

# 1

# The world of English

## A The place of English

Although English is not the language with the largest number of native or 'first' language speakers, it has become a **lingua franca**. A lingua franca can be defined as a language widely adopted for communication between two speakers whose native languages are different from each other's and where one or both speakers are using it as a 'second' language. Many people living in the European Union, for example, frequently operate in English as well as their own languages (where these are different), and the economic and cultural influence of the United States has led to increased English use in many areas of the globe. Like Latin in Europe in the Middle Ages, English seems to be one of the main languages of international communication, and even people who are not speakers of English often know words such as *bank, chocolate, computer, hamburger, hospital, hot dog, hotel, piano, radio, restaurant, taxi, telephone, television, university* and *walkman*. Many of these words have themselves been borrowed by English from other languages of course (e.g. *chocolate, hamburger, taxi*, etc.), and speakers of Romance languages are likely to have a number of words in common with English. But there are many 'false friends' too, where similar sounding words actually mean something quite different, for example, Italian *eventualmente* (= in case) contrasts with English *eventually* (= in the end).

### A1 The numbers game

Whatever the spread of English across the globe and whatever its overlap with other languages, there has been an intriguing debate over the years as to how many people speak English as either a 'first' or a 'second' language. Estimates of speaker numbers are somewhat variable. For example, Braj Kachru (1985) suggested between 320–380 million people spoke English as a first language, and anywhere between 250–350 million as a second language. On the other hand David Crystal (1995 and 1997) takes 75 territories where English 'holds a special place' (territories which include not only Britain, the USA, Australia, Canada, etc. but also places such as Hong Kong, India, Malaysia and Nigeria) and calculates around 377 million first language speakers of English and only 98 million speakers of English as a second language. However, he points out that it would be easy to get nearer a total of 350 million for second language speakers if we were able to calculate how many speakers of English as a second language there were in, say, Canada or Australia, or in countries like Pakistan or Nigeria. Not only is the calculation of such figures problematic, but a lot, he

suggests, also depends on how well we expect people to be able to speak English before we can start including them as second language English speakers. As he points out, 'the more limited command of English we allow to be acceptable, the more this figure can be inflated' (Crystal 1995: 108). It seems to be the case, therefore, that anywhere between 600–700 million people in the world speak English, and of that huge number, a significant minority speak it as a second language.

In 1983, however, Kachru made a prediction which, if correct, means that there are now more second language than first language speakers. He wrote:

One might hazard a linguistic guess here. If the spread of English continues at the current rate, by the year 2000 its non-native speakers will outnumber its native speakers.

From B Kachru (1983: 3)

David Graddol, writing some fourteen years later, thought it would take until at least 2007 before this position was reached (Graddol 1997).

As we shall observe (in A4), it is not necessarily the case that English will remain dominant among world languages. However, there is no doubt that it is and will remain a vital linguistic tool for many business people, academics, tourists and citizens of the world who wish to communicate easily across nationalities for many years to come.

## A2 How English got there

There are a number of interlocking reasons for the popularity of English as a lingua franca. Many of these are historical, but they also include economic and cultural factors which have influenced and sustained the spread of the language:

- **A colonial history:** when the Pilgrim Fathers landed on the Massachusetts coast in 1620 after their eventful journey from Plymouth, England, they brought with them not just a set of religious beliefs, nor only a pioneering spirit and a desire for colonisation, but also their language. Although many years later the Americans broke away from their colonial masters, the language of English remained and it is still the predominant language of the world's greatest economic and political power.

It was the same in Australia, too. When Commander Philip planted the British flag in Sydney Cove on 26th January 1788, it was not just a bunch of British convicts and their guardians who disembarked (to be rapidly followed by many free settlers of that land), but also a language.

In other parts of the British Empire, English rapidly became a unifying/dominating means of control. For example, it became a lingua franca in India, where a plethora of indigenous languages made the use of any one of them as a whole-country system problematic. The imposition of English as the one language of administration helped maintain the coloniser's power.

Thus, in the same way as Spanish was imposed on much of the new world by the conquistadores from Castile, or Brazil and parts of Africa took on the language of their Portuguese conquerors, English travelled around many parts

of the world, until, many years from the colonial reality that introduced it, and long after that colonial power has faded away, it is still widely used as a main or at least an institutional language in countries as far apart as Jamaica and Pakistan, Uganda, and New Zealand.

- **Economics:** a major factor in the spread of English has been the spread of commerce throughout the world, and in particular, the emergence of the United States as a world economic power. Of course other economic blocks are hugely powerful too, but the spread of international commerce has taken English along with it. This is the twentieth-century phenomenon of 'globalisation' described by the journalist John Pilger as '... a term which journalists and politicians have made fashionable and which is often used in a positive sense to denote a "global village" of "free trade", hi-tech marvels and all kinds of possibilities that transcend class, historical experience and ideology' (Pilger 1998: 61). Thus one of the first sights many travellers see arriving in countries as diverse as the Czech Republic and Brazil, for example, is the yellow twin-arched sign of a McDonalds fast food restaurant. Whether we take a benign view of such 'multinational' economic activity or, like John Pilger and many others, view it as a threat to the identities of individual countries and local control, English is the language that frequently rides on its back.
- **Travel:** much travel and tourism is carried on, around the world, in English. Of course this is not always the case, as the multilingualism of many tourism workers in different countries demonstrates, but a visit to most airports on the globe will show signs not only in the language of that country, but also in English, just as many airline announcements are glossed in English too, whatever the language of the country the airport is situated in.

So far, English is also the preferred language of air traffic control in many countries and is used widely in sea travel communication.

- **Information exchange:** a great deal of academic discourse around the world takes place in English. It is often a lingua franca of conferences, for example, and many journal articles in fields as diverse as astrophysics and zoology have English as a kind of default language.

The first years of the Internet as a major channel for information exchange have also seen a marked predominance of English (though as we shall see in B3, such a situation may not continue). This probably has something to do with the Internet's roots in the USA and the predominance of its use there in the early days of the World Wide Web (see Chapter 10F for more on the Internet).

- **Popular culture:** in the western world, at least, English is a dominating language in popular culture. Pop music in English saturates the planet's airwaves. Thus many people who are not English speakers can sing words from their favourite English medium songs. Many people who are regular cinemagoers (or TV viewers) frequently hear English in subtitled films coming out of the USA. However, we need to remind ourselves that 'Bollywood' (in

India) produces more films than Hollywood (in the USA) and that many countries, such as France, do their best to fight against the cultural domination of the American movie.

### A3 Where English fits

There are many views of the place of English in the world and what it is doing and has done. Is it, for example, an all-conquering language which obliterates everything in its path? Is it a wonderful means of mass communication? Does it carry a lot of cultural baggage with it, and if so how can that be assimilated and/or responded to? And finally, should people from countries all over the world struggle to learn it or would their time be better spent in the study of other languages?

Perhaps the first thing to say is that English is one of the many languages in the world battling it out for position. There are some doubts as to its future status, but even in the present it is worth countering the idea that it is an all-embracing world language.

There are, of course, many more people in the world who do not speak English than there are people who do! But it is not just that. In more and more countries English language films are dubbed into the language of that country, and on the Internet, the growth of non-English information exchange is noticeable; many search engines (like Alta Vista and Hotbot) have, for some time, offered users a choice of languages. According to the company Computer Economics, only 54 per cent of Internet users were English speakers in 1999, and that percentage was due to drop significantly (see A4 below).

Language is an intensely political issue since it is bound up with identity and power. As a consequence of its lingua franca status, English sometimes finds itself in conflict with more local languages, such as Welsh in Wales, or French in parts of French-speaking Canada. It works the other way too, of course. Visitors to Miami airport may well be surprised by the overwhelming use of Spanish in a major American airport because of a numerous Spanish-speaking community in that city. In a large number of countries in the world (of which Britain and the United States have, until now, been prominent exceptions) children regularly grow up speaking more than one language so that English, if it is learnt, becomes a third or fourth means of communication.

Many people worry about what English means for the cultures it comes into contact with, seeing its teaching as a form of 'cultural imperialism' (see, for example, Phillipson 1992 and Pennycook 1994, 1998). Alistair Pennycook draws our attention to the views of many people who have seen English as a way of promoting their own (American, Australian, British, Canadian, etc.) culture, and to the interrelationship of English (in particular) and colonialism. We should also be aware of the supranational power of global companies (see A2 above) which often fall back on English as a means of global communication across the company and largely unthinkingly promote its use.

English can have a negative effect on the languages it comes into contact with, downgrading them so that their use becomes restricted, and in extreme

circumstances, bringing about their decline. Nor is it necessarily welcome to those who have been obliged to study it, some of whom see learning English as an unpleasant but sadly necessary occupation (Pennycook 1998: 206–212). However, even Pennycook suggests that a powerful modern paradigm for English as a foreign language may be one of ‘appropriation’ – where cultures take English and change it in their own way – despite its relentless progress.

The view that learners of English are victims of linguistic and cultural imperialism is not shared by everyone. Joseph Bisong points out that Nigerians, for example, may want to operate with two or more languages in a multilingual setting, choosing which one to use depending upon the situation they are in and the people they wish to communicate with. He suggests that great writers like Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngugi do not write in English as victims, but out of choice – whatever the reasons for this choice might be (Bisong 1995). But this is not a free choice, Phillipson argues (1996). It is determined by their audience not by them. Kanavilil Rajagopalan, on the other hand, suggests that the teaching of English should not be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, ‘... in a world marked by cultural intermixing and growing multilingualism at a hitherto unprecedented level’ (Rajagopalan 1999: 200).

Most English language teaching in the world is not carried out by native speakers, but despite this, as we shall see in Chapter 6, B1, English language teaching methodology – especially that imported directly from English-speaking traditions – may not fit comfortably with the local educational culture in certain parts of the world, just as the contents of language teaching materials need looking at carefully for the cultural messages they may convey (see Chapter 21B).

#### A4 The future of English

If we accept that English is currently a lingua franca for many people in the world, does this necessarily mean that its pre-eminence is assured? What happens as more and more people appropriate it for their own uses? Will it split into varieties that become less mutually intelligible? Or will it continue to march over the globe, crushing all in its path? Is it conceivable, as David Crystal half-jokingly worries, that in 500 years it will be the only language left? Such an outcome would be, in his words, ‘... the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known’ (Crystal 1997: 140).

David Graddol does not prophesy a globally destructive English of this kind (Graddol 1997). He considers a number of future possibilities, all of which question the certainty of English as the number one world language. He points out, for example, that the fastest-growing language community in the USA is Hispanic. Taken together with the trade agreements which are springing up in both the North and South American continents, it is highly possible that in the foreseeable future the entire American continent will be an English-Spanish bilingual zone. Looking at the Internet and the World Wide Web he reminds us that whereas English is said to have accounted for 80 per cent of computer-based communication in the 1990s, that proportion is expected to drop to around 40 per cent by 2010. The company Computer Economics predicted the same kind of shift in their 1999 survey

(see Figure 1), where the balance between English-speaking users and non-English users of the Internet is set to change dramatically:

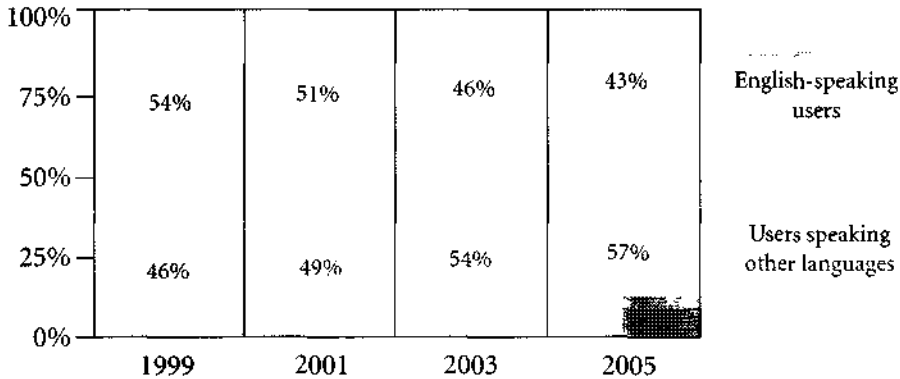


FIGURE 1: Internet usage according to language (based on information at [http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big\\_picture/demographics/print/0,1323,5901\\_150171,00.html](http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/print/0,1323,5901_150171,00.html))

Within the next few decades the number of Internet computer web sites and servers in Asia may well outstrip all other computer hosts put together. Air travel too is set to show the same kind of change. Graddol predicted that Asian air travel would account for half the world's flying by 2010. In such circumstances a form of Mandarin could be the lingua franca of choice in the region.

Whether or not these predictions prove or have proved to be accurate, it is most unlikely that English will ever become the dominant language in the world. On the contrary, its 'top dog' status may have changed in another fifty years so that it becomes just one of a number of other world languages being widely used around the globe.

## B Varieties of English

So far in this chapter, we have talked about English as one language, and in our discussion of its position as a lingua franca we have referred to it in the singular. Yet English, much like other languages such as Spanish, Portuguese or Arabic, for example, can take many forms. Depending on who speaks or writes it and where they do this, there can be great differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

### B1 Three circles

Most people are familiar with the fact that British and American English, whilst being similar, nevertheless have many differences. It was, after all, Oscar Wilde who wittily described the situation as 'two countries divided by a common language'. Thus, for example, British English speakers regularly use the phrase *have got* in utterances such as *I've got a book about it*, or *Have you got the time?* when American English speakers are more likely to say *I have a book ...* or *Do you have the time?* While British speakers in conversation make use of the present perfect in questions such as *Have you read her latest article yet?* an American English speaker might well say *Did you read her latest article yet?* The sentence *If I would have known I would have come*, is likely to be more acceptable to American than to British ears, and there

are many differences in vocabulary use (*lift/elevator, flat/apartment*), pronunciation (/lɔ:/ –law (British English) vs. /la:/ (American English), *advertisement* (British English) vs. *advertisement* (American English)), and even spelling (*advertise/advertize, colour/color*).

These are not the only varieties of English, of course. For example, there are now two home-grown dictionaries of Australian English; the *Australian Learners Dictionary* (published by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research at Macquarie University) is full of specifically Australian vocabulary such as *barby/barbie* (for *barbecue*) or *bottle shop* (for *off-licence*) – though words like this frequently cross over into other varieties such as British English.

There is nothing unique about Australian English in this respect. All varieties, whether South African, Canadian, Sri Lankan or Nigerian will have their own specific words and phrases, their own grammatical mannerisms and pronunciation idiosyncracies. However, calling a variety by the name of a country fails to take account of regional variety. If we consider ‘British English’, for example, it only takes a moment’s thought to realise that there are many varieties of English within the British Isles, each with its own vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. While a Londoner might get a *take-away* meal to eat at home, a Scottish person will order a *carry-out*. While an East-end Londoner might talk about having a *barf* /ba:f/ a Yorkshireman talks about a *bath* /bæθ/. While a speaker of standard southern English says *I did it*, speakers of other varieties say *I done it*.

In addition to geography, factors such as social class, ethnic grouping, and sex affect the language being used – and influence the way in which listeners judge speakers. Until very recently in Britain, it was customary for people to talk about ‘BBC English’ to describe an accent which derived from the ‘Received Pronunciation’ (RP) recorded by the phonetician Daniel Jones in the first half of the twentieth century, and which was considered a sign of status. In Britain, while some accents are admired (such as BBC English and some Scottish varieties), others (such as the ‘Birmingham’ accent) are seen by many as less attractive. Though it is true that such attitudes diminished towards the end of the twentieth century – and some accents, such as ‘Cockney’ and ‘Geordie’ became widely admired, particularly in broadcast media – it is still the case that many British people ascribe status, educational background, and social position to a person largely on the basis of accent.

Other countries have their regional and social differences too, as visits to different parts of Boston and Dallas would make instantly clear; there are varieties of American English which show marked differences one from the other so that, as with British English, the concept of one ‘American English’ is difficult to sustain. And even a city like Boston contains within it a large number of English varieties. There are varieties of Black English, Hispanic English, East Coast English, Chinese English, etc. amongst many others, and future waves of immigrants will appropriate the language for their own uses and in their own ways.

We are faced, then, with a situation where English varies between and within those countries where it is spoken widely. There is, then, a multiplicity of varieties, and this makes it difficult to describe English as any one thing.

Braj Kachru (1985: 12–15) suggests the division of the English-speaking world into three concentric circles. This classification is widely used and may help us to think about English around the globe.

In the first 'inner circle' Kachru puts countries like Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Britain, and the United States where English is spoken as a first language. In the second 'outer circle' are all the countries where English is spoken as a second or significant language, such as Singapore, India, Pakistan, Malawi, Malaysia, Nigeria. In the third 'expanding circle' we find countries where English has acquired cultural or commercial importance (China, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Greece, Japan, Israel, etc). See Figure 2:

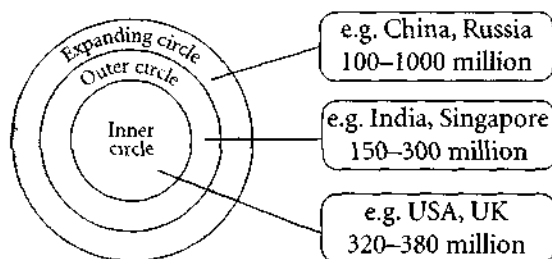


FIGURE 2: A diagrammatic representation of Kachru's circles, based on Kachru (1985)

In a world of so many Englishes, therefore, we have to consider which is the variety we should encourage our learners to aim for.

## B2 Appropriate models of English

In Brazil, a country with a population of more than 180 million, many people learn English, not only in school (where it is the foreign language of choice) and at university, but also in many private language schools located the length and breadth of that vast country. Two of the largest of these teaching organisations are the 'Cultura' institutes and the 'Bi-National' centres. The former have evolved from British Council schools and teach essentially British English, while the latter are supported by the United States Information Service and teach American English. Both organisations have centres all over the country from São Paulo to Salvador, from Rio de Janeiro to Recife. In 1999 they catered for some 140,000 and 120,000 students respectively. Do the two varieties, then, have parity? Which variety should the students choose?

Brazil is not alone, of course. In countries all over the world students can choose British or American English to learn. In other countries they can choose Australian English or a more outer circle variety such as Malaysian or Indian English. And if they wish to study abroad should they choose Ireland, Australia or Britain, Canada or New Zealand?

The reason for the students' choice may not be based entirely on the language variety, of course. They might go to one organisation rather than another because their friends do or because of some perceived methodological superiority. Where



they travel abroad, their choice of one country over another will also be affected by matters of cost and culture.

But what then of the teachers of English? What variety should they adopt? Of course teachers who are British or Canadian, for example, will probably use their variety of English as a model, but for the majority of non-native speaker teachers the choice may not be so clear cut, and for many programme directors the choice of textbook will be a point at which they have to make up their minds.

Jan Svartvik makes a compelling case for choosing a variety from the inner circle if English is being learnt in an expanding circle country – that is, if English is being studied as a foreign language. Clearly this will not apply if the study is taking place in India or Malaysia (examples of outer circle countries) where home-grown varieties of English are both necessary and desirable. But where students are studying English in Prague or Buenos Aires, in Havana or Istanbul, then an inner circle variety is, in Svartvik's opinion, the only appropriate choice. In a talk in 1998 he argued that the choice of which inner circle variety to learn was not so crucial since the differences between inner circle varieties, while notable, were not nearly so numerous as the underlying similarities. A speaker of Irish English, for example, is intelligible to most other English speakers in the world and will also understand what is said to him or her.

The safest conclusion to draw is that teachers should work with the variety that best reflects their own language use, always provided that this will be understood by most other English speakers in the world – and/or the speakers that the students are most likely to come into contact with.

The fact that teachers and students generally aim at one variety for language production does not mean that they should only ever see or hear that one language variety. Teachers should expose students to different language varieties in listening (and reading) texts so that they do not only hear their teacher's voice. This will prepare students for the times when they come into contact with different language varieties at some later stage (see Chapter 16, A3). Of course, exposing beginner students to too many varieties and accents will be counter-productive since they will already be facing the difficulty of coming to terms with just one variety. But as their level improves (see Chapter 3, B4), they will need to have opportunities to encounter more and different varieties of English.

### **B3 General and specific**

One issue of language variety has little to do with geography and power in the ways we have described in this chapter. As teachers, we have to decide whether the English we teach our students will be general or specific.

A large number of students in the world study 'general' English, that is all-purpose language with no special focus on one area of human experience (e.g. business or academic study) over another. Thus, as we shall see, general English courses usually offer a judicious blend of different language skills and choose their topics from a range of sources, basing their selection of content more on student interest and engagement than on an easily identifiable student need. In schools and institutes all

over the world students are taught to communicate on a general social level and to cope with the normal range of texts which educated language users experience outside their professional lives. A decision to teach general English is made, in part, when we do not know how, why or when our students will need the language in the future, and so we give them language with the broadest range of use possible.

In contrast to students of general English, students of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) may have a closely identified goal for learning. Perhaps they are studying (or are about to study) in an English-medium university. They might therefore want a form of ESP referred to as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in which there is a concentration on writing academic essays, taking notes from oral lectures, perfecting reference skills in English, etc. If they are going to become scientists or engineers, on the other hand, they might be learning English for Science and Technology (EST) in which case their teacher might have them improving on their ability to consult or design manuals amongst other things.

As we shall see in Chapters 14, B2 and 18, B2, different genres of writing and speaking provoke different language use. Scientific articles employ passives more than general ones; academic essays require a style of discourse and particular expressions which would be out of place in normal social interaction. The language of air traffic control has a specific vocabulary which has to be understood and followed if the system is to work; workers in the tourist industry need to be confident about the specific vocabulary and the types of language interactions, such as dealing with dissatisfied customers, that they may encounter.

An enormous growth area in English language teaching has been in the area of Business English because many students perceive a need for the kind of language which will allow them to operate in the world of English-medium commerce. Once again there is specific vocabulary and language events (presenting to colleagues, the language of contracts, etc.) which are unlikely to appear in a general English course, but which are vitally important for business students. And so teachers find themselves training classes in such procedures as the art of negotiating, the correct use of phones and e-mail, or the reading of business reports.

## Further reading

- **Native speakers**

On trying to define a native speaker and his or her status as a language user, see M Rampton (1990).

- **Where English fits**

On issues of power and the English language, see A Canagarajah (1999).

R Phillipson (1999) delivers an uncompromising critique of D Crystal (1997) on global issues. Crystal (2000b) answers these points.

- **Appropriate models of English**

D Crystal (2000a) predicted the coming of a tri-lingual English world with a base (home) level, a national level, and, tantalisingly, an international standard English.

- **ESP**

For more on ESP (English for Specific Purposes), see T Dudley-Evans and M St John (1998).

# 2

# Describing language

## A Grammar

The grammar of a language is the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language. If grammar rules are too carelessly violated, communication may suffer, although, as we shall see in A2, creating a 'good' grammar rule is extremely difficult. Linguists investigating native-speaker speech (and writing) have, over the years, devised various different systems to describe how the language works.

A typical tree diagram will show us one such description and demonstrate how grammar rules provide the scaffolding on which we can create any number of different sentences. If we take a simple sentence like *The mongoose bit the snake*, we can represent it in the following way:

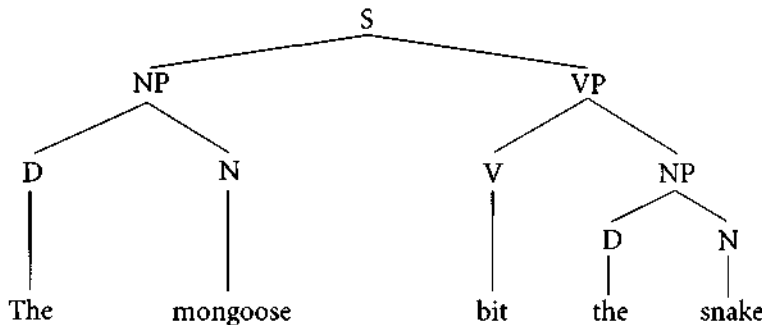


FIGURE 3: A grammar tree diagram

This formulation tells us that the sentence (S) contains a noun phrase (NP) and a verb phrase (VP). The noun phrase contains a determiner (D) and a noun (N) whilst the verb phrase contains a verb (V) and another noun phrase (NP).

What is important is not so much the particular way the grammar is represented here, but the fact that the representation shows us how this simple sentence is structured. It allows us to substitute different words yet retain the same structure, so that *The boy kicked the dog* or *The teacher praised the student* would also qualify as sentences with the same grammatical structure. This type of formulation also allows us to show how sentence structure can be transformed so that the active utterances (e.g. *The mongoose (NP1) bit (VP) the snake (NP2)*) can be transformed into passive ones (e.g. *The snake (NP2) was bitten (V) by the mongoose (NP1)*):

$$\text{NP1} + \text{VP} + \text{NP2} \implies \text{NP2} + \text{be} + \text{V-ed} + \text{by} + \text{NP1}$$
FIGURE 4: Active  $\rightarrow$  passive transformation

Such descriptions are largely the province of linguists, but they do nevertheless give considerable insight into the structure of a language. And these rules are known, at some subconscious level, by all competent speakers of the language. How else would we be capable of forming sentences? This knowledge is frequently called **competence**, and its realisation (in sentences such as *The mongoose bit the snake* or *The teacher praised the student*) is described as **performance**.

There are, of course, many other rules that go to make up a native speaker's competence. We are all happy to say *It's a big red car*, but find the sentence *It's a red big car* rather uncomfortable. This seems to be because we have a rule which says that when more than one adjective is placed before a noun, an adjective describing size comes before one of colour and not the other way round. When we say *She was elected by a thumping majority* it shows that we know how to change the word *elect* into *elected* by adding the **morpheme** *-ed* to the base form of the verb. Competent speakers know how to use these smallest units of grammar (morphemes) to combine grammatically with words to create new meanings. They know, consciously or subconsciously, that adding the *-ing* morpheme to *thump* turns it into a participle form and that participle forms can be used as adjectives as in *a thumping majority*, *a singing kettle*, etc.

This knowledge of **morphology** (using morphemes to change the meaning or grammar of a word) and **syntax** (the order that words can be arranged in) is essential to successful communication whether in writing or in speech. Consider the sentence *If he seems impossibly gloomy it may be because he's just heard about his exam results*. Clearly it would be impossible to make such a sentence unless we 'knew' that for the third person singular of the present simple, the base form of the verb (e.g. *seem*) always has the *s* morpheme added onto it. We also need to know that changing the shape of *impossible* to *impossibly* allows us to use it as an intensifying adverb; we need to be aware that we can use the present perfect to refer to something that has recently happened if we add *just*, and that the past participle of *hear* is *heard* – and so on.

## A1 Spoken and written grammar

For many years grammars have told us about the written language so that, for example, we confidently state that a sentence needs at least a subject and a verb, which can then be followed by an object (as in *I like biscuits*), by a complement (*He is British*) or by an adverbial (*She lives in Prague*). We know that questions are often formed by inverting the order of subject and verb (*Is he British?*) or (where there is no auxiliary present) bringing in an operator for this function (*Do you like biscuits?*). But the following conversation (in which four people in a kitchen are preparing for a party) seems to call some rules of this type into question:

**A:** Now I think you'd better start the rice

**B:** Yeah ... what you got there

[4 secs]

- B:** Will it all fit in the one  
**A:** No, you'll have to do two separate ones  
**C:** Right . . . what next  
 [17 secs]  
**C:** Foreign body in there  
**B:** It's the raisins  
**C:** Oh is it oh it's rice with raisins is it  
**B:** [  
 No  
 no no it's not supposed to be [laughs] erm  
**C:** There must be a raisin for it being in there  
**D:** Do you want a biscuit  
**C:** Erm  
**D:** Biscuit  
**C:** Er yeah  
 [9 secs]  
**D:** All right  
**C:** Yeah  
 [10 secs]  
**D:** Didn't know you used boiling water  
**B:** Pardon  
**D:** Didn't know you used boiling water  
**B:** Don't have to but it's erm ... they reckon it's erm [inaudible]

From R Carter and M McCarthy (1995: 208–209)

This transcript of informal speech is quite difficult to read, but a moment's reflection shows that it is not untypical of a lot of such conversations, containing, as it does, interruptions, non sequiturs, jokes (*There must be a raisin for it*), etc. What is perhaps more interesting is that certain grammatical rules seem to be completely ignored. Look at C's second utterance (*Foreign body in there*). A teacher might tell a student that such a sentence is not well formed and that what it should be is *There's a foreign body in there*. Four lines from the bottom D says *Didn't know you used boiling water*, but a grammar book would suggest that such a sentence should be *I didn't know (that) you used boiling water*. Then there's the biscuit. The first time D makes his or her offer the question is *Do you want a biscuit?*, but the second time all grammar appears to have been done away with and the question is just *Biscuit?* Yet even if this were the first question we would see nothing wrong with it in speech. People in kitchens frequently offer things by saying *Coffee? Sugar? Glass of wine?* Ellipsis (where words are 'left out' without destroying the meaning) is a common feature of informal conversation.

The grammar of speech has its own constructional principles (see Biber et al. 1999: 1066–1108); it is organised differently from writing. Spoken English has its own discourse markers too, for example:

- frequent non-clausal units (e.g. *Mmm, No, Uh huh, Yeah*)
- a variety of tags not found in written style, such as question tags (see D2)
- interjections (e.g. *ah, oh, wow, cor* (BrE))
- hesitators (*er, umm, erm*)
- interjections (e.g. *ah, oh wow, cor* (BrE))
- condensed questions (e.g. *More milk?, Any luck?*)
- echo questions (e.g. *Oh did you say San Francisco?, White chocolate hot cocoa?*)
- response forms (e.g. *yeah* or *sure* to acknowledge a request)
- fixed polite speech formulae (e.g. *Happy birthday!, Congratulations!*)

What is clear is that we need different grammar rules for speech and writing as Carter and McCarthy suggest (Carter and McCarthy 1995, McCarthy and Carter 1995). Language corpora (see B1 below and Chapter 12c) are now allowing us to do this as books like the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* clearly demonstrate (see Biber et al. cited above).

## A2 Problems with grammar rules

Once we know the grammatical rules of a language subconsciously, we are in a position to create an infinite number of sentences. However, while some rules are fairly straightforward, others seem to be horribly complex, and some grammatical patterning seems to have escaped perfect description so far.

One of the easiest rules to explain is the use of the *s* morpheme on the third person of the present simple (see above). We always add it with the pronouns *he, she,* and *it*. This is a straightforward rule, but it needs qualifying immediately. We can restate it by saying that we add *s* to all verbs for the third person singular of the present simple unless they are modal verbs (*must, can, will, should, etc.*), thus ruling out *\*he musts*. So a simple rule has become slightly less simple.

Many rules are considerably more complex than this, and linguists are still researching areas of language which hover teasingly out of reach of cut and dried description. But here a difference has to be made between **descriptive** and **pedagogic** grammars. Whilst the former may attempt to describe everything there is, the latter are designed specifically to be of help to teachers and students of the language who need, as far as possible, clear and easily-digestible summaries of what is and what is not correct. Such pedagogic grammar rules inform much language teaching but if they are carelessly applied, they can sometimes lead to considerable oversimplification – such as the ‘rule’ which says that *some* is used with affirmative sentences whilst *any* is used with questions and negative sentences. This rule helps students at beginner level to be sure of making correct sentences such as *I’ve got some sweets, I haven’t got any money?,* and *Have you got any petrol?* and as such might be quite useful. But of course it is not true – or rather it is not the whole truth – because we can also say *Would you like some tea?, I refuse to accept any responsibility, I wouldn’t mind some beer,* etc.

Michael Swan, an author not only of textbooks but also of one of the most widely-used pedagogic grammars, suggests a number of measures of a good rule (Swan 1994). These include ‘simplicity’ (though we have seen how this may cause

problems), 'truth' (because clearly some rules are more 'true' than others), 'clarity' (because rules that are unclear help nobody) and 'relevance' (because there are some things which a teacher or student probably does not really need to know). In a conference speech in 1998 he quoted the following rule, formulated by Louis Alexander for a magazine article, as an example of a formulation which opted for simplicity above all:

### THE PRESENT PERFECT TENSE

We often think that there are endless rules for this tense. In fact these can be boiled down to just two simple precepts:

- 1 To describe actions beginning in the past and continuing up to the present moment (and possibly into the future): *I've planted fourteen rose bushes so far this morning.*
- 2 To refer to actions occurring or not occurring at an unspecified time in the past with some kind of connection to the present: *Have you passed your driving test?*

Every use of the present perfect (for example with *since*, *for* and *so on*) will fit into one of these rules. Proliferating rules without end make this tense sound more difficult than it actually is.

From L. Alexander (1988: 59)

Yet Alexander himself devotes three pages to the simple present perfect in his own grammar book (1988: 171–174). Swan needs three and a half pages for an explanation of these and related uses of the present perfect (1995: 418–422) and Raymond Murphy in his intermediate grammar practice book has three separate units to cover the same areas in greater detail (1994: Units 7, 8 and 11). What this shows is that all writers of pedagogic grammar have to strike a balance between the competing measures of good rules which Swan (above) has enumerated. It is clear that Louis Alexander favoured simplicity and clarity above all in his magazine article, whereas both Swan and Murphy (and Alexander himself in a different context) have felt a need for more detailed and complex truth.

## B Vocabulary

In this section we will look at what is known about vocabulary as a result, in part, of the computerised analysis of language data. Armed with that knowledge we will discuss word meaning, how words extend their use, how words combine, and the grammar of words.

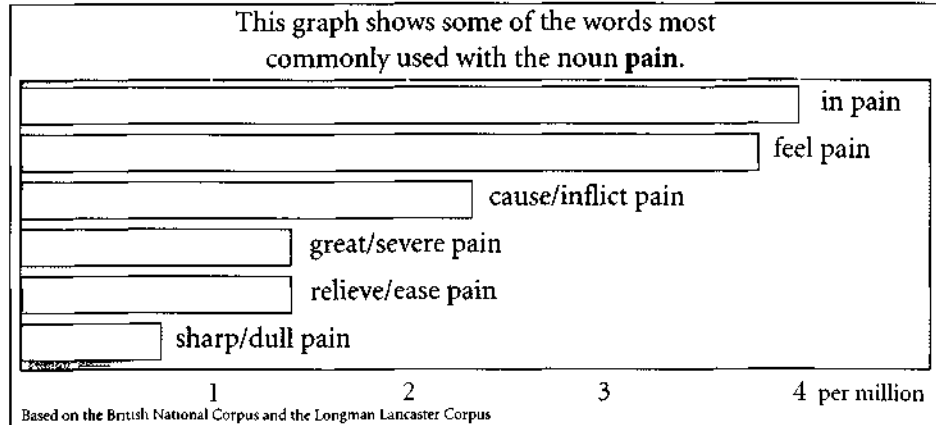
### B1 Language corpora

One of the reasons we are now able to make statements about vocabulary with considerably more confidence than before is because of the work of lexicographers and other researchers who are able to analyse large banks of language data stored on computers. From a **corpus** of millions of words (made up of novels, scientific



articles, plays, newspapers, brochures, speeches, recorded conversations, etc.) the computer can now give quick accurate information about how often words are used, and in what linguistic contexts. Compare this to the pioneering work of Michael West (see West 1953) who tried to get the same kind of information through manual sweat and toil and a card index.

Computer corpora have allowed dictionary makers to say how frequently individual words are used, as in the following example:



From the 1995 edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

Computer corpora can demonstrate that *okay* is far more common in speech than writing. They can also worry us by indicating that although we all know a phrase like *It's raining cats and dogs* this completely fails to appear even in a large corpus of spoken English (Rundell 1995).

Of course we knew some of these things already through a result of study and native speaker intuition, and it is true to say that however many words a corpus contains, it is only as good as the range and balance of material that goes into it. Nevertheless, much of our understanding of words has increased dramatically since the advent of computer databases, once a technological wonder, now commonplace and extremely useful as we will see in more detail in Chapter 12c. Thus, for example, the following computer concordance clearly shows us what adjectives are commonly used with the word we are looking at (in this case *thing* used in a particular journal). We have an easily visible demonstration of vocabulary facts in which we can have some confidence:

no matter how much of some other good thing. And the administration does not really make such concessions, that is one thing. But for the king to be the one to make to nurture a child or do the right thing by our parents. Lee Atwater, stricken John Major envisions some vague thing called a "Citizen's Charter" which The proposal "sounds like the same thing he's been doing all along, using U.S. and Japan are trying to do the same thing, he says. Slugs, it seems, have about lawyers. A few minutes into the thing, however, and it is clear that these Moody's said it's concerned the same thing may happen to the 33 issues under "Once martial law is declared, the first thing (Moscow) will do is stop this kind of "Noid" figure of a few years back are a thing of the past. The ads bear a strong "confident" he is doing the right thing. Schneider, a European power in the Scud missile launchers, said the only thing still holding Israel back is a lack also might have played a role. One thing that certainly had a part in the in governing ourselves. The only thing that is important, and that makes our rabbits to pull out of a hat. The only thing that will save this company is product says. "Losing subscribers is the last thing the newspaper industry needs." At he can choose to focus on "the vision thing. "The old argument -- that recognizing of the people who go in for this kind of thing. "They're medieval junkies," she says. Crop substitution won't be an easy thing to accomplish as long as North America -- Bookshelf: The Next Best Thing to Being There? ---- By Lee

thing as used in the *Wall Street Journal*, sampled from the *British National Corpus* (BNC)

## B2 Word meaning

The least problematic issue of vocabulary, it would seem, is meaning. We know that *table* means a thing with legs which we can write on and eat off and that *book* is a collection of words between covers. But, of course, this is not the end of the story at all. For example, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* lists three main meanings for *table* and four main meanings for *book* – let alone the large number of different phrases the words appear in where their meaning is subtly different. You can eat off a *table*, or you can *table* a motion at a conference. You can summarise information in a *table* too. Then again, when you have read your *book* you can ring up a restaurant and *book* a table, but if you drive too fast on the way you might be *booked* for speeding. Some people have been keeping a *book* on whether you will ever manage to persuade your boy/girlfriend to marry you, especially since everyone knows you have been cooking the *books* for years. The point is that the same collection of sounds and letters can have many different meanings. This polysemy is only resolved when we see the word in context. It is understanding the meaning in context that allows us to say which meaning of the word, in the particular instance, is being used.

What a word means is often defined by its relationship to other words. For example, we explain the meaning of *full* by saying that it is the opposite of *empty*; we understand that *cheap* is the opposite of *expensive*. Such **antonyms** reinforce the meaning of each word in the pair, though, of course, because a word can be polysemous it may have more than one antonym (e.g. *a rich person – a poor person, rich food – plain food*, etc.).

Words have **synonyms** that mean exactly or nearly the same as each other. We say that *bad* and *evil* are nearly synonymous as are *good* and *decent* in certain situations – as in *She's a good/decent pianist*. Once again much will depend on the context the words appear in. Yet in truth it is very difficult to find real synonyms. *Costly* and *expensive* might seem on the surface to mean the same yet they are subtly different: we tend to use the former about larger projects and larger amounts, while *expensive*

has a broader range of use. We would be unlikely to say *That pen you've got there looks very costly*, but *The new building programme is proving very costly* sounds perfectly all right.

Another relationship which defines the meaning of words to each other is that of **hyponymy**, where words like *banana*, *apple*, *orange*, *lemon*, etc. are all hyponyms of the **superordinate** *fruit*. And *fruit* itself is a hyponym of other items which are members of the food family. We can express this relationship in the following diagram:

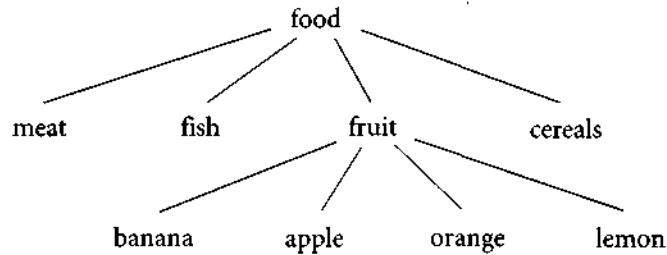


FIGURE 5: Hyponyms and superordinates

Part of a word's meaning, therefore, concerns its relations with other words, not only in terms of antonymy and synonymy, but also in terms of how it fits into the vocabulary hierarchy.

One final point should be made about word meaning, namely that what a word means is not necessarily the same as what it suggests – or rather that words have different **connotations**, often depending on the context they occur in. Thus the word *chubby* has a very positive connotation when it is combined with *baby*, but it suddenly becomes negative in tone if it is combined with *middle-aged English teacher*! And what about a sentence like *He's a very dangerous man* where *dangerous* would appear to have a negative connotation, yet some people have been known to find 'dangerous men' curiously attractive!

### B3 Extending word use

Words do not just have different meanings, however. They can also be stretched and twisted to fit different contexts and different uses. We say that someone is in a *black mood* or someone is *yellow*, yet we are not actually describing a colour. In such contexts *black* and *yellow* mean something else.

Jean Aitchison gives many other examples of how the literal meaning of words has been extended (Aitchison 1994: Chapter 13). We say, for example, that *The price of mangoes went up* but *went up here* cannot mean the same as *She went up the stairs*. When we say that *Prices have taken a dramatic tumble* how are we to explain the meanings of *dramatic* and *tumble*?

Such **metaphorical** use of words allows us to move beyond their purely denotational use (where a word only describes a thing rather than the feelings or ideas it suggests). It helps us extend our range of expression and interpretation, allowing us the opportunity to explain our feelings about things in a way that creates readily available images. Poets use such metaphors all the time, of course. Consider, for example, these lines:

The wind clawed through the shrunken trees  
And scratched and bit and roared with rage.

Some metaphors become fixed into phrases which competent speakers recognise at once, even though the meaning of the phrase is not decipherable from any understanding of the individual word. We all know that *She kicked the bucket* means she died and that *He has bitten off more than he can chew* means that he has attempted something that is too difficult for him. If someone says to you *I've got him eating out of my hand* we understand the metaphor, but it is not original; it is a common expression, an accepted **idiom**.

The metaphorical and idiomatic use of words and phrases is not always popular, however. For some years it became commonplace for people to describe someone who had suffered a disappointment being *as sick as a parrot*, and this idiomatic expression became so widely used that it began to irritate everybody, except, perhaps, when used ironically. *As sick as a parrot* had become a **cliché**, what Crystal calls a 'lexical zombie' (Crystal 1995: 186). *Money doesn't grow on trees, you know*, qualifies as a cliché too; as does the phrase *to add insult to injury*.

However, a cliché is not necessarily strongly metaphorical all the time as the following two lines of dialogue from a recent radio soap opera episode show:

*Ex-lover:* I never meant to hurt you.

*Jilted lover:* Oh please Richard, not that tired old cliché.

Sometimes words are extended so extremely that their meaning becomes completely impenetrable. The following sentence, Chomsky suggested, is meaningless, despite being grammatically respectable:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

Perhaps there are limits, then, in how far we can bend the meanings and uses of words. But do not bet on it. There are poets everywhere!

## B4 Word combinations

Although words can appear as single items which are combined in a sentence (*The mongoose bit the snake*), they can also occur in two-or-more item groups (*The normally lightning-quick reactions of the reptile let it down*). They often combine with each other in ways which competent speakers of the language recognise instantly, but which others often find strange. The kinds of word that go together in one language are often completely different from the kinds of word which live together in another.

Word combinations (also known as **collocations**) have become the subject of intense interest in the recent past, in part spurred on by discoveries from language corpora (see above). Collocation is the way in which words co-occur – combinations which, through custom and practice, have come to be seen as normal and acceptable. It is immediately apparent that while some words can live together, others cannot. We say *fast asleep*, and this is an acceptable collocation, but *\*fast awake* is not. We can say *clenched fist* and even *clenched teeth*, yet we cannot talk about *\*clenched ears*.

an original metaphor  
common expressions  
are idioms

usually used  
idiom is a  
cl. fr.

The way in which words combine collocationally and in larger chunks has led people, most notably Nattinger, to talk about **lexical phrases** (Nattinger 1988). Such phrases are often part of longer memorised strings of speech. We know, for example, what the word *ironic* means, but we can also say that it is typically used in the phrase *It is ironic that . . .*

Lexical phrases or 'language chunks' are like prefabricated building units. Apart from phrasal verbs, collocations, and compound words such as *traffic lights*, *walking stick*, and *workshop*, language also chunks itself, according to Maggie Baigent, into 'functional phrases' (*by the way*, *on the other hand*, *if you see what I mean*), 'idiomatic' or 'fixed expressions' (*a close shave*, *an only child*, *in love*) and 'verbal expressions' (*can't afford to*, *not supposed to*, *don't mind*) (Baigent 1999: 51). Michael Lewis demonstrates how a 'lexical unit', like *I'll*, crops up time and time again in what he calls 'archetypal utterances' such as *I'll give you a ring*, *I'll drop you a line*, *I'll see what I can do*, *I'll see you later*, etc. (Lewis 1993: Chapter 5).

The chunking of language in this way suggests that talking about vocabulary exclusively in terms of words is not sufficient to account for the different kinds of meaning unit which language users have at their disposal. A **phrasal verb** is made up of two or more words (if we accept one definition of what a word is) yet it is only one meaning unit. We could argue that *wide awake* and *a close shave* are single meaning units too. Some people refer to such meaning units as 'lexemes' (see Crystal 1995: 118), but whatever we call them, we need to see that words in combination have to be perceived as meaning units in their own right, just as single words such as *book* or *table* do.

What we are saying is that we use words either in prefabricated chunks or insert them into the templates provided by grammar. As Steven Pinker expresses it: '... the mind analyses language as some mixture of memorised chunks and rule-governed assemblies' (1999: 26).

## B5 The grammar of words

A key middle ground where words and phrases on the one hand and grammar on the other meet up is through the operation of word classes or parts of speech, such as **noun** or **adjective**. When we say a word is a noun we then know how it can operate in a sentence. The same is true for such word classes as **verbs** or **determiners** or **prepositions**. When we know a word's part of speech, we know what other words it can occur with in a phrase or sentence and where it can be put syntactically, a fact graphically demonstrated by the kind of tree diagram we looked at in A above.

Within word classes there are a number of restrictions. A knowledge of these allows competent speakers to produce well-formed sentences. Speakers of British English, for example, might say *There isn't any furniture in the room*, but would not say *\*There aren't any furnitures in the room* because furniture is almost always an **uncountable** noun (sometimes called a 'mass' or a 'non-count' noun). The same is true of words like *pollution* and *sugar* or *cheese*, whereas words like *cup* and *pen* are thought of as **countable** (sometimes called 'count' nouns) because you can pluralise them and therefore use them with plural verbs.

We can say, therefore, that nouns are countable or uncountable and many dictionaries have a [U] or a [C] next to such nouns to show what they are. But since, as we have discussed, the same word can have a number of different meanings, it is not always possible to say that a collection of letters like *sugar* is always uncountable. Change its meaning slightly and it is quite possible to say *Two sugars, please*, and the waiter at your table might well say *So that's two ice creams and two cheeses*, showing that *cheese* has suddenly changed its status from uncountable to countable. We may think we are faced with the same word, but we are actually dealing with two different lexemes or meaning units (see B4 above).

A similar situation occurs with verbs where we often label them either **transitive** (they take an object), **intransitive** (they do not take an object), or both. The verb *herd* (e.g. *to herd sheep*) is a transitive verb. It always takes an object. The verb *open* on the other hand can be either transitive or intransitive. The dentist says *Open your mouth* (transitive), but we can also say that *The dentist's surgery opens at eight o'clock* (intransitive).

Verbs are good examples, too, of the way in which words can trigger the grammatical behaviour of other words around them. *Like* triggers the use of either the *-ing* form in verbs which follow it (*I like listening to music*) or the use of *to* + the infinitive (*I like to listen to music*), but in British English *like* cannot be followed by *that* + a sentence (we cannot say *\*She likes that she sails*). The verb *tell* triggers the use of a direct object and, if there is a following verb, the construction *to* + infinitive (*She told me to arrive on time*), whereas *say* triggers *that* + a clause construction (*She said that she would arrive on time*).

As we saw on page 13, a word as a part of speech can be changed morphologically; adding the *s* morpheme to the noun *book* makes it plural. Adding the *s* morpheme to the verb *book* is obligatory if we use it with third person singular pronouns. The use of affixes such as *im* and *dis* can change the meaning of words (e.g. *possible* and *impossible*, *agree* and *disagree*).

Words can also occupy more than one word class, a fact that is frequently (but not always) indicated by morphological change. The word *anger* can be a noun or a verb, but if we want to use the related adjective we change it to *angry*, and if we want it to be used adverbially, we have to change the *y* to an *i* and add *ly*. The table below shows the way in which words can occupy different word classes, sometimes without changing, sometimes by altering their morphological shape:

Verb	Noun	Adjective	Adverb
argue	argument	argumentative	argumentatively
anger	anger	angry	angrily
suggest	suggestion	suggestive	suggestively
calm	calm	calm	calmly

## C Language in use

The linguist Peter Grundy reports the following conversation between himself (*me* in the extract) and a student at the University of Durham where he works:

- Me:* You're in a no-smoking zone.  
*Female student:* Am I?  
*Me:* The whole building's a no-smoking zone.  
*Female student:* Thanks very much (extinguishing cigarette).

From P Grundy (2000: 60)

We know what the words mean, of course, but why exactly did Peter Grundy give the student the information about the no-smoking zone? He clearly was not just offering information or passing the time. On the contrary, his purpose, as he himself acknowledges proudly, was to stop the student polluting the air! And what are we to make of the student's second utterance? Is she really thanking her lecturer for giving her information that she did not have before? Or does her *Thanks very much* really mean *sorry*? Perhaps its purpose is to indicate to her lecturer that yes, she knows she is smoking in a no-smoking zone and since she has been 'caught' she has no option but to put out her cigarette.

Peter Grundy might have chosen different words for the purpose, especially if, instead of a student, he had found the Dean, his boss, smoking in the corridor. Instead of stating, baldly, that *You're in a no-smoking zone*, he might have said something like *Umm, not sure if I should point this out or not, but didn't we agree that this building would be a no-smoking area?* or maybe he would have employed a different formula of words altogether to get his point across.

The issue that faces us here is that the words we use and what they actually mean in the context we use them are not the same thing at all. We choose words and phrases to have different effects from the surface meanings they appear to express, and we do this on the basis of a number of variables: purpose, appropriacy, language in discourse, and genre.

### C1 Purpose

Many years ago, the philosopher J L Austin identified a series of verbs which he called **performatives**, that is verbs which do what those same words mean. Thus, if a speaker says *I promise*, the word *promise* itself performs the function of promising. If a celebrity says *I name this ship 'Ocean 3'* the use of the verb *to name* performs the function of naming.

The idea that language performs certain functions is not restricted to the kind of verbs Austin mentioned, however. We saw above how *This is a no-smoking zone* had the purpose of having the student put out her cigarette, just as a sentence like *It's cold in here* might, in certain circumstances, perform the function of a request to the other person in the room to close the window. We may select language for its denotational (or surface) meaning, in other words, but we also use it to do something else. We have a purpose in mind which we wish to achieve.

One major result of this interest in purpose led applied linguists to propose a category of language **functions** such as 'inviting', 'apologising', 'offering' and 'suggesting'. Thus *Would you like to come for a coffee?* performs the function of inviting where the purpose is to be a good host, whereas *I can't go along with you there* performs the function of disagreeing with the purpose of making your own opinion quite clear. *Why don't you switch it on?* seems to be performing the function of strong suggestion where the purpose is to provoke action, and *I'll do it if you want* is clearly offering help, with the purpose of being helpful.

The study of functions and how they are realised in language has had a profound effect upon the design of language-teaching materials, making language purpose a major factor in the choice of syllabus items and teaching techniques.

## C2 Appropriacy

A feature of language functions is that they do not just have one linguistic realisation; the following phrases, for example, show only some of the possible ways of inviting someone to the cinema:

Would you like to come to the cinema?  
 How about coming to the cinema?  
 D'you fancy the cinema?  
 I was wondering if you might like to come to the cinema tonight?  
 What about the cinema?  
 Are you on for the cinema?  
 Cinema?  
 There's a good movie on at the cinema.  
 etc.

Thus, when we attempt to achieve a communicative purpose (such as getting someone to agree to an invitation) we have to choose which of these language forms to use. Which form, given our situation, is the most appropriate?

There are a number of variables which govern our choice:

- **Setting:** we speak differently in libraries from the way we do in night clubs. We often use informal and spontaneous language at home, whereas we may use more formal pre-planned speech in an office or work environment.
- **Participants:** the people involved in an exchange – whether in speech or writing – clearly affect the language being chosen. However egalitarian we may want to be we often choose words and phrases in conversation with superiors which are different from the words and phrases we use when talking to friends, members of our families, or colleagues of equal status to us.
- **Gender:** research clearly shows that men and women typically use language differently when addressing either members of the same or the opposite sex. Women have frequently used more concessive language than men for example, and crucially, have often talked less than men in mixed-sex conversations.



- **Channel:** as we saw in A1 above, there are marked differences between spoken and written grammars. But spoken language is not all the same: it is affected by the situation we are in. Are we speaking face to face or on the telephone? Are we speaking through a microphone to an unseen audience or standing up in a lecture hall in front of a crowd? Each different channel will generate different uses of language.
- **Topic:** finally, the topic we are addressing affects our lexical and grammatical choices. The words and phrases that we use when talking or writing about a wedding will be different from those we employ when the conversation turns to particle physics. The vocabulary of childbirth is different from the lexical phrases associated with football.

These, then, are some of the factors that influence our choice of language. When we have our students study the way language is used in speaking or writing, we will want to draw their attention to such issues. We may ask why a speaker uses particular words or expressions. We may have our students prepare for a speaking activity by assembling the necessary topic words and phrases. We may discuss what sort of language is appropriate in an office situation when talking to a superior – and whether the sex of the superior makes any difference.

Language is a social construct as much as it is a mental ability. It is important for students to be just as aware of this in a foreign or second language as they are in their own.

### C3 Language as discourse

Our description of language has so far taken in grammar, vocabulary, and language use (translated by applied linguists into a study of language functions and the appropriate use of language in different situations). This has led some researchers to describe conversations in terms such as turn-taking (how people take turns to speak in a conversation), and the patterns and routes which many typical conversations follow. The concern has been not so much to study the bits of language (words and grammar, for example) but to see how they are used in discourse (language used in context over an extended period), since it is at the level of discourse that we can really see how people operate.

We have already seen an example of conversational English discourse in the extract from the work of Carter and McCarthy (see A1). Here the researchers transcribed a conversation carefully, giving details about the pauses between utterances, showing how one speaker's utterance overlaps another's, for example:

C: Oh is it oh it's rice with raisins is it

B: [

No

From R Carter and M McCarthy (1995: 208)

More detailed transcripts use different symbols for overlapping speech (//), relatively long pauses (...), utterances that are impossible to decipher (( )), not to

mention the various symbols for intonation, loudness, etc. (Grundy 2000). With this kind of meticulous observation we can examine discourse under a microscope, to see what is going on.

Apart from the speech details mentioned so far, linguists also describe the organisation of meaning within a text. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), for example, describe content in discourse in terms of ‘topic markers’ (*Let’s look at X*, etc.), ‘topic shifters’ (*By the way*, etc.), ‘summarisers’ (*to cut a long story short*, etc.), and other markers such as ‘exemplifiers’, ‘relators’, ‘evaluators’ and ‘qualifiers’. With such labels it is possible to break any piece of discourse down into small chunks. Then we can see how the chunks are stacked up in a variety of discourse patterns. Now we can say to students, *Look this is how competent speakers put the language together into longer and longer chunks*.

However, we should ask ourselves how useful students will find the study of discourse, especially if it is investigated in the kind of detail we have suggested above. Most teachers and students would say that there is little time for such microscopic analysis. Yet, as the following example shows, a study of a paragraph can yield rich information. Julian Edge, drawing on the work of Michael Hoey (1983), shows how a typical pattern of paragraph organisation (Situation–Problem–Response–Evaluation) is exemplified in a simple story – produced in a teacher’s workshop session:

**Situation:** Once upon a time there was a merchant so rich that he could have paved the streets of his town with silver.

**Problem:** But his wealth brought him little happiness, because he was allergic to almost everything and had to stay cooped up in a sterile room.

**Response:** In desperation he offered half his fortune to anyone who could cure his allergies. Doctors came from far and wide but to no avail.

**Evaluation:** Unless he has died in the meantime he still sits there today, looking at pictures of the world outside.

From *The Foundation Module for the MSc in TESOL* by J Edge published by the University of Aston (1997)

With such a pattern we can say to students that if they wish to understand this type of story-telling – or if they wish to put together their own tales of this kind – the pattern we have drawn their attention to will help them to do so. This kind of approach will be useful, too, for readers and writers in a variety of genres (see below), just as it is here for people who wish to study story-telling.

We use a variety of devices to structure written discourse. Sometimes we repeat words (*Mary Allen, the Mayor of X, is to stand for re-election. Allen says ...*), replace names with pronouns (*Mary Allen, the mayor of X, is to stand for re-election. She ...*). Using such devices to refer to something earlier in the text is called **anaphoric reference**; in the case of reference forwards to something which will occur later, we call such reference **cataphoric**; reference outside the text is **exophoric**.

Contemporary textbooks show that materials writers are fully aware of how important discourse analysis is to our understanding of both spoken and written text. The more our students can identify typical patterns of use, the better they will be able to read, listen, write and speak.

#### C4 Genre

Discourse analysis allows us to make statements about typical paragraph organisation or the structure of conversations. But we can go even further than this, showing longer stretches of typical discourse which almost always behave in the same way. We can describe different types of film (e.g. *film noir*, *animated cartoon*, *teenage horror movie*) as different genres. In the same way, we can describe different types of writing – in different contexts and for different purposes – as different written genres, and we can look at typical speaking genres too. This then allows us to study different language use in thriller or romantic fiction. We can show the way in which holiday postcards are normally written, or study scientific writing for its general patterning; we can show how typical exchanges take place at post office counters (see page 241), or study the genre of social introductions. Students who have been helped to perceive these patterns will be in a much better position not only to understand what they read and hear, but also to produce their own written and spoken language.

The following examples show how one particular genre, the ‘lonely hearts’ advertisement, follows clearly identifiable set patterns:

<p><b>Forty-plus</b>, independent-minded, sensitive lady with a GSOH, would like to meet a genuine man for friendship. Dial 0897 505 100. When asked, dial 5 followed by Phone box no 69984.</p>	<p><b>Male</b>, 49, intelligent, gentle-natured, pleasant looking and blind seeks partner. Dial 0897 505 100. When asked, dial 5 followed by Phone box no 86846.</p>
<p><b>Two wonderful women</b>, professional and funny, would like to meet two interesting men over 40, for lunches, outings, music and theatre etc. North London area. Dial 0897 505 100. When asked, dial 5 followed by Phone box no 69984.</p>	<p><b>Well-travelled</b>, 40s, tall, slim 60s child, changing direction, seeks beautiful woman. West Yorkshire area. 0897 505 100 When asked, dial 5 followed by Phone box no 88749.</p>

Lonely hearts advertisements from the *New Statesman* magazine

It is amusing and instructive for many students to study the ‘lonely hearts’ genre, even though they may not go on to use their knowledge in any practical way. But the same technique applied to other genres (such as scientific writing, report writing, journalism, or certain kinds of narrative composition) will have more practical applications, allowing students to read or write with a greater understanding of how such texts are constructed.

## D The sounds of the language

In writing, we represent words and grammar through orthography. When speaking, on the other hand, we construct words and phrases with individual sounds, and we also use pitch change, intonation, and stress to convey different meanings.

The teaching of pronunciation will be the focus of Chapter 13, where we will also discuss how ‘perfect’ our students’ pronunciation should be (Chapter 13, A1). In this section, however, we will look at five pronunciation issues: pitch, intonation, sounds, sounds and spelling, and stress.

### D1 Pitch

One of the ways we recognise people is by the pitch of their voice. We say that one person has a very high voice whereas another has a deep voice. When their voice is very high we talk about them having a ‘high-pitched’ voice.

While most of us have a pitch range that we normally operate at, in times of tension, for example, the pitch of our voices may change dramatically. We often speak at a higher pitch than normal if we are frightened or excited. When we are tired, bored, or fed up our pitch may be lower than is customary.

A device by which we communicate emotion and meaning, therefore, is through the pitch we use. If we start speaking at a higher pitch than usual, this is noticeable. A low grunt gives some indication of mood too!

### D2 Intonation

On its own, pitch is not very subtle, conveying, as we have seen, only the most basic information about mood and emotion. But once we start altering the pitch as we speak, changing the ‘tune’ we are using, we are able to convey a much subtler range of meanings. The music of speech, that is the **intonation** we use, is a crucial factor in speaking.

Joanne Kenworthy shows how intonation is used to put words and information in the foreground (by using a high or wavering pitch), in the background (by using a lower pitch than normal), to signal ends and beginnings of conversations (we often know when someone has finished speaking because their voice drops in pitch – just as their voice may start at a higher pitch than usual at the beginning of their contribution), or to show whether a situation is ‘open’ or ‘closed’ (when we finish what we are saying at a higher pitch than normal we leave other possibilities ‘in the air’ whereas a falling pitch closes off what we have said from further discussion) (Kenworthy 1987: 88–89).

Intonation is also used to convey emotion, involvement, and empathy. If we use an exaggerated intonation tune in a question like *What’s going on?*, starting at quite a high pitch and using large pitch leaps, it shows that we are really surprised or frightened. But if we say the same question at a low pitch with a fairly flat intonation tune it suggests that we are not very concerned at the answer we will get.

Intonation is also a way of modifying the strength or intention of what we are saying. We can perform different functions (see C1 above) by choosing different

forms of language. But we can also make the same forms perform different functions. The word *well* can express agreement, acceptance, doubt, or disagreement depending on how we say it. *No* can indicate refusal, questioning of fact, or disagreement.

Finally, we use intonation to show how certain we are about what we are saying and to indicate what response we expect. The most typical example of this is the use of tag questions such as *You're okay, aren't you?* with a falling tone to confirm what we believe to be the case, or with a rising tone to show our uncertainty about what the answer will be.

Intonation, then, is crucial in communicating meaning. Indeed, listeners frequently get the wrong messages from intonation when foreign speakers use it in an idiosyncratic way. That is because intonation tells us what someone means and how they feel about it. We recognise the difference between making a statement and asking a question. We are aware of the fact that someone is surprised, for example, and we gather from their intonation that they are being polite – or rude.

### D3 Individual sounds

Words and sentences are made up of sounds (or **phonemes**) which, on their own, may not carry meaning, but which, in combination, make words and phrases. The phonemes /k/ (like the *c* in *can*), /æ/ (like the *a* in *can*) or /t/ (like the *t* in *tooth*) are just sounds, but put them together in a certain order and we get /kæt/ *cat*, a word that is instantly recognisable. If we change just one of these sounds (/b/ for /k/, for example) we will get a different word *bat*; if, on the other hand, we changed /æ/ for /ɒ/ – like the *o* in *hot* – we would get another different word, /kɒt/ *cot*.

'Southern English standard' has forty-four phonemes as the following list shows:

i:	sheep	aʊ	house	θ	think
ɪ	ship	ɔɪ	buoy	ð	then
e	breath	ɪə	cheer	s	cell
æ	back	eə	chair	z	lens
ɑ:	arm	ʊə	sure	ʃ	shell
ɒ	what	p	pen	ʒ	measure
ɔ:	law	b	board	h	he
ʊ	would	t	little	m	plumb
u:	shoe	d	dance	n	no
ʌ	son	k	cup	ŋ	ring
ɜ:	first	g	good	l	let
ə	again	tʃ	chin	r	wring
eɪ	play	dʒ	July	j	yes
əʊ	ago	f	fan	w	when
aɪ	climb	v	van		

The phonemes of 'Southern English standard'

Competent speakers of the language make these sounds by using various parts of the mouth such as the lips, the tongue, the teeth, the alveolar ridge (the ridge behind

the upper teeth), the palate, the velum (the flap of soft tissue hanging at the back of the palate – often called the soft palate), and the vocal cords (folds). See Figure 6:



FIGURE 6: Parts of the mouth

As an example we can observe that the consonant /t/ is made when the tip of the tongue is placed on the alveolar ridge above it (the alveolar ridge is the flat surface you can feel immediately behind your top teeth) and when air from the lungs forces the tongue away from the ridge in an explosive burst. That is why /t/ is referred to as an **alveolar plosive**. Figure 7 shows which parts of the mouth are used for alveolar plosives:

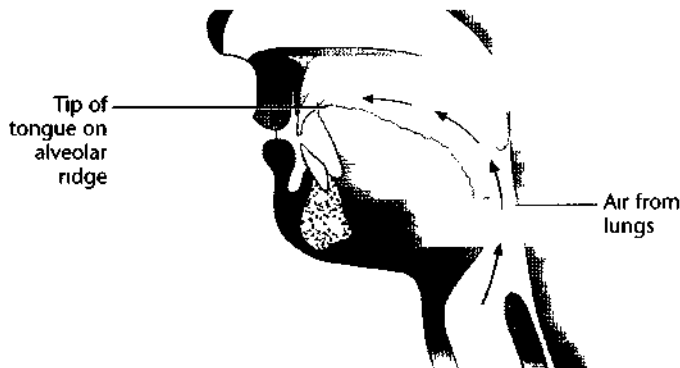


FIGURE 7: The alveolar plosive

The consonant /d/ is made in a similar way to /t/ but there are crucial differences. When we say /t/ as in /tʌn/ *ton* the first sound is just air and the air is expelled from the mouth (try saying *t, t, t* to yourself holding your hand in front of your mouth). In the larynx the vocal cords (the two flaps of muscular tissue which, when pressed together, vibrate when air is forced through them) are completely open, so there is no obstruction for the air coming from the lungs. When we say /d/ as in /dʌn/ *done*, however, the vocal cords are closed, the air from the lungs forces them to vibrate, and our voiceless /t/ is now voiced to become /d/. Furthermore there is little **aspiration** (air) as there was with /t/ (again, if you hold your hand in front of your mouth this will become clear). Figure 8 shows the position of the vocal cords for **voiceless** sounds (like /p/, /t/, /k/) and **voiced** sounds (like /b/, /d/, and /g/):

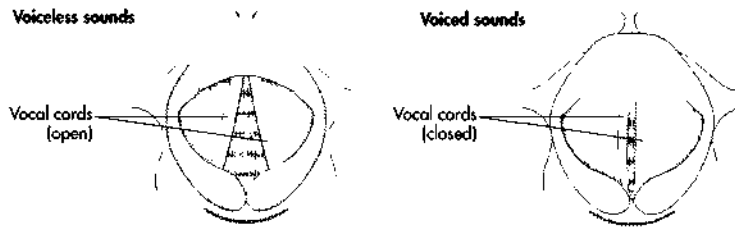


FIGURE 8: Position of the vocal cords (seen from above) for voiceless and voiced sounds

Vowels are all voiced. Two other features create the differences between vowels. The first is the place in the mouth where they are made. The second feature, which is easier to observe, is the position of the lips. For /a:/ the lips form something like a circle, whereas for /i:/ they are more stretched and spread. Figure 9 shows these two positions:



FIGURE 9: Position of the lips for /a:/ and /i:/

One sound which does not occur in many phonemic charts but which is nevertheless widely used is the glottal stop, created when a closure of the vocal cords 'stops' air completely, and we say /əpɑ:ʔmənt/ *apartment*, for example, instead of /əpɑ:tmənt/ or /aɪsɔ:ʔɪt/ *I saw it* instead of /aɪsɔ:rɪt/. The glottal stop is often used instead of other stop (or plosive) consonants, in other words.

Speakers of different languages have different sounds. Thus there is no equivalent in English for the 'click' used by Xhosa speakers, so English speakers find it difficult to produce. French people are accustomed to the awkward way in which British speakers mangle French vowels because they are not the same as English ones. Japanese speakers, on the other hand, do not have different phonemes for /l/ and /r/ and so have difficulty differentiating between them, and often find it nearly impossible to make the different sounds.

#### D4 Sounds and spelling

Whereas in some languages there seems to be a close correlation between sounds and spelling, in English this is often not the case. The sound /ʌ/, for example, can be realised in a number of different spellings (e.g. *won*, *young*, *funny*, *flood*). The letters *ou*, on the other hand, can be pronounced in a number of different ways (e.g. *enough* – /ənʌf/, *through* – /θru:/, *though* – /ðəʊ/, *trough* – /trɒf/, or even *journey* /dʒɜ:nɪ/). A lot depends on the sounds that come before and after them, but the fact remains that we spell some sounds in a variety of different ways, and we have a variety of different sounds for some spellings.

Words can change their sound too, and this is not indicated by the way we spell them. Thus we say that *was* sounds like this, /wɒz/. However, when it occurs in a sentence like *I was robbed*, the vowel sound changes from a stressed vowel /ɒ/ to an unstressed vowel /ə/, e.g. /aɪwəzrɒbd/. This unstressed sound /ə/ is called the **schwa**, and is one of the most frequent sounds in English, created by shortening of the vowel and the placing of stress elsewhere (see D5 below).

Other changes occur when sounds get close or slide into each other in connected speech: sometimes **elision** takes place where sounds disappear into each other. Thus /ka:nɪ/ *can't* finishes with the sound /t/, but when it is placed next to a word beginning with /d/, for example, the /t/ hardly sounds at all (e.g. /aɪka:nɪdɑ:nz/ – *I can't dance*). Sometimes **assimilation** takes place where the sound at the end of one word changes to be more like the sound at the beginning of the next. Thus the /n/ at the end of /gri:n/ becomes an /m/ when placed next to a word starting with /p/, e.g. /gri:mpɛn/ *green pen*, but changes to /ŋ/ when placed immediately before /k/ in normal speech, e.g. /pæŋkeɪk/ *pancake*. Sometimes we insert **linking** sounds between vowels, e.g. /r/ in *law and order* /lɔ:rənɔ:də/, or /j/ in *I am* /aɪjəm/. **Juncture** (where two sounds meet) can vary according to such qualities as syllable stress or vowel length, e.g. *ice cream* vs. *I scream*.

## D5 Stress

British and American English speakers sometimes differ in where they place the stress in words. Thus *ballet* in British English is stressed on the first syllable (*bal*) whereas in American English the stress usually falls on the second syllable (*let*).

Stress is the term we use to describe the point in a word or phrase where pitch changes, vowels lengthen, and volume increases. In a one-syllable word like *dance* there is no problem, since at least one syllable will need these characteristics, and since there is only one syllable, we know which one it is! A word with more than one syllable is more complex, however. We might stress the word *export* on the second syllable (*exPORT*) if we are using it as a verb. But if, on the contrary, we stress the first syllable (*EXport*) the verb is now a noun.

In multisyllable words there is often more than one stressed syllable (e.g. *singularity*, *information*, *claustrophobia*). In such cases we call the strongest force the **primary stress** and the weaker force the **secondary stress**, e.g. *ˌsɪŋgʊlˈærɪti*, *ˌɪnfərˈmeɪʃən*, *ˌklaʊstrəˈfəʊbiə*. Note that primary stress has a superscript mark whereas secondary stress is marked below the line. Secondary stress is not the same as unstressed syllables, as the presence of the schwa shows, e.g. /ˌɪnfəˈmeɪʃən/.

As was discussed above, words are often not pronounced as one might expect from their spelling. The word *secretary* would appear, on paper, to have four syllables, but when it is spoken there are sometimes only three and the first one is stressed /sekɹətɹɪ/, or even, in rapid speech, only two, e.g. /sekɹɪ/.

It is worth noticing, too, that when a word changes shape, the stressed syllable may shift as well. In English we stress *Japan* on the second syllable (*jaPAN*), but when we turn the word into an adjective the stress moves to the new syllable (*jaPANese*). However, this does not always happen (e.g. *amERica*, *amERican*).



Stress is vitally important in conveying meaning in phrases and sentences. We have already discussed the importance of pitch and intonation, and it is on the stressed part of a phrase that intonation changes are most marked. In British English the stress often falls on the end of the phrase – to give it ‘end weight’. So a neutral way of saying *Brad wants to marry my daughter* might have the stress on the *dau* of *daughter*. But if the speaker changes where the stress falls (and thus where the intonation change takes place), then the meaning of the sentence changes too so that an affirmative statement, for example, may well become a question:

Brad wants to MARRY my daughter? (= I didn't know he was that serious.)

or

BRAD wants to marry my daughter? (= Not Brad, surely!)

## E Paralinguistic features of language

A number of features of communication take place outside the formal systems of language (sounds, grammar, etc). These **paralinguistic features** fall into two broad categories, those that involve the voice and those that involve the body.

### E1 Vocal paralinguistic features

David Crystal gives five examples of ‘tones of voice’ which, while they are perhaps not central to meaning in the same way as the sound features we noted in Section D above, may nevertheless convey attitude or intention in some way (Crystal 1995: 249). The five are whispering (to indicate the need for secrecy), breathiness (to show deep emotion or sexual desire), huskiness (to show unimportance or disparagement), nasality (to indicate anxiety) and extra lip rounding (to express greater intimacy, especially with babies, for example). Whether or not these characteristics are voluntary or involuntary, they nevertheless convey intention and circumstance.

It is clear that there are a number of ways of altering our tone of voice, and that when we do this consciously, we do it to create different effects.

### E2 Physical paralinguistic features

We can convey a number of meanings through the way in which we use our bodies. The expression on our face, the gestures we make, and even proximity or the way we sit, for example, may send powerful messages about how we feel or what we mean. We can look at some of these in more detail.

- **Facial expression:** facial expression is a powerful conveyor of meaning. Smiling is an almost universal signal of pleasure or welcome. Other facial expressions may not be so common, however. Raising eyebrows to suggest surprise or interest may be a part of one culture's normal currency, but may be more extreme for others. Other facial actions such as biting your lip (indicating thought or uncertainty), compressing the lips (to show decision or obstinacy), and a visible clenching of the teeth to show anger are all powerful conveyors of meaning too.

• **Gesture:** we use gesture to indicate a wide range of meanings, although once again the actual gestures we use may be specific to particular cultures. A few examples of British English behaviour show how powerful such gestures can be: shrugging shoulders may indicate indifference, an attitude of *I don't care*, or *I don't know*; crossing your arms may indicate relaxation, but it can also powerfully show boredom. Waving can denote welcome and farewell, whereas scratching your head may indicate puzzlement.

Each culture group also has its gestures for *go away* both in its polite and ruder forms, and the use of arms, hands, and fingers to make obscene gestures for insults is part and parcel of the currency of society. Other less threatening gestures are also culture-bound as Figure 10 shows:

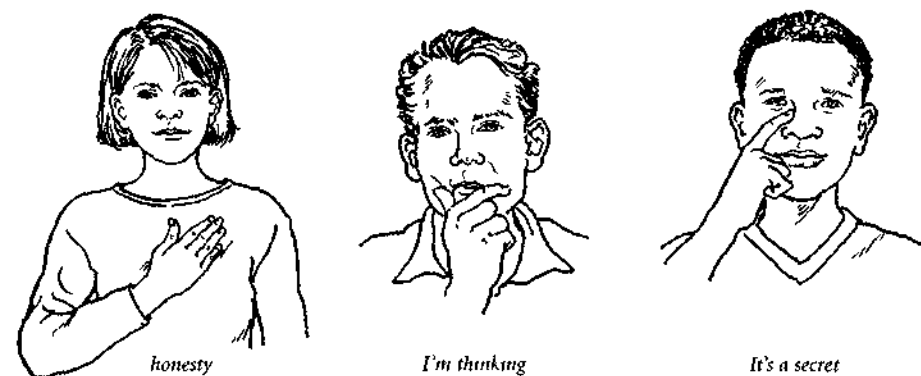


FIGURE 10: Some gestures and their meanings

Of course some gestures such as head-scratching, hand-clasping, 'cracking' fingers, etc. may not be used to convey meanings, but may rather be unconscious 'ticks' – or be used in some way to displace tension. Such **displacement activities** may convey a person's nervousness or distractedness, but do not send messages in the same way as a clenched fist or a beckoning finger.

• **Proximity, posture, and echoing:** the physical distance between speakers can indicate a number of things and can also be used to consciously send messages about intent. Closeness, for example, indicates intimacy or threat to many speakers whilst distance may denote formality or a lack of interest. Proximity is also both a matter of personal style and is often culture-bound so that what may seem normal to a speaker from one culture may appear unnecessarily close or distant to a speaker from another. And standing close to someone may be quite appropriate in some situations such as an informal party, but completely out of place in others, such as a meeting with a superior.

Posture can convey meaning too. Hunched shoulders and a hanging head give a powerful indication of mood. A lowered head when speaking to a superior (with or without eye contact) can convey the appropriate relationship in some cultures. Direct level eye contact, on the other hand, changes the nature of the interaction, and can be seen as either open or challenging.

A feature of posture and proximity that has been noted by several observers is that of 'echoing'. An example of this sometimes occurs when two people who are keen to agree with each other find that unconsciously they have adopted the same posture as if in imitation of each other. When used in this way, echoing appears to complement the verbal communication whereas when such imitation is carried out consciously it often indicates some form of mockery.

Paralinguistic features such as tone of voice, gesture, and posture are all part of the way we communicate with each other in face-to-face encounters. When teaching we can draw our students' attention to this, particularly when we are using video material – as we shall see in Chapter 20.

## Further reading

### • Spoken grammar

For a book which contains transcripts of informal spoken English together with explanations and exercises, see R Carter et al. (1998).

For an extensive discussion of the grammar of conversation see D Biber et al. (1999) in their substantial grammar which pays equal attention to spoken and written language.

### • Grammar books

Of the many pedagogic grammars now available, some of the most widely used are Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage* (M Swan 1995), the *Longman English Grammar* (L Alexander 1988), and R Murphy (1994) whose *English Grammar in Use* is extraordinarily popular with students and teachers for its mixture of simple rules and exercises. M Parrott (2000) has written a grammar especially for teachers with helpful sections on difficulties for students.

### • Vocabulary

One of the best books about vocabulary for teachers is still R Gairns and S Redman (1986). See also the excellent M McCarthy (1990).

For discussions of vocabulary meaning see R Gairns and S Redman (1986: Chapter 2), J Aitchison (1994: Chapter 4), and M Lewis (1993: Chapter 4).

For more on lexical phrases and the way they operate, see J Nattinger (1988), and J Nattinger and J DeCarrico (1992), and M Lewis (1993).

### • Language corpora

For more on language corpora and their uses, see C Tribble and G Jones (1997), J Sinclair (1991), T McEnery and A Wilson (1999), and G Fox (1998). See also the following web sites:

<http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/timconc.htm> (T Johns' site) and  
<http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc/corpora.html> (English Language and Corpora Resources).

- **Extending word use**

On the issue of meaningless grammatical sentences, see S Pinker (1994: 88–89).

- **Language in use**

The whole issue of performatives first came to prominence in J Austin (1982) – a collection of his articles published by his students after his death.

For a definitive account of language functions and notions, see D Wilkins (1976).

For issues of gender in speech (and in teaching), see J Sunderland (1994) and especially D Tannen (1990).

- **Discourse analysis and pragmatics**

M Coulthard (1985) is still a good introduction to an essentially sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis. See also G Cook (1989) and P Grundy (2000).

For an example of a detailed transcript for the purposes of discourse/pragmatic analysis, see P Grundy (2000: 174–182).

For the importance of genre in writing, see C Tribble (1997: Chapter 6).

- **Pronunciation**

On the teaching of pronunciation some of the best books are G Kelly (2000), A Underhill (1994), J Kenworthy (1987), P Roach (1991) and C Dalton and B Seidlhofer (1995). See also Chapter 13 in this book.

For a pronunciation dictionary which shows alternative pronunciations and how frequently they are used, see J Wells (2000).

- **Physical paralinguistic features**

For the way we use our bodies and what this means, see D Morris (1977 and 1985).

# 3

## Describing learners

### A Age

The age of our students is a major factor in our decisions about how and what to teach. People of different ages have different needs, competences, and cognitive skills; we might expect children of primary age to acquire much of a foreign language through play, for example, whereas for adults we can reasonably expect a greater use of abstract thought.

There are a number of commonly held beliefs about age. Some people say that children learn languages faster than adults do. They talk of children who appear to pick up new languages effortlessly. Perhaps this has something to do with the plasticity of a young brain. Something, after all, must account for the fact that with language, according to Steven Pinker, 'acquisition ... is guaranteed for children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from then until shortly after puberty, and is rare thereafter' (Pinker 1994: 293), and that this applies not only to the acquisition of the first language, but also to second or foreign languages.

Another belief is that adolescents are unmotivated, surly, and uncooperative and that therefore they make poor language learners. And there are those who seem to think that adults have so many barriers to learning (both because of the slowing effects of ageing and because of their past experience), that they only rarely have any success.

There is some truth in many of these beliefs, but they can also be misleading since, like all stereotypes, they suggest that everyone is the same. They also ignore evidence from individuals within these groups (adolescents and adults) which flatly contradicts such assumptions. We should also point out that many of the concerns in this section will have special relevance for the western world where, for example, it is stressed that children should 'learn by doing' and where some generalisations can be made about adolescent behaviour. But as we shall see in Chapter 6B, different educational cultures have very different expectations about teacher and learner behaviour.

In what follows we will consider students at different ages as if all the members of each age group are the same. Yet each student is an individual with different experiences both in and outside the classroom. Comments here about young children, teenagers, and adults can only be generalisations. Much also depends upon individual learner differences and motivation (see B and C below).

## A1 Young children

Young children, especially those up to the ages of nine or ten, learn differently from older children, adolescents, and adults in the following ways:

- They respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words.
- They often learn indirectly rather than directly – that is they take in information from all sides, learning from everything around them rather than only focusing on the precise topic they are being taught.
- Their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and, crucially, have a chance to touch and interact with.
- They generally display an enthusiasm for learning and a curiosity about the world around them.
- They have a need for individual attention and approval from the teacher.
- They are keen to talk about themselves, and respond well to learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topics in the classroom.
- They have a limited attention span; unless activities are extremely engaging they can easily get bored, losing interest after ten minutes or so.

In the light of these characteristics, it can be concluded that good teachers at this level need to provide a rich diet of learning experiences which encourages their students to get information from a variety of sources. They need to work with their students individually and in groups developing good relationships. They need to plan a range of activities for a given time period, and be flexible enough to move on to the next exercise when they see their students getting bored.

We can also draw some conclusions about what a classroom for young children should look like and what might be going on in it. First of all we will want the classroom to be bright and colourful, with windows the children can see out of, and with enough room for different activities to be taking place. We might expect them to be working in groups in different parts of the classroom, changing their activity every ten minutes or so. 'We are obviously,' Susan Halliwell writes, 'not talking about classrooms where children spend all their time sitting still in rows or talking only to the teacher' (1992: 18). Because children love discovering things, and because they respond well to being asked to use their imagination, they may well be involved in puzzle-like activities, in making things, in drawing things, in games, in physical movement or in songs.

## A2 Adolescents

Anyone who has taught secondary school students has had lessons, even days and weeks, when the task seemed difficult, and on especially bad days hopeless. Yet if, as the methodologist Penny Ur suggests, teenage students are in fact overall the best language learners (Ur 1996: 286) this suggests that this is only part of the picture.

When Herbert Puchta and Michael Schratz started to design material for teenagers in Austria they, like many before them, wondered why teenagers seemed to be less lively and humorous than adults. Why were they so much less motivated, they asked, and why did they present outright discipline problems (Puchta and Schratz 1993: 1)?

It is widely accepted that one of the key issues in adolescence, especially perhaps in the west, is the search for individual identity, and that this search provides the key challenge for this age group. Identity has to be forged among classmates and friends; peer approval may be considerably more important for the student than the attention of the teacher which, for younger children, is so crucial.

As we shall see in Chapter 9A there are a number of reasons why students – and teenage students in particular – may be disruptive in class. Apart from the need for self-esteem and the peer approval they may provoke from being disruptive, there are other factors too, such as the boredom they feel – not to mention problems they bring into class from outside school. However, while it is true that adolescents can cause discipline problems, it is usually the case that they would be much happier if such problems did not exist. They may push teachers to the limit, but they are much happier if that challenge is met, if the teacher actually manages to control them, and if this is done in a supportive and constructive way so that he or she ‘helps rather than shouts’ (Harmer 1998: 2).

However, we should not become too preoccupied with the issue of disruptive behaviour, for while we will all remember unsatisfactory classes, we will also look back with pleasure on those groups and lessons which were successful. Teenagers, if they are engaged, have a great capacity to learn, a great potential for creativity, and a passionate commitment to things which interest them. There is almost nothing more exciting than a class of involved young people at this age pursuing a learning goal with enthusiasm. Our job, therefore, must be to provoke student engagement with material which is relevant and involving. At the same time we need to do what we can to bolster our students’ self-esteem, and be conscious, always, of their need for identity.

Herbert Puchta and Michael Schratz see problems with teenagers as resulting, in part, from ‘... the teacher’s failure to build bridges between what they want and have to teach and their students’ worlds of thought and experience’ (1993: 4). They advocate linking language teaching far more closely to the students’ everyday interests through, in particular, the use of ‘humanistic’ teaching (see Chapter 6, A7). Students must be encouraged to respond to texts and situations with their own thoughts and experience, rather than just by answering questions and doing abstract learning activities. We must give them tasks which they are able to do, rather than risk humiliating them.

We have come some way from the teaching of young children. We can ask teenagers to address learning issues directly in a way that younger learners might not appreciate. We are able to discuss abstract issues with them. Indeed part of our job is to provoke intellectual activity by helping them to be aware of contrasting ideas and concepts which they can resolve for themselves – though still with our guidance. As we shall see in Chapters 5 and 11, there are many ways of studying language, most of which are appropriate for teenagers.

### A3 Adult learners

Adult language learners are notable for a number of special characteristics:

- They can engage with abstract thought. Those who succeed at language learning in later life, according to Steven Pinker, ‘... often depend on the conscious exercise of their considerable intellects, unlike children to whom language acquisition naturally happens’ (Pinker 1994: 29). This suggests that we do not have to rely exclusively on activities such as games and songs – though these may be appropriate for some students.
- They have a whole range of life experiences to draw on.
- They have expectations about the learning process, and may already have their own set patterns of learning.
- Adults tend, on the whole, to be more disciplined than some teenagers, and crucially, they are often prepared to struggle on despite boredom.
- They come into classrooms with a rich range of experiences which allow teachers to use a wide range of activities with them.
- Unlike young children and teenagers, they often have a clear understanding of why they are learning and what they want to get out of it. As we shall see in Section c below, motivation is a critical factor in successful learning, and knowing what you want to achieve is an important part of this. Many adults are able to sustain a level of motivation (see Section c3) by holding on to a distant goal in a way that teenagers find more difficult.

However, adults are never entirely problem-free learners, and have a number of characteristics which can sometimes make learning and teaching problematic:

- They can be critical of teaching methods. Their previous learning experiences may have predisposed them to one particular methodological style which makes them uncomfortable with unfamiliar teaching patterns. Conversely, they may be hostile to certain teaching and learning activities which replicate the teaching they received earlier in their educational careers.
- They may have experienced failure or criticism at school which makes them anxious and under-confident about learning a language.
- Many older adults worry that their intellectual powers may be diminishing with age – they are concerned to keep their creative powers alive, to maintain a ‘sense of generativity’ (Williams and Burden 1997: 32). However, as Alan Rogers points out, this generativity is directly related to how much learning has been going on in adult life before they come to a new learning experience (1996: 54).

Good teachers of adults take all of these factors into account. They are aware that their students will often be prepared to stick with an activity for longer than younger learners (though too much boredom can obviously have a disastrous effect on motivation). As well as involving their students in more indirect learning through reading, listening, and communicative speaking and writing, they also allow them to use their intellects to learn consciously where this is appropriate. They encourage their students to use their own life experience in the learning process too.



As teachers of adults we should recognise the need to minimise the bad effects of past learning experiences. We can diminish the fear of failure by offering activities which are achievable, paying special attention to the level of challenge presented by exercises. We need to listen to students' concerns too and, in many cases, modify what we do to suit their learning tastes (see Chapter 6B).

## B Learner differences

In this section we are going to look at a number of approaches to describing the differences between learners, including 'Multiple Intelligence' theory and 'Neuro-linguistic programming' – two ways of looking at learning which have provoked considerable interest among teachers and materials designers.

### B1 Aptitude

Some students are better at learning languages than others. At least that is the generally held view, and in the 1950s and 1960s it crystallised around the belief that it was possible to predict a student's future progress on the basis of linguistic aptitude tests. But it soon became clear that such tests were flawed in a number of ways. They did not appear to measure anything other than general intellectual ability even though they ostensibly looked for linguistic talents. Further, they favoured analytic-type learners over their more 'holistic' counterparts, so that the tests were especially suited to people who have little trouble doing grammar-focused tasks. Those with a more 'general' view of things – whose analytical abilities are not so highly developed, and who receive and use language in a more message-oriented way – appeared to be at a disadvantage. In fact, analytic aptitude is probably not the critical factor in success. Peter Skehan, for example, believes that what distinguishes exceptional students from the rest is that they have unusual memories, particularly for the retention of things that they hear (Skehan 1998: 234).

Another damning criticism of traditional aptitude tests is that while they may discriminate between the most and the least 'intelligent' students they are less effective at distinguishing between the majority of students who fall between these two extremes. What they do accomplish is to influence the way in which both teachers and students behave. It has been suggested that students who score badly on aptitude tests will become de-motivated and that this will then contribute to precisely the failure that the test predicted. And teachers who know that particular students have achieved high scores will be tempted to treat those students differently from students whose score was low. Aptitude tests end up being self-fulfilling prophecies whereas it would be much better for both teacher and students to be optimistic about all of the people in the class.

### B2 Good learner characteristics

Another line of enquiry has been to try and tease out what a good learner is. If we can narrow down a number of characteristics that all good learners share, then we can, perhaps, cultivate these characteristics in all our students.

Neil Naiman and his colleagues included a tolerance of ambiguity as a feature of good learning together with areas such as positive task orientation (being prepared to approach tasks in a positive fashion), ego involvement (where success is important for a student's self-image), high aspirations, goal orientation, and perseverance (Naiman et al: 1978).

Joan Rubin and Irene Thompson listed no less than fourteen good learner characteristics amongst which learning to live with uncertainty (much like the tolerance of ambiguity mentioned above) is a notable factor (Rubin and Thompson 1982). But the Rubin and Thompson version of a good learner also mentions students who can find their own way (without always having to be guided by the teacher through learning tasks), who are creative, who make intelligent guesses, who make their own opportunities for practice, who make errors work for them not against them, and who use contextual clues.

Much of what various people have said about good learners is based on cultural assumptions which underpin much current teaching practice in countries like Britain, Australia, and America. In these cultures we appreciate self-reliant students, and promote learner autonomy as a main goal (see Chapter 24A). We tend to see the tolerance of ambiguity as a goal of student development, wishing to wean our pupils away from a need for things to be always cut and dried. We encourage students to read texts for general understanding without stopping to look up all the words they do not understand (see Chapter 14, A4); we ask students to speak communicatively even when they have difficulty because of words they do not know or cannot pronounce (see Chapter 19), and we involve students in creative writing (see Chapter 18, B3). In all these endeavours we expect our pupils to aspire beyond their current language level.

Different cultures value different learning behaviours, however. Our insistence upon one kind of good learner profile may encourage us to demand that students should act in class in certain ways, whatever their learning background. When we espouse some of the conclusions mentioned above, we risk imposing a methodology on our students that is inimical to their culture. As we shall see in Chapter 6B and Chapter 9, B1 it is better for us to reach some kind of learning bargain where both our beliefs and the learners' preferences can be satisfied. It is not always just the learners who may have to change.

### **B3 Learner styles**

A preoccupation with learner personalities and styles has been a major factor in psycholinguistic research. Are there different kinds of learner? Are there different kinds of behaviour in a group? How can we tailor our teaching to match the personalities in front of us?

The methodologist Tony Wright describes four different learner styles within a group (1987: 117–118). The 'enthusiast' looks to the teacher as a point of reference and is concerned with the goals of the learning group. The 'oracular' also focuses on the teacher but is more orientated towards the satisfaction of personal goals. The 'participator' tends to concentrate on group goals and group solidarity, whereas the

'rebel' while referring to the learning group for his or her point of reference, is mainly concerned with the satisfaction of his or her own goals.

Other researchers have tried to describe student learning styles in their own words, identifying individual behaviour they have observed. They produce caricatures, of course, which never quite describe any particular student. But they do give us some pointers to the kinds of people we have in our classrooms.

Keith Willing, working with adult students in Australia, produced the following descriptions:

- **Convergers:** these are students who are by nature solitary, prefer to avoid groups, and who are independent and confident in their own abilities. Most importantly they are analytic and can impose their own structures on learning. They tend to be cool and pragmatic.
- **Conformists:** these are students who prefer to emphasise learning 'about language' over learning to use it. They tend to be dependent on those in authority and are perfectly happy to work in non-communicative classrooms, doing what they are told. A classroom of conformists is one which prefers to see well-organised teachers.
- **Concrete learners:** though they are like conformists, they also enjoy the social aspects of learning and like to learn from direct experience. They are interested in language use and language as communication rather than language as a system. They enjoy games and groupwork in class.
- **Communicative learners:** these are language use orientated. They are comfortable out of class and show a degree of confidence and a willingness to take risks which their colleagues may lack. They are much more interested in social interaction with other speakers of the language than they are with analysis of how the language works. They are perfectly happy to operate without the guidance of a teacher.

Learning styles adapted from Willing 1987 quoted in Skehan (1998: 247–250)

However we choose to categorise learner styles, an understanding that there are different individuals in our classes is vitally important if we are to plan the kinds of activity that will be appropriate for them. We need to balance the interests of individuals against what is good for the group and to be aware of certain individual traits when putting students into pairs and groups (see Chapter 8). We need to recognise which students need more personal attention than others, and which need different kinds of explanations and practice of language. As we shall see in Chapters 11 and 12, there are many different styles of language study and student language research. Some students respond better than others to discovery activities, for example (see Chapter 11B), so we will use such exercises with them. Others, however, may prefer a more directed approach to language study and so we will, within reason, adapt our practice accordingly. Yet others may respond with enthusiasm to creative writing or speaking activities (see Chapters 18 and 19), where some of their colleagues may need more structured work.

It is not possible to cater for each preference all of the time, of course. Yet over a period of time the attention we give to different learning styles will ensure that we do our best not only for the whole group but also for the individuals within it.

#### B4 Language levels

Students are generally described in three levels, **beginner**, **intermediate**, and **advanced**, and these categories are further qualified by talking about **real beginners** and **false beginners**. Between beginner and intermediate we often class students as **elementary**. The intermediate level itself is often sub-divided into **lower intermediate** and **upper intermediate** and even **mid-intermediate**. One version of different levels, therefore, has the following progression:

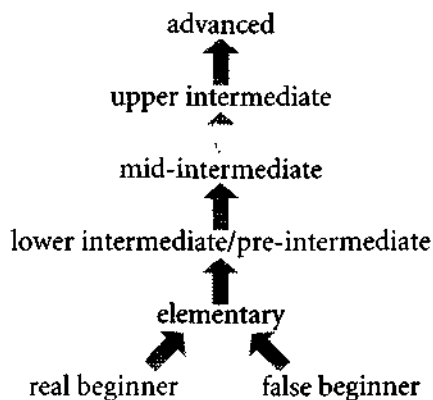


FIGURE 11: Representing different student levels

The problem with these labels is that they mean different things to different people. What one school or education system calls advanced may be more like intermediate to some other teachers.

Public examinations (see Chapter 23, A1) help us to determine levels and standards, of course. We can judge people by the scores they get on the TOEFL or TOEIC examinations from the USA or the various examinations offered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and others in the United Kingdom, for example. Coursebooks (see Chapter 21) have a role to play here too, since they generally conform to agreed syllabus requirements and ability. Such information, together with our own experience and intuition, will allow us to use level labels with discrimination.

A number of issues are directly related to the level our students have reached:

- **The plateau effect:** while learners at beginner level find it easy to see progress in their abilities from one week to the next, the same is not so easy for students at higher levels, particularly at intermediate levels, where progress is more subtle, and students do not always find it easy to see where they are going. This seems to cause a plateau effect where students are inclined to accept the level they have reached as adequate for their needs and the limits of their capacity.

Teachers need to be sensitive to the plateau effect, taking special measures to counteract it. Such efforts may include setting goals clearly so that students have a clear learning target to aim at, explaining what still needs to be done, making sure that activities are especially engaging, and sparking the students' interest in the more subtle distinctions of language use.

- **Methodology:** some techniques and exercises that are suitable for beginners look less appropriate for students at higher levels – for example, the use of repetition. Teachers find it quite effective to get beginner students to repeat sentences in chorus, but at higher levels this usually seems strange and patronising. At advanced levels it is easy to organise discussion – whether pre-planned (see Chapter 19, B3) or opportunistic (see Chapter 22, C1), whereas for beginners this option will not be available.

Teachers of beginners will necessarily use activities whose organisation and content is less complex than those for more advanced learners. And although discovery learning, for example, is seen as desirable at any level (see Chapter 11, B2) it is more widely used at intermediate levels and above than it is at beginner and elementary levels.

- **Language:** we need to adjust the classroom language we use to the level we are working with (see Chapter 4, D3). The language materials we expose students to should be of a completely different level too, not only in terms of complexity, but also in range of genre and length. We would not expect beginners to tackle a national newspaper in English; we would not offer very advanced students a simplified dialogue. However, the issue of how 'authentic' language materials should be is the subject of debate amongst teachers and methodologists, as we shall see in Chapter 14, B1. People have worried about whether simplified language is too insubstantial even for beginner students or, conversely, that 'authentic' English (however that is defined, and whether spoken or written) tends to have a de-motivating effect on even advanced students if it is beyond their level.
- **Topics:** one problem with some beginner coursebook material in particular is the way in which quite complex topics are reduced to banalities because the language available at the level makes it impossible to treat them in any depth. The result is a kind of 'dumbing-down' which sometimes makes English language learning appear almost childish.

It is important to match topics to the level, reserving complex issues for more advanced classes. But there is a danger here too that by restricting beginners to 'the family', 'the home', etc. the world is being diminished for crude linguistic reasons.

## B5 Individual variations

If some people are better at some things than others – better at analysing, for example – this would indicate that there are differences in the ways individual brains

work. It also suggests that people respond differently to the same stimuli. How might such variation determine the ways in which individual students learn most readily? How might they affect the ways in which we teach? There are two theories in particular which have tried to account for such perceived individual variation, and which teachers have attempted to use to for the benefit of their learners:

- **Neuro-linguistic programming:** according to practitioners of Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), we use a number of 'primary representational systems' to experience the world. These systems are described in the acronym 'VAKOG' which stands for Visual (we look and see), Auditory (we hear and listen), Kinaesthetic (we feel externally, internally, or through movement), Olfactory (we smell things), and Gustatory (we taste things).

Most people, while using all these systems to experience the world, nevertheless have one 'preferred primary system' (Revell and Norman 1997: 31). Some people are particularly stimulated by music when their preferred primary system is auditory, whereas others, who have visual as their primary preferred system, respond most powerfully to images. The extension of this is that a visual person is also likely to 'see' music.

The VAKOG formulation, while somewhat problematic in the distinctions it attempts to make, offers a framework to analyse different student responses to stimuli and environments. Dede Teeler, for example, suggests that kinaesthetic students behave differently when introduced to the Internet as a language learning tool from predominantly visual learners. The latter need a demonstration of what to do before leaping into Internet tasks, unlike their kinaesthetic colleagues who just get on and do it (Teeler 2000: 60–61). VAKOG also indicates that some students will gain most from the things they hear, whereas others need to see things. This suggests that purely oral presentations of language will be most appropriate for some individuals in a group, while visual material and written text may be more effective for other students. The implications of the olfactory and gustatory systems have not been explored in language teaching so far, however!

- **MI theory:** MI stands for 'Multiple intelligences', a concept introduced by the Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner. In his book *Frames of Mind*, he suggested that as humans we do not possess a single intelligence, but a range of intelligences (Gardner 1983). He listed seven of these: Musical/Rhythmic, Verbal/Linguistic, Visual/Spatial, Bodily/Kinaesthetic, Logical/Mathematical, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal. All people have all of these intelligences, he said, but in each person one (or more) of them is more pronounced. This allowed him to predict that a typical occupation (or 'end state') for people with a strength in logical/mathematical intelligence is that of the scientist, whereas a typical end state for people with strengths in visual/spatial intelligence might well be that of the navigator. The 'athlete' might be the typical end state for people who are strong in bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence, and so on. Gardner has since added an eighth intelligence which he calls

Naturalistic intelligence (Gardner 1993) to account for the ability to recognise and classify patterns in nature. Daniel Goleman has added a ninth 'Emotional intelligence' (Goleman 1996). This includes the ability to empathise, control impulse, and self-motivate.

If we accept that different intelligences predominate in different people, it suggests that the same learning task may not be appropriate for all of our students. While people with a strong logical/mathematical intelligence might respond well to a complex grammar explanation, a different student might need the comfort of diagrams and physical demonstration because their strength is in the visual/spatial area. Other students who have a strong interpersonal intelligence may require a more interactive climate if their learning is to be effective. Murray Loom, a teacher at the Giralang primary school in Canberra, Australia, produced the following chart to show what the original seven intelligences might mean for his students:

TYPE	LIKES TO	IS GOOD AT	LEARNS BEST BY
Linguistic Learner 'The word player'	read, write, tell stories	memorising names, places, dates and trivia	saying, hearing and seeing words
Logical/Mathematical Learner 'The questioner'	do experiments, figure things out, work things out, work with numbers, ask questions, explore patterns and relationships	maths, reasoning, logic and problem solving	categorising, classifying working with abstract patterns/relationships
Spatial Learner 'The visualiser'	draw, build, design and create things, daydream, look at pictures, watch movies, play with machines	imagining things, sensing changes, mazes/puzzles, reading maps, charts	visualising, dreaming, using the mind's eye, working with colours and pictures
Musical Learner 'The music lover'	sing, hum tunes, listen to music, play an instrument, respond to music	picking up sounds, remembering melodies, noticing pitches/rhythms, keeping time	rhythm, melody, music
Bodily/Kinaesthetic Learner	move around, touch and talk, use body language	physical activities, (sport/dancing/acting)	touching, moving, interacting with space, processing knowledge through bodily sensations
Interpersonal Learner 'The Socialiser'	have lots of friends, talk to people, join groups	understanding people, leading others, organising, communicating, manipulating, mediating conflicts	sharing, comparing, relating, cooperating, interviewing
Intrapersonal Learner	work alone, pursue own interests	understanding self, focusing inward on feelings/dreams following instincts, pursuing interests/goals, being original	working alone, individualised projects, self-paced instruction, having own space

Taken from 'How to use Gardner's seven intelligences in a class program', presented by M Loom at the Internet site for the University of Canberra in Australia (See note on page 55.)

Armed with this information, teachers can look at the right-hand column and see whether they have given their class a variety of activities to help the various types of learner described here. Although we cannot teach directly to each individual student in our class all of the time, we can ensure that we sometimes give opportunities, during our language programme, for visualisation, for students to work on their own, for sharing and comparing, and for physical movement. By keeping our eye on different individuals, we can direct them to learning activities which are best suited to their own proclivities.

## B6 What to do about individual differences

Faced with the different descriptions of learner types and styles which have been described here, it may seem that the teacher's task is overwhelmingly complex. We want to satisfy the many different students in front of us, teaching to their individual strengths with activities designed to produce the best results for each of them, yet we also want to address our teaching to the group as a whole.

We have to start with the recognition of students as individuals as well as being members of a group. Even when classes have been separated into different levels, not everyone in the group will have the same knowledge of English. Some will be better writers than others and some will have greater oral fluency than others.

We need to establish who the different students in our classes are. To ascertain their language level, for example, we can look at their scores on different tests, and we can monitor their progress through both formal and informal observation. This will tell us who needs more or less help in the class. It will inform our decisions about how to group students together (see Chapter 8), and it will guide the type and amount of feedback we give to each student (see Chapter 7). In a general way, we will tailor our teaching methods, the materials we use and the production we expect to the level we are working with.

We want to recognise the other differences we have discussed in this section too. We can do this through observation or, as in the following two examples, through more formal devices. We might ask students what their learning preferences are in questionnaires with items (perhaps in the students' first language) such as the following:

<b>When answering comprehension questions about reading passages I prefer to work:</b>	
a on my own	<input type="checkbox"/>
b with another student	<input type="checkbox"/>
c with a group of students	<input type="checkbox"/>

Or we might try to find out which preferred sensory system our students respond to. Revell and Norman suggest the following activity for their teacher readers:



## THE LEAD VAK TEST: READ AND IMAGINE

Follow each instruction in your mind and give yourself a mark:  
0 = impossible    1 = difficult    2 = OK    3 = easy

- \_\_\_ SEE a kangaroo
- \_\_\_ SEE your front door
- \_\_\_ SEE your toothbrush
- \_\_\_ SEE a friend's face
- \_\_\_ SEE a plate of food
- \_\_\_ SEE a TV show . . .
- \_\_\_ WATCH the TV scene change
  
- \_\_\_ HEAR a song
- \_\_\_ HEAR rain
- \_\_\_ HEAR a fire alarm
- \_\_\_ HEAR a friend's voice
- \_\_\_ HEAR your own voice
- \_\_\_ HEAR birds singing . . .
- \_\_\_ HEAR the birdsong change to a call of alarm
  
- \_\_\_ FEEL excited
- \_\_\_ FEEL yourself swimming
- \_\_\_ FEEL grass under your feet
- \_\_\_ FEEL a cat\* on your lap
- \_\_\_ FEEL hot
- \_\_\_ FEEL your fingers on a piano keyboard
- \_\_\_ FEEL your fingers playing a few notes

When you've done the test:

- Add up your scores for each sense: SEE \_\_\_ HEAR \_\_\_ FEEL
- Does the highest score correspond with what you think your preferred lead system is? How did you fare when it came to changing the scenes slightly in the last one of each section?
- Think of ways to enhance the systems you don't find so easy.

\*The Lead VAK Test' from *In your Hands* by J Revell and S Norman (Saffire Press)

However we get our information about individuals, we will then be in a position to try and offer activities which offer maximal advantage to the different people in the class. This might involve the way we organise groups in order to satisfy people who prefer working on their own or, conversely, people who benefit most from interaction. We will want to provide different sensory stimuli for the different group members. We will want to offer activities which favour, at different times, students with different learning styles. It is then up to us to keep a record of what works and what does not, either formally or informally. We can also ask our students (either face to face, or, more effectively, through written feedback) how they respond to these activities. The following (unedited) comments, from a multinational group of adult students in Britain, were written in response to a lesson in which they were asked to write an imaginary film scene based on a particular piece of music:

Turkish female:

*I liked this subject because everyone could find a connection part of them. After we listened a part of music we could describe what we thing by own sentences. That is why it was very attractive and that type of study was pushing us to talking a lot.*

- Italian male:** I didn't like that kind of music. I prefer different kind of music.
- Brazilian female:** I think that music is an excellent way to learn. But I think that it will be more interesting if we work with the lyrics of songs. We can learn new expressions, new words and memorize them easily because when we see the words again, we will be able to remember the song, the context the words were used in the songs and consequently your meanings
- Turkish male:** *I love to learn about music.*
- Argentinian female:** *It is difficult to express your feelings even in my mother language but finally I could written down something.*
- Japanese female:** *I was interested in this theme. Because all students can all enjoy music. But I didn't like making composition from music.*
- Turkish male:** I liked this lesson. Because it was funny. And everyone joined at this matters.
- Italian female:** This part was interesting as well because we had the opportunity to create something ourself (talking about music listening) using a certain language, immediate, strong and easy at the same time – what I mean is that I never thought that I could, from a piece of music, write down a scene and less of all in English! I liked it and it was not that difficult, well only because we don't have the vocabulary to write something really good.

Apart from demonstrating how individuals respond differently to the same activity, these comments help us to decide whether or not to use a similar kind of activity again, whether to amend it, or whether to abandon such an exercise type.

Such feedback, coupled with questionnaires and our own observation, help us to build a picture of the best kinds of activity for the mix of individuals in a particular class. As we shall see in Chapters 7, B2 and 23, B1, this kind of feedback enables us, over time, to respond to our students with an appropriate blend of tasks and exercises.

This does not mean, of course, that everyone will be happy all of the time (as the feedback above shows). On the contrary, it clearly suggests that some lessons (or parts of lessons) will be more useful for some students than for others. But if we are aware of this and act accordingly, then there is a good chance that most of the class will be engaged with the learning process most of the time.

There is one last issue which should be addressed. We have already referred to the danger of pre-judging student ability through aptitude tests (see B1 above), but we might go further and worry about pigeonholing students with fixed descriptions so that we assume they are always going to behave in the same way. For if this was the case there would be no point in learner training, nor should we waste our time introducing new kinds of activity for the benefit of the group as a whole or the

individuals within it. Yet such a position makes no sense. Students do develop as a result of classroom experiences of success or failure. They will almost certainly change in some way as a result of their learning environment and the tasks they perform.

## Motivation

*It is accepted for most fields of learning that motivation is essential to success: that we have to want to do something to succeed at it. Without such motivation we will almost certainly fail to make the necessary effort. If motivation is so important, therefore, it makes sense to try and develop our understanding of it. Are all students motivated in the same way? What is the teacher's role in a student's motivation? How can motivation be sustained?*

### C1 Defining motivation

At its most basic level, motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something. As H Douglas Brown points out, a cognitive view of motivation includes factors such as the need for exploration, activity, stimulation, new knowledge, and ego enhancement (Brown 2000: 160–166). The adult who starts going to a gym, for example, may hope that a new body image will aid ego enhancement and be stimulated by the active nature of this new undertaking.

Marion Williams and Richard Burden suggest that motivation is a 'state of cognitive arousal' which provokes a 'decision to act' as a result of which there is 'sustained intellectual and/or physical effort' so that the person can achieve some 'previously set goal' (Williams and Burden 1997: 120). They go on to point out that the strength of that motivation will depend on how much value the individual places on the outcome he or she wishes to achieve. Adults may have clearly defined or vague goals. Children's goals, on the other hand, are often more amorphous and less easy to describe, but they can still be very powerful.

In discussions of motivation an accepted distinction is made between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, that is motivation which comes from outside and from inside.

**Extrinsic motivation** is caused by any number of outside factors, for example, the need to pass an exam, the hope of financial reward, or the possibility of future travel. **Intrinsic motivation**, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better.

Most researchers and methodologists have come to the view that intrinsic motivation is especially important for encouraging success. Even where the original reason for taking up a language course, for example, is extrinsic, the chances of success will be greatly enhanced if the students come to love the learning process.

### C2 Sources of motivation

The motivation that brings students to the task of learning English can be affected and influenced by the attitude of a number of people. It is worth considering what and who these are since they form part of the world around students' feeling and engagement with the learning process.

- **The society we live in:** outside any classroom there are attitudes to language learning and the English language in particular. How important is the learning of English considered to be in the society? In a school situation, for example, is the language learning part of the curriculum of high or low status? If school students were offered the choice of two languages to learn, which one would they choose and why? Are the cultural images associated with English positive or negative?

All these views of language learning will affect the student's attitude to the language being studied, and the nature and strength of this attitude will, in its turn, have a profound effect on the degree of motivation the student brings to class and whether or not that motivation continues. Even where adult students have made their own decision to come to a class to study English, they will bring with them attitudes from the society they live in, developed over years, whether these attitudes are thoroughly positive or somewhat negative.

- **Significant others:** apart from the culture of the world around students, their attitude to language learning will be greatly affected by the influence of people who are close to them. The attitude of parents and older siblings will be crucial. Do they approve of language learning, for example, or do they think that maths and reading are what count, and clearly show that they are more concerned with those subjects than with the student's success in English?

The attitude of a student's peers is also crucial. If they are critical of the subject or activity, the student's own motivation may suffer. If they are enthusiastic learners, however, they may take the student along with them.

- **The teacher:** clearly a major factor in the continuance of a student's motivation is the teacher. Although we will be discussing the role of the teacher in detail in Chapter 4, here it is worth pointing out that his or her attitude to the language and the task of learning will be vital. An obvious enthusiasm for English and English learning, in this case, would seem to be prerequisites for a positive classroom atmosphere.
- **The method:** it is vital that both teacher and students have some confidence in the way teaching and learning take place. When either loses this confidence, motivation can be disastrously affected, but when both are comfortable with the method being used, success is much more likely.

### C3 Initiating and sustaining motivation

At the beginning of a course, with students at whatever level and at whatever age, the teacher is faced with a range of motivations. Some students have a clear goal, fed by a strong extrinsic motivation to achieve it. Others have an internal intrinsic drive which has fired them up. Others still may have very weak motivation, whatever type it is. But a student's initial motivation (or lack of it), need not stay the same for ever. As Alan Rogers points out, '... we forget that initial motivation to learn may be weak and die; alternatively it can be increased and directed into new channels' (Rogers 1996: 61).



Increasing and directing student motivation is one of a teacher's responsibilities, though as Dick Allwright argued, we cannot be responsible for all of our students' motivation. In the end it is up to them (Allwright 1977). However, there are three areas where our behaviour can directly influence our students' continuing participation:

- **Goals and goal setting:** we have said that motivation is closely bound up with a person's desire to achieve a goal. A distinction needs to be made here between long- and short-term goals.

Long-term goals may include the mastery of English, the passing of an exam (at the end of the year), the possibility of a better job in the future, etc. Short-term goals, on the other hand, might be the learning of a small amount of new language, the successful writing of an essay, the ability to partake in a discussion or the passing of the progress test at the end of the week.

Teachers need to recognise that long-term goals are vitally important but that they can often seem too far away. When English seems to be more difficult than the student had anticipated, the long-term goals can begin to behave like mirages in the desert, appearing and disappearing at random.

Short-term goals, on the other hand, are by their nature much closer to the student's day-to-day reality. It is much easier to focus on the end of the week than the end of the year. If the teacher can help students in the achievement of short-term goals, this will have a significant effect on their motivation. After all, 'nothing succeeds like success'!

- **Learning environment:** although we may not be able to choose our actual classrooms, we can still do a lot about their physical appearance and the emotional atmosphere of our lessons. Both of these can have a powerful effect on the initial and continuing motivation of students. When students walk into an attractive classroom at the beginning of a course, it may help to get their motivation for the process going. When they come to an unattractive place motivation may not be initiated in this way.

We can decorate even the most unattractive classrooms with all kinds of visual material to make them more agreeable as learning environments. Even where this is not possible because the classroom is not 'ours', we can still change the atmosphere through such things as the use of music; even the immovability of the furniture (if this is a problem) can be ameliorated by having students get up and walk around the room when this is appropriate.

All of this is less important, however, than the emotional atmosphere that teachers are able to create and sustain. That is why they have to be careful about how they respond to students, especially in the giving of feedback and correction (see Chapter 7). There is a need for a supportive, cooperative environment to suit the various learner types we discussed in Section B of this chapter. Above all, the teacher's rapport with the students is critical to creating the right conditions for motivated learning.

- **Interesting classes:** if students are to continue to be intrinsically motivated they clearly need to be interested both in the subject they are studying and in

the activities and topics they are presented with. We need to provide them with a variety of subjects and exercises to keep them engaged (see Chapter 22A). The choice of material to take into class will be crucial too, but even more important than this will be the ways in which it is used in the lesson.

Our attempts to initiate and sustain our students' motivation are absolutely critical to their learning success (as we shall see with the need for 'engagement' in Chapter 6, A3), for as Alan Rogers writes, 'motivation ... is as much a matter of concern for the teacher as it is for the learner; it depends as much on the attitudes of the teacher as on the attitudes of the students' (Rogers 1996: 66).

## Chapter notes and further reading

### • Young children

On teaching children at and before primary level, see S Reilly and V Ward (1997), W Scott and L Ytreborg (1990), J Brewster et al. (1993), and S Halliwell (1992).

### • Adolescents

On the young person's search for identity, see the work of E Erikson (1963) reported in M Williams and R Burden (1997).

The idea that adolescents present an ideal teaching and learning age is put forward in P Ur (1996: 286) and R Ellis (1994: 484–494).

### • Adult learners

On adult learners, see especially J Rogers (1977), A Rogers (1996), and H McKoy and A Tom (2000).

### • Aptitude

The best discussion on aptitude I know is in P Skehan (1998: Chapters 8 and 9). See also H D Brown (2000: 98–99).

The two most widely quoted aptitude test instruments from the 1950s and 1960s were the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) designed by J Carroll and S Sapon (Carroll and Sapon 1958) and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (P Pimsleur 1966).

### • Psychology for language teachers

The two most approachable books I have come across on the psychology of learning are P Skehan (1998) and M Williams and R Burden (1997).

### • Learning styles

For more on learning style, see P Skehan (1998: Chapter 10), A Rogers (1996: 110–112), and H D Brown (2000: Chapter 6).

- **Success and failure**

On the issue of adults ‘dropping out’ despite initial motivation, see J Rogers (1977: Chapter 2).

- **Multiple intelligence**

For more on Multiple intelligence theories, read H Gardner (1983, 1993), D Lazar (1994), and R Christison (1996).

Murray Loom’s web site, which can be found at

<http://crlt.canberra.edu.au/intranets/examples/giralang/staff/waysoflearning/Mult%20Intel%20Table.html/>, seems to have become impossible to access, but

those interested in MI theory might want to go to

[http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple\\_intelligences.htm/](http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm/), or for a survey to determine their own ‘intelligence’ they could visit

<http://www.surfaquarium.com/MIinvent.htm/>.

- **Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)**

On NLP, the most enjoyable book I know is J Revell and S Norman (1997). But founded and developed as it was by R Bandler and J Grinder, see also R Bandler and J Grinder (1979) and R Bandler (1985).

- **Motivation**

On motivation in general, see G Crookes and R Schmidt (1991), Z Dörnyei (1998), and the works referred to in this section of the chapter – in particular M Williams and R Burden (1997: Chapter 6).

# 4

# Describing teachers

## A What is a teacher?

Teachers use many metaphors to describe what they do. Sometimes they say they are like actors because 'we are always on the stage'. Others think they are like orchestral conductors 'because I direct conversation and set the pace and tone'. Yet others feel like gardeners, 'because we plant the seeds and then watch them grow'. The range of images – these and others – that teachers use about themselves indicate the range of views that they have about their profession.

Dictionaries also give a variety of messages about teaching. According to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 'teaching' means 'to give (someone) knowledge or to instruct or train (someone)', whereas the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* suggests that it means to 'show somebody how to do something' or to 'change somebody's ideas'.

It is because views are somewhat mixed as to what teachers are, and because different functions are ascribed to teaching, that we need to examine the teacher's role not only in education generally, but in the classroom itself.

### A1 Teachers and learners

Many trainers are fond of quoting from a work called *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. 'If (the teacher) is indeed wise, he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind' (Gibran 1991: 76). Such humanist sentiments expose a dilemma in the minds of many trainers and trainees. Is teaching about the 'transmission' of knowledge from teacher to student, or is it about creating conditions in which, somehow, students learn for themselves? To put it another way, if you were to walk into a classroom, where would you expect to see the teacher – standing at the front controlling affairs, or moving around the classroom quietly helping the students only when needed?

In recent years, under the influence of humanistic and communicative theories (see Chapters 5D and 6, A7), great emphasis has been placed on 'learner-centred' teaching, that is teaching which makes the learners' needs and experience central to the educational process. In this framework, it is students' needs which should drive the syllabus, not some imposed list; it is the students' learning experiences and their responses to them which should be at the heart of a language course. The measure of a good lesson is the student activity taking place, not the performance of the teacher.



The physical manifestation of this trend is to be found in classrooms where learners are given tasks to work on (see Chapter 6, A5), and where, in the process of performing these tasks (with the teacher's help), real learning takes place. In these situations the teacher is no longer the giver of knowledge, the controller, and the authority, but rather a facilitator and a resource for the students to draw on. One writer has suggested that teachers in such learner-centred classrooms need special qualities including maturity, intuition, educational skills (to develop students' awareness of language and learning), an openness to student input, and a greater tolerance of uncertainty. These qualities, he suggests, are in marked contrast to more traditional teacher behaviour (Tudor 1993). Yet they are precisely the characteristics most people would expect of any teacher, traditional or modern, who has their learners' best interests at heart.

Not all methodologists find it easy to accept learner-centredness uncritically, however. Robert O'Neill, an influential materials writer and trainer, wrote an article whose title clearly expressed his disquiet since he called it 'The plausible myth of learner-centredness' (O'Neill 1991). He worried that letting students do the learning on their own with teachers only intervening when and if needed, might amount to a form of neglect. It could be tantamount to an abdication by the teacher of the knowledge-giving role. What is wrong with old-fashioned 'teacher-fronting' he wondered. It seems to work; it has always worked, and many students feel more comfortable with it.

As we shall see in Chapter 6, B1, it is true that in some educational traditions, students, and teachers find learner-centred classrooms quite difficult to come to terms with. It also seems to be the case that there are many occasions when the teacher will want to be at the front of the class to motivate, instruct, or explain something to the whole class. But there are also many activities where encouraging students to solve their own problems on their own or in pairs or groups, will have enormously beneficial effects both on learning, and on the dynamics and atmosphere in the classroom. It is not an 'either ... or' situation, in other words. Instead our behaviour will depend on how we feel about teaching and what we are comfortable with, on the type of activity our students are involved in, and on who the students are and how they feel about what we are asking them to do.

## **B The roles of a teacher**

Within the classroom our role may change from one activity to another, or from one stage of an activity to another. If we are fluent at making these changes our effectiveness as teachers is greatly enhanced.

We have already used the term 'facilitator' in Section A above to suggest the teacher's role in learner-centred lessons – the way in which facilitator is traditionally used by many commentators. Roles such as prompter (B4), resource (B6), or tutor (B7) may well fulfil this concept. Yet in one sense any role which the teacher adopts – and which is designed to help students learn – is to some extent facilitative. All roles, after all, aim to facilitate the students' progress in some way or other, and so it is useful to adopt more precise terms than facilitator as the sections below indicate.

## B1 Controller

When teachers act as controllers they are in charge of the class and of the activity taking place in a way that is substantially different from a situation where students are working on their own in groups. Controllers take the roll, tell students things, organise drills, read aloud, and in various other ways exemplify the qualities of a teacher-fronted classroom.

Teachers who view their job as the transmission of knowledge from themselves to their students are usually very comfortable with the image of themselves as controllers. Most people can remember teachers from their past who had a gift for just such a kind of instruction and who inspired their students through their knowledge and their charisma. However, not all teachers possess this ability to inspire, and in less charismatic hands transmission teaching appears to have less obvious advantages. For a start it denies students access to their own experiential learning by focusing everything on the teacher; in the second place it cuts down on opportunities for students to speak because when the class is acting as a whole group, fewer individuals have a chance to say anything at all; and in the third place, over-reliance on transmission teaching can result in a lack of variety in activities and classroom atmosphere.

Of course there are times when acting as a controller makes sense such as when announcements need to be made, when order has to be restored, when explanations are given, or when the teacher is leading a question and answer session. Indeed in many educational contexts this is the most common teacher role. Many teachers fail to go beyond it since controlling is the role they are used to and are most comfortable with. Yet this is a pity because by sticking to one mode of behaviour we deny ourselves and the students many other possibilities and modes of learning which are good not only for learning itself, but also for our students' enjoyment of that learning.

## B2 Organiser

One of the most important roles that teachers have to perform is that of organising students to do various activities. This often involves giving the students information, telling them how they are going to do the activity, putting them into pairs or groups, and finally closing things down when it is time to stop.

It is vitally important for teachers to get this role right when it is required. If the students do not understand what they are supposed to do they may well not get full advantage from an activity. If we do not explain clearly the ways pairs or groups should be organised, for example, chaos can ensue. If we have not spent some time engaging the students' interest and ensuring their participation, the activity may be wasted.

The first thing we need to do when organising something is to get students involved, engaged (see Chapter 6, A3) and ready. In most cases this means making it clear that something 'new' is going to happen and that the activity will be enjoyable or interesting or 'good for you'. At this point teachers will often say something like *Now we're going to do this because ...* and offer a rationale for the activity students

are to be asked to perform. Thus, instead of just doing something because the teacher says so, they are prepared, hopefully with some enthusiasm, for an activity whose purpose they understand.

Once the students are ready for the activity, we will want to give any necessary instructions, saying what students should do first, what they should do next, etc. Here it is important to get the level of the language right and to try and present instructions in a logical order and in as unconfusing a way as possible. It is frequently a good idea to get students to give the instructions back, in English or in their own language, as a check on whether they have understood it. An important tool in instruction is for the teacher to organise a demonstration of what is to happen. If students are going to use a chart or table to ask other students questions and record their answers, for example, getting a student up to the front to demonstrate the activity with you may be worth any number of complex instructions. Demonstration is almost always appropriate and will almost always ensure that students have a better grasp of what they are supposed to do than instructions can on their own.

Then it is time for us to start or initiate the activity. At this point students probably need to know how much time they have got and exactly when they should start.

Finally we stop the activity when the students have finished and/or when other factors show the teacher and the students that it is time to stop. This might be because they are bored, or because some pairs or groups have already finished before the others (see Chapter 8, B4). Perhaps the lesson is coming to the end and we want to give some summarising comments. At this point it is vital to organise some kind of feedback, whether this is merely a *Did you enjoy that?* type of question (a vitally important question, of course) or whether it is a more detailed discussion of what has taken place.

Teachers should think about 'content feedback' just as much as they concern themselves with the use of language forms in 'form and use feedback'. The latter is concerned with our role as assessor (see below), whereas the former has more to do with the roles of participant and tutor.

When organising feedback we need to do what we say we are going to do, whether this concerns the prompt return of homework (see Chapter 24, A1) or our responses at the end of an oral activity. Students will judge us by the way we fulfil the criteria we offer them.

We can summarise the role of organiser as follows:

engage  $\longrightarrow$  instruct (demonstrate)  $\longrightarrow$  initiate  $\longrightarrow$  organise feedback

### B3 Assessor

One of the things that students expect from their teachers is an indication of whether or not they are getting their English right. This is where we have to act as an assessor, offering feedback and correction and grading students in various ways.

We will be dealing with correction in a chapter all of its own (Chapter 7), but where teachers act as assessors, offering feedback on performance, handing out

grades, saying whether students can pass to the next level, etc. we can make some important points.

Students need to know how and for what they are being assessed. We should tell them what we are looking for and what success looks like so that they can measure themselves against this. We might say, for example, that *in today's piece of writing I will be looking especially at punctuation* or *in this communication activity I am more interested in your fluency than your accuracy*. Students then have a clear idea of what they need to concentrate on.

Another critical issue is the one of fairness. When students are criticised or score poor grades and they then find that other students have suffered less criticism for an equally good or bad performance, they tend to be extremely unhappy. Most of them want credit for good performance and constructive criticism for poor performance. What they do not want is a feeling that they are being unfairly judged.

When we act as assessors (whether in the matter of 'instant' correction or more drawn-out grade giving) we must always be sensitive to the students' possible reactions. A bad grade is a bad grade, however it is communicated. But it can be made far more acceptable if it is given with sensitivity and support.

#### **B4 Prompter**

Sometimes, when students are involved in a role-play activity, for example, they lose the thread of what is going on, or they are 'lost for words' (i.e. they may still have the thread but be unable to proceed productively for lack of vocabulary). They may not be quite sure how to proceed. What should teachers do in these circumstances? Hold back and let them work things out for themselves or, instead, 'nudge' them forward in a discreet and supportive way? If we opt for the latter, we are adopting some kind of a 'prompting' role.

In such situations we want to help but we do not want, at that stage, to take charge because we are keen to encourage the students to think creatively rather than have them hang on our every word. Thus it is that we will occasionally offer words or phrases, suggest that the students say something (e.g. *Well, ask him why he says that*), or suggest what could come next in a paragraph a student is writing, for example. Often we have to prompt students in monolingual groups to speak English rather than using their mother tongue (see Chapter 9D).

When we prompt we need to do it sensitively and encouragingly but, above all, with discretion. If we are too adamant we risk taking initiative away from the student. If, on the other hand, we are too retiring, we may not supply the right amount of encouragement.

#### **B5 Participant**

The traditional picture of teachers during student discussions, role-play, or group decision-making activities, is of people who 'stand back' from the activity, letting the learners get on with it and only intervening later to offer feedback and/or correct mistakes. However, there are also times when we might want to join in an activity not as a teacher, but also as a participant in our own right.

There are good reasons why we might want to take part in a discussion. For example, it means that we can enliven things from the inside instead of always having to prompt or organise from outside the group. When it goes well, students enjoy having the teacher with them, and for the teacher, participating is often more instantly enjoyable than acting as a resource.

The danger of teachers as participants, of course, is that we can easily dominate the proceedings. This is hardly surprising since we usually have more English at our disposal than our students do. But it is also due to the fact that even in the most egalitarian classroom, the teacher is still frequently perceived of as 'the teacher' and tends to be listened to with greater attention than his or her students. It takes great skill and sensitivity to avoid this situation.

## B6 Resource

In some activities it is inappropriate for us to take on any of the roles we have suggested so far. Suppose that the students are involved in a piece of group writing, or that they are involved in preparation for a presentation they are to make to the class. In such situations having the teacher take part, or try to control them, or even turn up to prompt them might be entirely unwelcome. However, the students may still have need of their teacher as a resource.

Students might ask how to say or write something or what a word or phrase means. They might want to know information in the middle of an activity about that activity or they might want information about where to look for something – a book or a web site for example. This is where we can be one of the most important resources they have.

A few things need to be said about this teacher role. No teacher knows everything about the language! Questions like *What's the difference between X and Y?* or *Why can't I say Z?* are always difficult to deal with because most of us do not carry complex information of this kind in our heads. What we should be able to offer, however, is guidance as to where students can go to look for that information. We could go further, however, and say that one of our really important jobs is to encourage students to use resource material for themselves, and to become more independent in their learning generally. Thus, instead of answering every question about what a word or phrase means, we can instead direct students to a good monolingual dictionary, or in the case of creative work, towards a good production dictionary (see Chapter 12, A1). Alternatively, we need to have the courage to say *I don't know the answer to that right now, but I'll tell you tomorrow*. This means, of course, that we will indeed have to give them the information the next day, otherwise they may begin to lose confidence in us.

When we are acting as a resource we will want to be helpful and available, but at the same time we have to resist the urge to spoon-feed our students so that they become over-reliant on us.

**B7 Tutor**

When students are working on longer projects, such as pieces of writing or preparations for a talk or a debate, we can act as a tutor, working with individuals or small groups, pointing them in directions they have not yet thought of taking. In such situations we are combining the roles of prompter and resource, acting as a tutor.

It is difficult to be a tutor in a very large group since the term implies a more intimate relationship than that of a controller or organiser. However, when students are working in small groups or in pairs, we can go round the class and, staying briefly with a particular group or individual, offer the sort of general guidance we are describing. Care needs to be taken, however, to ensure that as many individuals or groups as possible are seen, otherwise the students who have not had access to the tutor may begin to feel aggrieved.

It is essential for us to act as tutors from time to time, however difficult this may be. In this more personal contact the learners have a real chance to feel supported and helped, and the general class atmosphere is greatly enhanced as a result. Nevertheless, as with prompting and acting as a resource, we need to make sure that we do not intrude either too much (which will impede learner autonomy) or too little (which will be unhelpful).

**B8 Observer**

We will want to observe what students do (especially in oral communicative activities) so that we can give them useful group and individual feedback.

When observing students we should be careful not to be too intrusive by hanging on their every word, by getting too close to them, or by officiously writing things down all the time. Above all we should avoid drawing attention to ourselves since to do so may well distract them from the task they are involved in.

It is often useful, when taking notes on students' performance – either as a whole class, or for individual students – to have columns not only for what students get wrong but also what they do right, either in their use of actual language or in their use of conversational strategies. Observing for success often gives us a different feel for how well our students are doing.

But even when we are acting as controllers, giving feedback or organising students, we need to be observing at the same time too, constantly alert to the effect our actions are having, trying to tease out feelings and reactions in the classroom. We need to be able to work and observe simultaneously, listening, watching, and absorbing so that we can create the best kind of rapport between ourselves and our students.

Teachers do not only observe students in order to give feedback. They also watch in order to judge the success of the different materials and activities that they take into lessons so that they can, if necessary, make changes in the future. Indeed, one area of teacher development involves just such observation, built into an action research cycle (see Chapter 24, B1) where we pose questions about what we do in the classroom and use observation to answer such questions.

## Which role?

The role that we take on is dependent, as we have seen, on what it is we wish the students to achieve. Where some activities are difficult to organise without the teacher acting as controller, others have no chance of success unless we take a less domineering role. There are times when we will need to act as a prompter where, on other occasions, it would be more appropriate to act as a resource.

What we can say, with certainty, is that we need to be able to switch between the various roles we have described here, judging when it is appropriate to use one or other of them. And then, when we have made that decision, however consciously or subconsciously it is done, we need to be aware of how we carry out that role and how we perform.

## C The teacher as performer

In an article published at the end of the 1980s, Christopher Crouch described his experiences of observing his student teachers on teaching practice in Madrid. One of them, who he called *W*, was obviously full of energy and he writes of how she 'rubbed her hands together' and 'advanced on the front row with a question, almost aggressively ...'. Later on, '... seeking students to come out to the front of the class *W* strode up aisles, literally hauling individuals out of their seats' (Crouch 1989: 107). Yet amazingly, Crouch reports, the students did not seem to mind this at all; on the contrary they were pleased to join in and were clearly fascinated by her behaviour!

*W* was different from student teacher *X* who was 'relaxed, at ease, but his non-verbal gestures were exaggerated, larger than life'. He seemed to empathise with his students, gazing into their eyes and generally being more 'laid back' than his colleague. But like *W*, he too was popular with students. Many of us will be able to remember teachers whose classroom behaviour was exaggerated in a way not unlike *W* or *X* – or indeed some mixture of them both.

We can be sure that neither *W* nor *X* behave in the same way when they are walking along the street as they did in the classes that Christopher Crouch observed. On the contrary, they clearly went into 'performance' mode when they entered the classroom. When, in a piece of informal research, I asked a number of teachers 'Are you a different person in the classroom than you are out of the classroom?' the responses I got all suggested that the teachers thought of themselves as more energetic, humorous, and creative in class. Frequently, too, they described themselves as 'actors' (Harmer 1995).

If, then, teachers are all performers in the classroom at some level, what does this mean for the learner-centred teacher? Can we 'perform' and still act as a resource? What kind of performance should we adopt when giving feedback? Does 'performance' automatically mean that we must be standing at the front of the class putting on a show? For clearly if this was the case, teacher performance would describe only one kind of teacher role and might be criticised for the very transmissive and teacher-centred behaviour it demonstrated. But as *W* and *X* show, different teachers perform differently. Not only that, but any one teacher probably

also has many different performance styles depending on the situation. One minute we may be standing at the front commanding or entertaining, but a few minutes later we will be working quietly with a pair while the other students are working in their own pairs.

Knowing that different teachers act differently and that individual teachers vary their behaviour, depending upon what they are doing, gives us insights into classroom behaviour. It suggests that instead of just saying what role teachers should be playing, we can also describe how they should be playing it. Just as stage directions give the actors an insight into what lines mean, so similar descriptions in teaching may give us insights into how activities can best be managed. Thus for an activity where the students are involved in a team game, we will want to behave energetically (because a game needs excitement and energy), encouragingly (if students need a nudge to have a go), clearly (because we do not want the game to fail through misunderstanding) and fairly (because students care about this in a competition situation). If, on the other hand, students are involved in a role-play we should perform clearly (because students need to know exactly what the parameters of the role-play are), encouragingly (because students may need prompting to get them going), but also retiringly (because, once the activity has got going, we do not want to overwhelm the students' performance) and supportively (because students may need help at various points). Figure 12 shows how we might describe these and other activities:

Activity	How the teacher should perform
1 Team game	energetically, encouragingly, clearly, fairly
2 Role-play	clearly, encouragingly, retiringly, supportively
3 Teacher reading aloud	commandingly, dramatically, interestingly
4 Whole-class listening	efficiently, clearly, supportively

FIGURE 12: Describing teacher performance styles

What seems to be clear is that while we certainly need to be aware of the roles we described in Section B (above), and while we also need to be able to use each of these different roles, it is also vitally important to consider how we actually behave during their performance.

## D The teacher as teaching aid

Apart from the roles which we adopt in the classroom – and the way that these roles are performed, we are also a kind of teaching aid ourselves, a piece of teaching equipment in our own right. In particular, we are especially useful when using mime and gesture, as language models, and as providers of comprehensible input.

### D1 Mime and gesture

One of the things that we are uniquely able to do on the spot is to use mime, gesture, and expression to convey meaning and atmosphere. It is not difficult to pretend to



be drinking, or to pull a sad face. The ability to demonstrate words like *frightened* or *old* is fairly easy for many teachers, just as shrugging shoulders can be used to indicate indifference.

Mime and expression probably work best when they are exaggerated since this makes their meaning explicit. However, gestures do not necessarily have universal meanings (see Chapter 2, E2), and what might seem acceptable in one situation or place will not be appropriate in another. We need, therefore, to use them with care.

We can also use gesture to express or demonstrate meaning. Thus, as we shall see in Chapter 11, A1, fingers can be used to show how verbs are contracted, and arms can be used to 'conduct' choral repetition. Stress can be shown through clapping or clicking fingers, and intonation can be explained through a kind of drawing in the air!

One gesture which is widely used, but which teachers should employ with care, is the act of pointing to students to ask them to participate in a drill or give some other form of response. Though it is quick and efficient, especially when we are having trouble with our students' names, it can seem aggressive and it may make it depressingly obvious to the students that, in having failed to learn their names, we are less than respectful of their identity.

## D2 Language model

Students get models of language from textbooks, reading materials of all sorts, and from audio and videotapes. But we can also model language ourselves. This does not only mean the giving of a clear language model as in the PPP procedure described in Chapter 6, A2, but also, for example, the saying of a dialogue or the reading aloud of a text.

One way in which we can model dialogues is to put up two faces on the board and then stand in front of each of them when required to speak their lines. For such activities we should make sure that we can be heard, and we should animate our performance with as much enthusiasm as is appropriate for the conversation we are modelling. We should judge the appropriate speed too, making sure that however slowly we speak, a natural rhythm is maintained and normal intonation patterns preserved as far as possible.

Many of the same requirements apply to reading aloud, a skill which some teachers have tended to ignore. Yet the reading aloud of a particularly exciting or interesting excerpt can be extremely motivating and enjoyable for a class, especially when students have been encouraged to predict what they are going to hear. Poems, too, are very engaging for many students when teachers read them to the class.

Anyone who doubts the power of such activities only has to look at the reading circles in primary classes where children group enthusiastically around the teacher to enjoy the experience of listening to a story. Story-telling and story/poem-reading can work with adults too, though the content and the way it is handled will be significantly different, of course.

Reading passages aloud to students can capture imagination and mood like nothing else, but in order for this to work we need to 'perform' the reading in an interesting and committed way and, as with so many other activities, we must be careful not to use this activity too frequently.

### D3 Provider of comprehensible input

An issue that confronts many teachers in classrooms is how much they themselves should talk, and what kind of talk this should be. Of course there are times when teachers have to take the roll or ask for quiet, or suggest that students should get into pairs and groups. But there are also times when teachers simply talk to groups, engage in conversation with them, discuss the topic under consideration or ask them about their weekend, etc.

On most training courses a distinction is made between student-talking time (STT) and teacher-talking time (TTT). As we shall see in Chapter 8 it is the concern to maximise the former that leads many teachers to use pair and groupwork; it has been assumed that on the whole we want to see more STT than TTT, since, as trainers frequently point out to their student teachers, *You don't need the language practice, they do.*

It is certainly true that some teachers talk too much and that this is not necessarily advantageous for their students, especially since those teachers are unlikely to be permanently interesting. However, as we shall see in Chapter 5B, it is widely accepted that a vital ingredient in the learning of any language is, of course, exposure to it. The American linguist Stephen Krashen described the best kind of language that students could be exposed to as 'comprehensible input', that is language which students understand the meaning of, but which is nevertheless slightly above their own production level (see Krashen 1985). Yet where can they go for such language input? In the world outside the classroom, English, if they have access to it, will frequently appear incomprehensible, especially when they are at a low level. They need something or someone to provide language which has been 'roughly-tuned' to be comprehensible to them. And there is someone right there in the classroom to give them just that!

As teachers we are ideally placed to provide comprehensible input since we know the students in front of us and can react appropriately to them in a way that a coursebook or a tape, for example, cannot. We know how to talk at just the right level so that even if our students do not understand every word we say, they do understand the meaning of what is being said. At such times the language gains, for the student, are significant.

However, we do need to be aware of how much we ourselves are speaking. If we talk all the time, however 'comprehensible' our language is, the students are denied their own chance to practise production, or get exposure through other means (from reading or listening to tapes, for example). They may also become bored by listening to the teacher all the time.

Basing a lesson on what we can do ourselves as in the examples above clearly has the enormous advantage of not being susceptible to technical malfunction (though that can happen!), power cuts, or unavailability. However, an over-reliance on what we ourselves can offer places excessive demands upon us. It is hard to be permanently motivating and amusing, and it is taxing to have to offer a perpetually varied diet of voices, gestures, and expressions. Nevertheless the ways in which we use our voice, the ways in which we model language and employ gesture and expression are all basic and important teaching skills.

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## **Chapter notes and further reading**

- **Metaphors for teaching**

S Thornbury, in a discussion of the language teachers use to describe what they do, writes that teachers' metaphors 'reveal more than they realise about their beliefs and values' (S Thornbury 1991a: 193).

- **Teachers' roles**

An important book on teacher roles is T Wright (1987).

- **Teacher-talking time**

As long ago as 1985 T Lowe was discussing the value of teacher-talking time as roughly-tuned input.

- **Reading aloud**

On a reassessment of the value of reading aloud, see A Amer (1997).

# 5

## Some background issues

English language teaching has been influenced by a whole range of theories ranging from scientific studies to opinionated conjecture, from descriptions of what ‘seems to work’ to philosophical beliefs. Sometimes the connections between such theories and particular teaching methods are easy to perceive, but at other times they are less clear. The five sections in this chapter detail some of the theoretical debates which have enlivened (and continue to inform) the practice of English language teaching.

### A Pulling habits out of rats

In an article published in the early part of the twentieth century, two psychologists, Watson and Raynor, reported the results of an experiment they had carried out with a young boy called Albert (Watson and Raynor 1920). When he was nine months old they discovered that the easiest way to frighten him was to make a loud noise by striking a steel bar with a hammer. At various intervals over the next three months they frightened Albert in this way while he was in the presence of various animals (a rat, a rabbit, and a dog). The result was that after three months Albert showed fear when confronted with these animals even when the noise was not made, and furthermore, showed unease when a fur coat was put in front of him. Pleased with their progress, the scientists then proposed to continue their experiment by turning the young baby’s fear back to pleasure but they were unable to do so because, unsurprisingly, Albert was withdrawn from the experiment by his parents.

Despite its age Watson and Raynor’s experiment is of more than academic interest because the ‘conditioning’ it demonstrated – and the way that such research into conditioning led on to the theory of **Behaviourism** – had a profound effect upon teaching of all kinds. This is especially true of language teaching where, arguably, Behaviourism still exerts a powerful influence.

To a modern sensibility Watson and Raynor’s work with poor little Albert seems extraordinarily unethical, yet they were merely substituting a human being for the various animals who were conditioned to behave in certain ways. Pavlov’s dogs, after all, were trained/conditioned to salivate when they heard a bell even if food was not produced.

In Behaviourist theory, conditioning is the result of a three-stage procedure: **stimulus, response, and reinforcement**. For example, in a classic experiment, when a light goes on (the stimulus) a rat goes up to a bar and presses it (the response) and is rewarded by the dropping of a tasty food pellet at its feet (the reinforcement). If



this procedure is repeated often enough, the arrival of the food pellet as a reward reinforces the rat's actions to such an extent that it will always press the bar when the light comes on. It has learnt a new behaviour in other words.

In a book called *Verbal Behaviour* the psychologist Bernard Skinner suggested that much the same process happens in language learning, especially first language learning (Skinner 1957). The baby needs food so it cries and food is produced. Later the infant swaps crying for one- or two-word utterances to produce the same effect, and because words are more precise than cries he or she gradually learns to refine the words to get exactly what is wanted. In this Behaviourist view of learning a similar stimulus–response–reinforcement pattern occurs with humans as with rats or any other animal that can be conditioned in the same kind of way.

Learning a foreign language as an adult may be very different from the baby's acquisition of a mother tongue, but many methodologists supposed that Behaviourist principles could still apply. As we shall see in Chapter 6, A1, Audio-lingual methodology depended quite heavily on stimulus, response, and reinforcement, and much controlled practice that still takes place in classrooms all over the world can trace its heritage back to the influence of Behaviourism.

The almost fatal attack on Behaviourism, when it came, was by the then-little-known linguist Noam Chomsky who wrote a review of Skinner's book (Chomsky 1959). His objection centred on the following conundrum: if all language is learnt behaviour, how come children and adults frequently say things they have never heard before? How on earth would it be possible to create whole new sentences in conversation and poetry, for example, if all language behaviour has been conditioned into us? The fact that we can do these things is the result of having a mental ability to process what we hear, channelling it through the language-processing parts of our brain where rules in some way reside, and where all input adds more information for the better functioning of that processor. This is what stops us from being the mere repeaters, the almost-robots, that Behaviourist principles would seem to describe us as.

Chomsky theorised that all children are born with some kind of language processor – a 'black box' or 'language acquisition device' – which allowed them to formulate rules of language based on the input they received. The mind, in other words, contains 'blueprints for grammatical rules' (Pinker 1994: 43). Once these rules have been activated, the potential for creativity follows. This would suggest that for learners of second languages a methodology based on Behaviourism is not adequate. It is not enough just to teach students 'good' habits: they also need to be given input which will allow their 'processors' to work. They should also be given opportunities for creative language use both in language production and in the processing of written and spoken text.

Despite such reservations about Behaviourism and its influence on language teaching, controlled practice and the use of the Stimulus–Response–Reinforcement model is still widely used and at least one writer was recently prepared to say that:

We have to admit that some behaviourist principles as applied to foreign language learning were not so far off the mark.

From A Bruton (1998: 20)

We will see Behaviourist theories applied directly to language teaching in Chapter 6 (A1 and 2).

## B 'Language learning will take care of itself'

A major issue in language learning theory has been whether traditional techniques normally associated with language teaching – drills, repetition, controlled practice of specific language items, etc. – actually have any beneficial effect. Indeed, in educational theory generally, there has been some argument about whether teaching 'works' at all.

In his book, *Deschooling Society*, the educational theorist Ivan Illich questioned the whole purpose of formal education. As the title of his book indicates he had a very bleak view of what happens in classrooms. We may think, he suggested, that the more input we are exposed to, the more we learn. We may even go so far as to assume that we can measure knowledge with tests and grades. But all this is a delusion.

In fact, learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting.

From I Illich (1972: 56)

First language learning provides a perfect example of what he is talking about. All children succeed at it to a greater or lesser extent. Although parents and other close adults may help to 'teach' the language in an informal way (for example, through repetition, 'play', or made-up dialogues – where, in the early stages the parent will often take the baby's part when the baby cannot actually speak the words), still the process of learning is unconscious. What the young child does get, of course, is considerable exposure to language which he or she more or less understands the meaning of. And at the end of this process, the language, miraculously, is there as a result of exposure, a clear motivation to communicate – for both physical and emotional reasons – and an opportunity to use what is being acquired.

Perhaps, then, all that anybody needs to learn a new language are those three elements: exposure, motivation, and opportunities for use. This was certainly the view of Dick Allwright and his colleagues who had the task of improving the English language skills of students from overseas who were soon to study on postgraduate courses at the University of Essex in England in the 1970s. The students already had some English knowledge.

The teachers at Essex reasoned that the ways they had been teaching – such as studying grammar, explaining vocabulary, or teaching paragraph organisation – did not seem to have much effect and anyway, they did not 'feel right'. How would it be, they wondered, if they abandoned all that and instead devoted all their efforts to exposing students to English and getting them to use it, particularly given that they were highly motivated to learn. This would satisfy the three criteria we have just detailed. The hypothesis they were working on was, in Allwright's words, that:

... if the language teacher's management activities are directed exclusively at involving the learners in solving communication problems in the target language, then language learning will take care of itself...  
From R Allwright (1979: 170)

In the course which followed, students were given tasks to do outside the classroom (such as interviewing people and searching for library books) which involved them in speaking and reading: real tasks for which the teachers gave no language training, advice or, crucially, correction. Students also took part in communication games where the only objective was to complete the task using all and/or any language at their disposal. A student had to draw the same picture as their partner without looking at the partner's picture, for example, or they had to arrange objects in the same order as their partner without looking at their partner's objects – both tasks relying on verbal communication alone. The results, although not scientifically assessed, were apparently favourable. Everyone enjoyed the process far more (especially the teachers) and the students' progress appeared to have been more impressive than in previous years.

The American applied linguist, Stephen Krashen, writing a short time later, appeared to be making similar suggestions about language learning too, though by dividing language 'learning' into **acquisition** and **learning** he was being far more specific. Language which we acquire subconsciously, he claimed, is language we can easily use in spontaneous conversation because it is instantly available when we need it. Language that is learnt, on the other hand, taught and studied as grammar and vocabulary, is not available for spontaneous use. Indeed, it may be that the only use for learnt language is to help us to monitor (check) our spontaneous communication; but then the more we monitor what we are saying, the less spontaneous we become!

Krashen saw the successful acquisition by students of a second language as being bound up with the nature of the language input they received. It had to be comprehensible, even if it was slightly above their productive level, and the students had to be exposed to it in a relaxed setting. This **roughly-tuned** input is in stark contrast to the **finely-tuned** input of much language instruction, where specific graded language has been chosen for conscious learning. Roughly-tuned input aids acquisition, Krashen argued, whereas finely-tuned input combined with conscious learning does not.

A further attack on traditional forms of language teaching – especially the use of repetition and controlled practice – has centred around studies which have demonstrated that it is impossible to show a direct connection between drilling of any particular grammatical item, for example, and the acquisition of that item. Dave Willis describes as a fallacy the idea that controlled practice leads to mastery of grammar (Willis 1996: 48), and others have made the same point, as we shall see in Chapter 6, A3.

Despite all these claims, however, language teaching has not been quite so radicalised as some commentators might have expected. This is partly due to the theories themselves, whose claims are somewhat weakened when exposed to close

scrutiny. Take Allwright's students at the University of Essex: they all had some knowledge of English, they were all highly motivated (because they would shortly be taking postgraduate degrees at an English university) and, crucially, they were studying in England where their opportunities for exposure to English were greatly increased. Allwright's solution might have been exactly right for such students – the ones it was designed for – but it does not follow, therefore, that the same kind of approach would be appropriate for students at different levels studying in different situations in other parts of the world.

Krashen's claims came under sustained attack partly because they were unverifiable. When someone produces language, how can you tell if this language is 'learnt' or 'acquired'? The speaker will almost certainly be unable to provide you with the answer, and there are no ways, so far, of finding this out. Second, many commentators have questioned his suggestion that learnt language can never pass to the acquired store. This seems observably false. Both roughly-tuned and finely-tuned input (the latter related, of course, to learning) end up becoming acquired language at some point; Rod Ellis suggested that communicative activities might be the switch that took language from the learnt to the acquired store (Ellis 1982). However, no one has suggested that Krashen is wrong about the beneficial qualities of comprehensible input in a relaxed setting.

And what of Willis' criticism of controlled practice, by which he appears to mean both individual and choral repetition? As we shall see in Chapter 6, A3 controlled practice may not fulfil the role originally ascribed to it (the mastery of grammar and vocabulary) but at certain levels it may well have other pay-offs in terms of encouraging motor skills in the spoken production of new language, and in providing the illusion of progress to aid the students' motivation.

Much of the problem in discussing acquisition and learning – in trying to discover whether 'language learning will take care of itself' – occurs when the discussion is divorced from the age of the students (see Chapter 3A), the level they are at (see Chapter 3, B4), their motivation (see Chapter 3C), their educational culture (see Chapter 6B), and the places in which the learning is taking place. Thus we need to balance the fact that all children acquire language against some of the special conditions in which this takes place. Children receive much greater exposure than the average second language student. There is some 'covert teaching' going on as they acquire not only the language itself but the social routines in which it is used. First language acquisition is also closely allied to social growth and general cognitive development.

Most teachers of young learners avoid grammar teaching because experience has shown that it has little effect. Children subconsciously acquire languages with considerable ease. Yet adults find things more difficult, especially when they are learning in classrooms away from target-language communities; for them focused language study is not only useful, it is almost certainly desirable, and most of them want it anyway (see Chapter 3, A1 and 3 for more discussion on this point). Just involving students in communicative tasks may thus be unsatisfactory, provoking 'a general over-emphasis on performance at the expense of progress' (Wicksteed



1998: 3). However, there may be special circumstances (such as those described by Allwright above) where such activities match the motivational drive, level, and situation of the students concerned.

It seems, therefore, that some concentration on language study is helpful for most teenagers and adults learning English whether in the form of finely-tuned input or in some other way, for, as Chapters 6 and 11 will demonstrate, there are many different means of language study. However, many of the theoretical considerations discussed in this section have influenced popular methodology, especially the Communicative approach and its aftermath (see Chapter 6, A4) and Task-based learning (see Chapter 6, A5).

## C Noticing

A theme that runs through much discussion of the study of specific graded language is that if controlled practice does not work as well as it should, and if, in Steven Pinker's words, students often depend upon their 'considerable intellects' (1994: 29), then one of the teacher's main tasks is to make students 'aware' of language as an alternative to teaching it. In this approach, often referred to as 'consciousness-raising', the teacher does not expect students to produce new language immediately but instead makes them aware of certain of its features. This awareness will help their acquisition of the language so that when they need to use it, the knowledge thus gained will help them to produce it accurately and fluently.

Richard Schmidt uses the term 'noticing' to describe a condition which is necessary if the language a student is exposed to is to become language that he or she takes in (language intake) (Schmidt 1990). Unless the student notices the new language, he or she is unlikely to process it, and therefore the chances of learning it (and being able to use it) are slim. This suggestion modifies the view of Stephen Krashen (see above) who argued that comprehensible input (with no necessary noticing) was enough for acquisition to take place.

According to Schmidt and based to some extent on his own learning of Portuguese, second language learners notice a language construction if they come across it often enough or if it stands out in some way. One way of coming across it, of course, is through instruction – that is, if teachers draw their attention to it. Of course, whether or not a teacher is present, students need to have already reached a level where they can notice the language feature in question.

This emphasis on noticing and awareness-raising may lead people to suggest that rather than 'teaching' an item of language, the teacher's job is to get students to notice it when it occurs so that it sinks into the brain where it is processed. One way of doing this is to organise tasks where certain language naturally occurs with frequency and where with or without a teacher's help, the student will notice it.

The fact that language has been noticed does not mean it has been acquired/learnt, nor that students can use it immediately. Rob Batstone suggests that structuring and restructuring of 'noticed' language will be necessary to adjust the

hypotheses that the learner has formed (Batstone 1994: 40–43). This means learners trying the language out, often in controlled classroom conditions, to test out its boundaries and characteristics.

Spontaneous production of acquired/learned language seems to take longer; it happens when the language in question has had enough ‘processing’ time in the student’s memory – through noticing and, perhaps, restructuring – to be available for use. Teachers who expect its instant production in spontaneous conversation are thus often disappointed, but if they wait it will (if students have noticed it) emerge in creative language use in due course.

## D The affective variable

One issue that has preoccupied educators in many disciplines is the students’ response to their learning experiences and how this makes them feel about themselves. The psychologist Abraham Maslow, for example, suggested that self-esteem was a necessary ‘deficiency need’ which had to be met before cognitive or aesthetic needs could be engaged with (Maslow 1987). This idea, that the learner’s state of mind, his or her personal response to the activity of learning, is central to success or failure in language learning has greatly influenced teaching methods and materials writing. This area of theorising has been called the humanist approach and, as we shall see in Chapter 6, A7, it has given rise to a specific set of teaching methods.

Theorists who are concerned with humanism say that the learner’s feelings are as important as their mental or cognitive abilities. If students feel hostile towards the subject of study, the materials, or the teaching methods, they will be unlikely to achieve much success. The American writer Earl Stevick calls these states ‘alienations’ and suggests that to counter these states, humanist approaches are called for (Stevick 1996). Stephen Krashen, whose ideas were discussed in Section B, would probably agree. His claim for the beneficial value of comprehensible input depends upon the students being relaxed, feeling positive, and unthreatened. If they are not, then their affective filter is raised and blocks the input from being absorbed and processed. But if, on the other hand, the affective filter is lowered – because students are relaxed – then the comprehensible input the students are exposed to will contribute far more effectively to their acquisition of new language.

How then can teachers ensure that their students feel positive about learning – that the **affective filter** is lowered? The psychologist Carl Rogers, whose impact upon this line of thinking has been profound, suggested that learners needed to feel that what they were learning was personally relevant to them, that they had to experience learning (rather than just being ‘taught’) and that their self-image needed to be enhanced as part of the process (Rogers 1994). Education should speak to the ‘whole person’, in other words, not just to a small language-learning facility. In a humanist classroom, students are emotionally involved in the learning; they are encouraged to reflect on how learning happens, and their creativity is fostered. The teacher can achieve this by keeping criticism to a minimum and by encouraging them, in plain terms, to feel good about themselves. In a humanist classroom learning a language is

as much an issue of personal identity, self-knowledge, feelings and emotions as it is about language.

However, not everyone is happy with this view of the language learning experience. Some humanist activities encourage students to speak from their 'inner' selves, saying, for example, how they feel about their lives, their closeness to different members of their families. John Morgan and Mario Rinvolucri describe such activities as allowing students to 'exteriorise their own internal text' (1986: 9). But critics question whether it is the teacher's job to ask students to reveal things of a private nature, and sometimes even to monitor and nurture the students' inner selves. There is some criticism, too, that there is a strong cultural bias to this view of teaching and learning which would be inappropriate in certain situations. Furthermore a concentration on the inner self may limit the range of language that students can experience, with more emphasis being placed on interpersonal and informal language at the expense of other kinds. Lastly, some doubters suggest, paying too much attention to affective issues in learning may mean that teachers neglect their students' cognitive and intellectual development.

It is certainly true that we want to create an unthreatening environment for our students (just as we will want to foster their cognitive development). We should also be concerned not to do anything which damages their self-esteem. But how far we should act as moral guides and quasi-therapists as well as being teachers of language is a more difficult question, and one which is intimately bound up with our understanding of the role of teachers (see Chapter 4A).

## E Discovering language

One school of thought which is widely accepted by many language teachers is that the development of our conceptual understanding and cognitive skills is a main objective of all education. Indeed, this is more important than the acquisition of factual information (Williams and Burden 1997: 24). Such conceptual understanding is arrived at not through 'blind learning', but through a process of exploration which leads to genuine understanding (Lewis 1986: 165). The things we discover for ourselves are absorbed more effectively than things we are taught.

The practical implications of this view are quite clear: instead of explicitly teaching the present perfect tense, for instance, we will expose students to examples of it and then allow them, under our guidance, to work out for themselves how it is used. Instead of telling students which words collocate with *crime*, we can get them to look at a computer concordance of the word (see Chapter 12C) and discover the collocations on their own. Instead of telling them about spoken grammar we can get them to look at transcripts and come to their own conclusions about how it differs from written grammar (see Chapter 2, A2). What we are doing, effectively, is to provoke 'noticing for the learner' (see Batstone 1994: 72 and Section C above).

One powerful reason for encouraging language students to discover things for themselves is the complex nature of language itself. While there may be an argument at lower levels for reducing its complexity into manageable pieces, students who

encounter real language outside the classroom will find that it is considerably 'messier' than it may appear in a language lesson. Their response to this may well depend on how prepared they are to observe this messy language and work out, for themselves, how it is put together. Any training in language analysis we have given them will make them more able to do so. In general, encouraging students to be more autonomous learners needs to be a key goal for many teachers particularly of adults and teenagers (see Chapter 24A).

Discovery learning may not be suitable for all students, however, especially if it conflicts with their own learning culture (see Chapter 6, B1). One student in a piece of research by Alan Fortune which compared discovery activities with more traditionally taught grammar said that 'I feel more secure with a rule because my intuition does not tell me a lot' (Fortune 1992: 168). Nor is it clear whether such techniques work equally well with all items of grammar or lexis. If the language students are exposed to is over-complex, they may find it difficult to make any meaningful analysis of it on their own, even if they understand more or less what it means. As we shall see in Chapter 11, B2, however, discovery activities can have an important part to play in the study of language, even when students are initially reluctant to work in this way. In Alan Fortune's study, quoted above, experience of such activities caused a significant number of informants to end up preferring them to more familiar activities.

## Chapter notes and further reading

### • Behaviourism

I first heard the 'pulling habits out of rats' witticism expressed by Peter Shaw though whether he originated it I do not know!

For an easily digestible view of Behaviourism, the work of Skinner (for example) and its use in Audio-lingualism and Structuralism, see M Williams and R Burden (1997: 8–13).

### • Acquisition and learning

Of all of Krashen's writing on acquisition and learning the most accessible is probably *The Input Hypothesis* (S Krashen 1985).

R Ellis (1988) suggested that it is impossible to show a direct connection between controlled repetition and the acquisition/learning of some language.

Krashen's views are effectively challenged in K Gregg (1984). See also J Harmer (1983) and a review of an earlier Krashen book in R Ellis (1983).

### • Controlled practice (repetition)

G Cook (1994) argues that repetition is a pleasurable, valuable, and efficient language learning activity which makes learners feel they are involved in authentic and communicative use of language.

- **Noticing**

For an earlier discussion of consciousness-raising see M Sharwood-Smith (1981).

On noticing activities, leading on to structuring and re-structuring, see R Batstone (1994: Chapter 7).

- **Humanistic teaching**

Nearly ten years apart, D Atkinson (1989) and N Gadd (1998) express doubts about humanistic teaching and wonder how far it should be taken. However, humanism is defended passionately in A Underhill (1989) and J Arnold (1998). The most complete modern account of the role of affect in language teaching is J Arnold (ed.) (1999).

- **Discovery learning**

The way 'real' language is used 'untidily' is demonstrated in D Maule (1988) who looked at the complexity of conditional sentences in real life and G Yule et al. (1992) who showed how people really report speech.

For examples of discovery material see R Bolitho and B Tomlinson (1995) and N Hall and J Shephard (1991).