 6 In order to make the course better, my suggestions to my teacher are _____
- 7 Further comments and suggestions: _____

Another less structured method, which is useful with more advanced or older classes, is to write the students a letter. Give them your own feedback and your opinion about how the course is going, and ask for their responses and suggestions in an answering letter.

Either way, the results are not always clear-cut. There are sometimes contradictory messages from different students, due to differing student personalities and needs, and some responses may be confusing or unhelpful. Nevertheless, I have found when doing this myself that there is usually enough consensus to provide useful and constructive feedback that I can use to inform and improve my teaching.

21.4

Development through reading and further study

As you develop as a teacher, it is important to start looking for sources of further professional knowledge outside your own school. One of the characteristics of the expert, burnout is strongly linked with lack of further learning.

Sooner or later, you will start looking for ways to learn more, to broaden your knowledge and start thinking about the teaching of English outside the immediate resources of your own institution or personal practice.

Reading

The first and perhaps best way to learn more is to access both theoretical and practical information through reading. Most educational institutions have a basic library of professional literature, and this is where you will probably start. Professional journals, available in print and digital form in university libraries, are an excellent and convenient source of reading material. Their articles are easier to cope with than a full book, and recent issues will have up-to-date news and ideas. Also, the bibliographies at the end of most

articles and book reviews will give you ideas for further reading. See **Further reading** at the end of this chapter for a list of references related to English teaching in general, and similar lists at the ends of other chapters for more specific areas.

Online sources include not only books and articles, but also, and increasingly, blogs and other kinds of websites that make available information and teaching ideas. See, for example, the British Council's *Teaching English* website which includes a number of easily-accessible posts, resources and webinars on a variety of topics.

Accessing reading material that is relevant to your interests has been made easier in recent years through online tools, particularly Google Scholar and RSS. Google Scholar will easily find a particular publication or author you are interested in; and articles are increasingly available to read free online. Using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) you can tag a particular source (a blog, for example, or a website that provides up to date information) and receive regular updates or feeds. For this, you need an RSS reader: Inoreader, for example, or Feedly.

The main problem today with such topics is the sheer amount of resources available on the subject of English language teaching in print and online. How do you choose what to read? Some tips:

The author. If the name of the author is known to you, or you have already read something written by them that you liked, then search for more of their publications.

The source. There is a large, and increasing, number of journals on teaching English or applied linguistics: some of the most well-known ones at the time of writing are those listed under **Further reading** at the end of this chapter. Or if it's a book, the best ones are likely to be published by reputable publishers: publishing companies associated with a university, for example, or ones that specialize in English language teaching like Pearson, Heinemann, Macmillan, Helbling and more.

Courses, conferences. The reading lists added to ELT courses are good sources, as are any references mentioned by lecturers.

Personal recommendation. Ask colleagues or other ELT professionals what book(s) or articles they would recommend: ones that have had substantial influence on their professional thinking, or have been most useful for their teaching.

Courses

If you have the opportunity, it is worthwhile to take further courses of study. This usually means a degree, or another academic course at a university, in English language teaching, or an associated subject: pure or applied linguistics, the various branches of education, psychology or sociology. Or, if you do not yet have a formal qualification, you may wish to take a course that gives you one. The attraction of such studies is not only the satisfaction of the learning itself and its contribution to your professional expertise, but also an internationally recognized qualification, with its associated prestige and aid to promotion.

These courses provide a valuable opportunity to take a step back from the demands of everyday practice, reflect quietly on what you do, and rethink your own principles and practice in the light of other people's theories and research.

Conferences

Conferences are being organized by English teachers' organizations with increasing frequency in many countries. During the COVID pandemic they were temporarily held online; but online conferences, it appears, are a poor substitute for the full face-to-face event. Conferences offer a rich selection of lectures, workshops, seminars, panel discussions and more. They enable you to update your knowledge on the latest research and controversies and learn new techniques and methods, find out about recently published materials and meet other professionals. There is a large number of conferences on English language teaching, ranging from the very large international ones such as IATEFL and TESOL, to the national conferences such as BraTESOL in Brazil, or the smaller regional ones such as APAC in Catalonia, Spain. The strength of conferences is the huge number and variety of sessions and materials available to participants; but this carries with it the problem of choice. Usually the schedule is based on a number of concurrent sessions, so you can attend only a small proportion of them. Moreover, they vary widely in level and effectiveness as well as in topic. The sessions you select may or may not satisfy you, and it is unlikely that you will find everything you attend worthwhile. In fact, if each day you feel that one or two of the events you attended were of real value to you, you are doing well!

Conferences cannot supply the systematic coverage of topics that you get from formal courses, but you may well come across new materials or ideas which trigger insights or ideas of your own. Their other major advantage is the opportunities they provide for networking: meeting teachers from other places, exchanging ideas and learning about each other's problems and solutions. Arguably, at least as much interesting learning takes place between sessions as during them.

Webinars and online courses

These are becoming very frequent, and are a good source of professional learning. They are relatively cheap: webinars are often free, and courses vary a lot in how much they cost. When signing up for either, check out carefully the credentials of the company or authority that is running them, as well as the syllabus and the teacher(s).

21.5 Further development

This section suggests ways in which you can publish your own ideas, through conference presentations or written publication. This not only benefits others in the field; it also indirectly contributes to your own development, as writing down your thoughts and presenting them in a way that makes them accessible to others is an excellent way to clarify things for yourself and develop your own thinking.

