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Planning lessons

A The planning paradox

In an article some years ago, the trainer Craig Thaine described how he and his colleagues increased the emphasis on timetabling and lesson planning in their teacher training programmes. In particular, he asked participants in a methods course to design a three-day timetable sequence of five hours a day. This was because he was concerned that teacher training courses 'were often not adequately preparing candidates in the very useful skill of timetabling in daily, weekly or monthly blocks' (1996a: 7). Reactions to this extra focus on timetabling were, he reported, extremely positive both from tutors and from the trainees themselves.

In an extraordinary outburst in response to this article, however, Mario Rinvoluceri questioned the very assumptions on which Craig Thaine's article was based. It is worth quoting a somewhat florid paragraph from his open letter to the journal in which the article had appeared:

The assumption behind your article seems to be that a teacher on Sunday evening should know what ... she will be doing with her class on Friday morning, five lessons on. The assumption fills me with a mixture of amazement and hilarity. How can I possibly, on a Sunday evening, know what will make sense to me and to at least some in my learning group the following Friday morning? ... Why do you consciously teach your trainees to elaborate mental structures that ignore their flesh-and-blood, here-and-now learners?

(Rinvoluceri 1996: 3)

Rinvoluceri's concerns are echoed by David Mallows, who points out that what actually happens in a lesson is the result of an interactive system that is extremely complex. In other words, as the lesson progresses (as students interact with their teacher and with the language they are studying), things evolve and develop, depending on what has happened and what is happening minute by minute. Yet by encouraging teachers to plan lessons 'with essentially linear aims', we might be 'producing teachers who are unaware of the complex patterns that are woven in the interaction between learners and the language to which they are exposed, and which they produce' (2002: 8).

This, then, is the planning paradox. On the one hand, it makes no sense to go into any situation without having thought about what we are going to do. Yet at the same time, if we pre-determine what is going to happen before it has taken place, we may be in danger not only of missing what is right in front of us but, more importantly, we may also be closing off avenues of possible evolution and development.

In his reply to Mario Rinvoluceri's letter, Craig Thaine pointed out that for inexperienced teachers, a plan – a mental structure – 'might be just the map we need initially' (Thaine 1996b: 3). New teachers, especially, need maps to help them through the landscape. And students, too, like to know what their teacher has in store for them. Evidence of teacher planning helps

to ensure their confidence in the person who is teaching them. A complete failure to plan may seem irresponsible to both students and others.

A1 The planning continuum

Whatever our reaction to the planning paradox, however, the fact remains that most teachers do think about what they are going to teach before they go into the lesson. Tessa Woodward, for example, could not think of a single teacher in all the staff rooms she had worked in who had not done 'some thinking and preparing before class' (Woodward 2002: 25).

Jim Scrivener, on the other hand, describes a situation where the teacher has no real idea what he or she is going to do before a lesson starts and where, as a result, the lesson is created moment by moment with the teacher and the learners working with whatever is happening in the room. He calls this a 'jungle path' lesson. He gives an example of the teacher walking into a classroom and asking *How was the weekend?* and, after listening to a number of answers, provoking a discussion based on what has been said. At some point the teacher may then select particular items of language that have emerged and invent instant exercises that will help students work on them (Scrivener 2005: 132). Far from being lazy or artless, he suggests, such teaching demands high skill and an ability to react appropriately minute by minute. Interestingly, this kind of lesson mirrors the Dogme proposal we discussed on page 75. But once again, it is worth pointing out that in most educational contexts, a succession of jungle path lessons will suggest to the students a degree of carelessness – or even negligence – on the part of the unprepared teacher.

At the other end of the spectrum, teachers on training courses who are about to be observed tend to produce elaborate plans of the kind we will discuss in Section B below. This is partly to give themselves confidence that they have done their best to plan for any eventuality (though of course that may be impossible – see above), but also because a detailed plan gives the observer clear evidence of the thinking that has gone into the making of the lesson.

Some teachers allow the coursebook to do the planning for them; they take in a lesson or unit and teach it exactly as it is offered in the book (though in reality, most teachers will look at the book lesson before they take it into class).

Some teachers scribble a few notes down in folders or notebooks. Perhaps these might consist of the name of an activity (e.g. different holidays – discussion), or some language (e.g. inviting). Sometimes the notes will be more elaborate than this.

Occasionally, teachers do some kind of vague 'corridor planning' in their head as they walk towards the class. Even when teachers don't make notes or write a decent plan, they generally have ideas in their head anyway.

Except in formal assessment situations, the actual form that a plan takes is less important than the thought that has gone into it; the overriding principle is that we should have an idea of what we hope our students will achieve in the class, and that this should guide our decisions about how to bring it about. At the very least, we should have what has been called 'a door into and a door out of the lesson' (Harmer 2005: 169). Where written plans act as a useful record of what we hoped to achieve, and where we amend these records (after the lesson) to say what actually happened, they become effective accounts which we can use for action research (see Chapter 24B).

A2 Using plans in class

Planning a lesson is not the same as scripting a lesson. Lessons are not plays where students and their teacher have to remember and reproduce words in a pre-ordained sequence. Nor are they

like western classical music where all the notes have to be played exactly as they are written. A better metaphor for a lesson, perhaps, would be jazz, where from an original chord sequence the players improvise their own melodies, inventing their own twists and turns so that they arrive at their own destinations by their own routes. What we take into the lesson, in other words, is a proposal for action, rather than a lesson blueprint to be followed slavishly. And once we put our proposal for action *into action*, all sorts of things might happen, quite a few of which we might not have anticipated. Classrooms are dynamic environments and, as we said on page 364, a lesson is an interactive event in which people react with each other and with the language.

Although, especially for teachers in training, it is a good idea to try to follow the plan that we have made, nevertheless in normal teaching there are a number of reasons why we may need to modify our proposal for action once a lesson is taking place:

- **Magic moments:** some of the most affecting moments in language lessons happen when a conversation develops unexpectedly or when a topic produces a level of interest in our students which we had not predicted. This is the moment when students suddenly really want to talk about the topic, or when one of them says something that, even if it falls outside the plan, is so extraordinary, challenging or amusing, that everyone, including ourselves, wants to discuss it or follow it up.

When such magic moments come along, we have to make (often instant) decisions about what to do. We could, of course, carry on with our planned lesson as if the moment had never occurred. Yet that might not only waste a golden opportunity for real communication, but might also demonstrate to the students that we are not really respecting them and listening to them in the ways we suggested were so important for successful rapport (see Chapter 6C). A better course is to recognise the magic moment and see how it can be used, rather than denying it life because it does not fit into our plan.

- **Sensible diversion:** sometimes non-magical things happen which cause us to wonder what to do next. For example, students might start trying to use some new grammar or vocabulary which we had not planned to introduce. Yet this suddenly seems like an ideal moment to do some work on the language which has arisen, and so we take a diversion and teach something we had not intended to teach. This is the opportunistic teaching we discussed on page 201.
- **Unforeseen problems:** however well we plan, unforeseen problems often crop up. Some students may find an activity that we thought interesting incredibly boring; an activity may take more or less time than we anticipated. It is possible that something we thought would be fairly simple for our students turns out to be very difficult (or vice versa). We may have planned an activity based on the number of students we expected to turn up, only to find that some of them are absent. Occasionally we find that students have already come across material or topics we take into class, and our common sense tells us that it would be unwise to carry on. Sometimes the technology we had relied on fails to work properly.

In any of the above scenarios it would be almost impossible to carry on with our plan as if nothing had happened. If an activity finishes quickly, we have to find something else to fill the time. If students cannot do what we are asking of them, we will have to modify what we ask them to do. If some students (but not all) have already finished an activity, we cannot just leave those students to get bored.

It is possible to anticipate potential problems in the class (see page 373) and to plan strategies to deal with them. But however well we do this, things will still happen that surprise us.

Using a plan means having a constant dialogue between what we intended to do and what is actually happening. In other words, it is entirely right and proper to design learning outcomes which we hope our students will achieve. Indeed, many teachers will be constrained by the syllabus, exam preparation and cultural expectations (see Chapter 4B) so that the lesson outcomes will have been pre-determined. However, forcing those outcomes in the face of obvious and changing reality within the lesson itself – and continuing with a planned activity simply because it is in the plan – can be detrimental to the students' perception of us as teachers and may, if we are not careful, close off learning opportunities which our students could have benefited from. It is in the implementation and adaptation of a plan – and the interaction between the plan and ever-changing reality once a lesson has started – that the planning paradox is ultimately resolved.

B Pre-planning and planning

There is a stage that teachers go through, either consciously or subconsciously, that happens before we actually make a plan of what is going to happen in our lesson. This pre-planning stage is where we gather ideas and material and possible starting-off points. For some teachers, engaged in corridor planning, for example, this may be as far as planning goes, and jungle path teachers (see page 365) often have little more than a vague idea of how to start a lesson. For teachers who are going to produce a more formal plan, however, the pre-planning stage is the start of the whole process.

Ideas for pre-planning can come from a wide variety of sources. We could have come across a good activity that we would like to use (perhaps in a book or at a teachers' seminar). Perhaps we have seen something on the Internet or on the television which we think might be fun for a lesson. We might have made an informal decision to teach a particular item of language, or just have a vague idea about working on a unit of our coursebook.

Our pre-planning ideas are usually based on our knowledge of who we are teaching (unless we are thinking of the first few lessons with a new class). We have their personalities as individuals (and as a group) in our minds. We are conscious of their level and what we think they might be capable of. We have studied the syllabus we are following and what the students are expected to have achieved by the end of the course.

For Tessa Woodward, this pre-planning stage (considering the students and coming up with ideas from a variety of different sources) is planning itself. When she talks about planning she does 'NOT mean the writing of pages of notes with headings such as "Aims" and "Anticipated Problems" to be given in to an observer before they watch you teach' (Woodward 2001: 1). But for those teachers who are undergoing a formal observation, generalised pre-planning, with or without jotted notes, is not enough. They need to be able to show evidence of following pre-plans through into clear thinking about exactly what they intend their students to do. In the rest of this section, therefore, we will show how pre-planning ideas (based on our perception of student needs) lead on to a plan, and how this can then be translated into a formal planning document.

B1 Student needs

Lesson plans are based both on our own ideas about what will be appropriate and on what the syllabus we are working towards expects us to do. In both cases, decisions are based not only on the syllabus designer's (or lesson planner's) understanding of how language items interlock

and on the kind of topics and tasks which can follow each other in effective sequences, but also on perceptions of the needs and wants of the students.

In Chapter 7, B1 we saw how teaching in a one-to-one situation has the advantage that teachers can design a programme of study based entirely on one student's needs, learning styles and learning preferences. We can do this by asking the student what he or she wants or expects from the lessons and modifying what we had intended to teach accordingly. It is more difficult to ascertain what all the different individuals in a class – or indeed a whole student population – want. However, large organisations have tried to do this, sometimes with notable success as with the 'can do' statements from the Council of Europe (see page 96).

There are all sorts of ways of conducting a *needs analysis* about what students want and need (these two may not, of course, be the same thing). We can talk to them about it, though this will not necessarily tell us anything more than the opinions of the more confident members of the class. We can give students lists of possible activities or topics and get them to rate them in order of preference. They can then compare their different lists and come to a consensus view of what the class as a whole wants and needs. We can ask students to write to us and tell us what they need, or give them a series of statements about the course for them to modify (either individually or in groups). We can administer questionnaires before, during and after the course. Alun Davies, for example, gives his questionnaires in the middle of course programmes. Students are asked to evaluate the course itself, the materials and learning activities because, he claims, 'it is impossible to overestimate the value of what learners can teach us about themselves via class-specific questionnaire surveys' (Davies 2006: 10). He does this both for *summative* assessment (that is to find out how well things have gone) and also for *formative* evaluation (that is for reasons of future course planning and professional teacher development). Other teachers have students write journals (see Chapter 23, B3) in part as a way of keeping in touch with how they feel about their lessons and modifying the programme as a result (see 'Reacting to what happens' on page 375).

Whatever means we choose to find out what our students need and want, the important thing is that our planning decisions (and the decisions of a syllabus designer) should be informed by an understanding of what is in our students' best interests.

B2 Making the plan

We will now consider a formal plan from its pre-planning phase through to the end of its formal realisation.

In the pre-planning phase we have considered a number of different parameters. In the first place, we are familiar with the syllabus and, based on its requirements, we have a number of activities and topics floating around in our heads. For example, we think it's about time we did a fluency activity with this group of students. But we quite like the idea of giving the students some reading to do, too, because that is something they have had little practice of recently. Sometime around now we should have a look at the structure *should have done*, which is in the syllabus. It would be nice to continue with the theme of transport that we have been following in the last few lessons, but we need to find something a bit different if our students aren't to get bored.

Of course, none of these thoughts occurs in a vacuum. There are things we have learnt about our students and the timetable, too. For example, we know that our class is at the intermediate level and how many people it has in it and how old they are. We know, perhaps,

that they are quite prepared to have a go – that they are quite creative – but that they sometimes need waking up at the beginning of a lesson. Of course, we also know what equipment we can count on (a whiteboard or an OHP or data projector, for example, and audio equipment).

When we start to make a plan, we may want to go further than finding a door in and a door out (see page 365). We may try to aim for a ‘sense of ending’, to borrow the literary critic Frank Kermode’s phrase, so that, once we know the end of the story (the lesson), we can give shape to the lesson as a whole. Some teachers find it useful to come up with metaphors for class sequences – a symphony, a play, a story, a TV programme, for example – to help them achieve this lesson shape. This may be extremely helpful, but what really matters, in the end, is what syllabus we are following and how we are going to realise this in terms of the activities we are going to take into class and how one activity leads into – or progresses from – another. We will discuss both of these issues in turn.

- Syllabus type:** over the years materials designers have come up with a variety of different syllabus types. Many courses, for example, have been based around *grammatical* syllabuses (that is a list of items, such as present continuous, countable and uncountable nouns, comparative adjectives, etc.), but others have grouped their teaching items in sequences of topics (e.g. the weather, sport, the music scene, etc.). *Functional* syllabuses have listed functions, such as apologising, inviting, etc., and *situational* syllabuses have been based around situations, such as *at the bank, at the travel agent, at the supermarket*, etc. There has been talk, too, of *lexical* syllabuses (see Chapter 4, A7) and syllabuses based on lists of *tasks* (see Chapter 4, A6). There are advantages and disadvantages to any of these choices. A grammatical syllabus, for example, restricts the kind of tasks and situations which students can work with. A functional syllabus has some problems working out a grammar sequence when there are so many different ways of performing the same function (see page 27). It is difficult to sequence language if we base our syllabus on situations, and we have discussed some of the difficulties associated with task-based learning in Chapter 4, A6. What most designers and coursebook writers try to provide, therefore, is a kind of multi-syllabus syllabus, in other words, an interlocking set of parameters for any particular level or point of study which includes not only the categories discussed above, but also issues of skills and pronunciation, for example. Syllabus designers thus juggle issues of grammar, lexis, functions, topics and tasks when putting together a teaching sequence, as the coursebook example in Figure 1 makes clear. However, in reality, grammar is still often seen as the essential syllabus frame around which the other syllabuses are erected.

CONTENTS						
Module	Language focus	Themes	Skills	Grammar	Functions	Tasks
Module 1	1 Asking and answering questions Pronunciation: Auxiliary verbs	Everyday activities People around you Wordplay: how (and how not) to get	Reading and speaking: How we really spend our time	Task: Find things in common Preparation: listening Task: speaking Follow up: writing	Writing: I want to do that	Module 1 tip: Using English in class Preparation: reading Task: writing
	2 Present simple and continuous					
Module 2	1 Past simple and continuous Pronunciation: Past simple and verbals	Remembering and forgetting	Listening and speaking: First meetings. A childhood memory Song: Remember the Days of the old Schoolday Reading: For maps to improve your memory	Task: Test your memory Preparation: reading Task: speaking	Module 2 tip: Writing in class Preparation: listening Task: writing	Module 2 tip: Using the past Preparation: reading Task: writing
	2 used to					

FIGURE 1: Part of the contents page from *New Cutting Edge* by S Cunningham and P Moor (Pearson Education Ltd)

- **Lesson stages:** the issue of how one activity leads into another is a matter of how different parts or stages of a lesson hang together. Students need to know, during a lesson, when one stage has finished and another is about to begin. This involves drawing their attention to what is going to happen next, or making it clear that something has finished by making summarising comments. Many teachers write the different stages of the lesson on the board at the beginning of each class so that students will know where they are in the lesson sequence at any given moment.

When planning lessons, we need to think carefully, therefore, about what stages a lesson will go through and how we will get from one stage to another.

In our example – and based on our pre-planning thoughts, the syllabus we are working to, and the stages we want our students to experience – we have decided to get students to read a text about a space station (see *Light in space*, Example 4 on page 215) and use it to get students to predict before they read. We like the idea of getting students to come up with their own endings for the story. And then we think that we can organise an oral fluency activity around this topic, too. Maybe they could take part in a role-play about being in a space-station crew. There will also be a chance for language study of a current syllabus grammar point arising out of the text. These are our basic lesson blocks. Now we have to decide on the shape of the lesson – the progression from one activity to another. A possible sequence is shown in Figure 2.

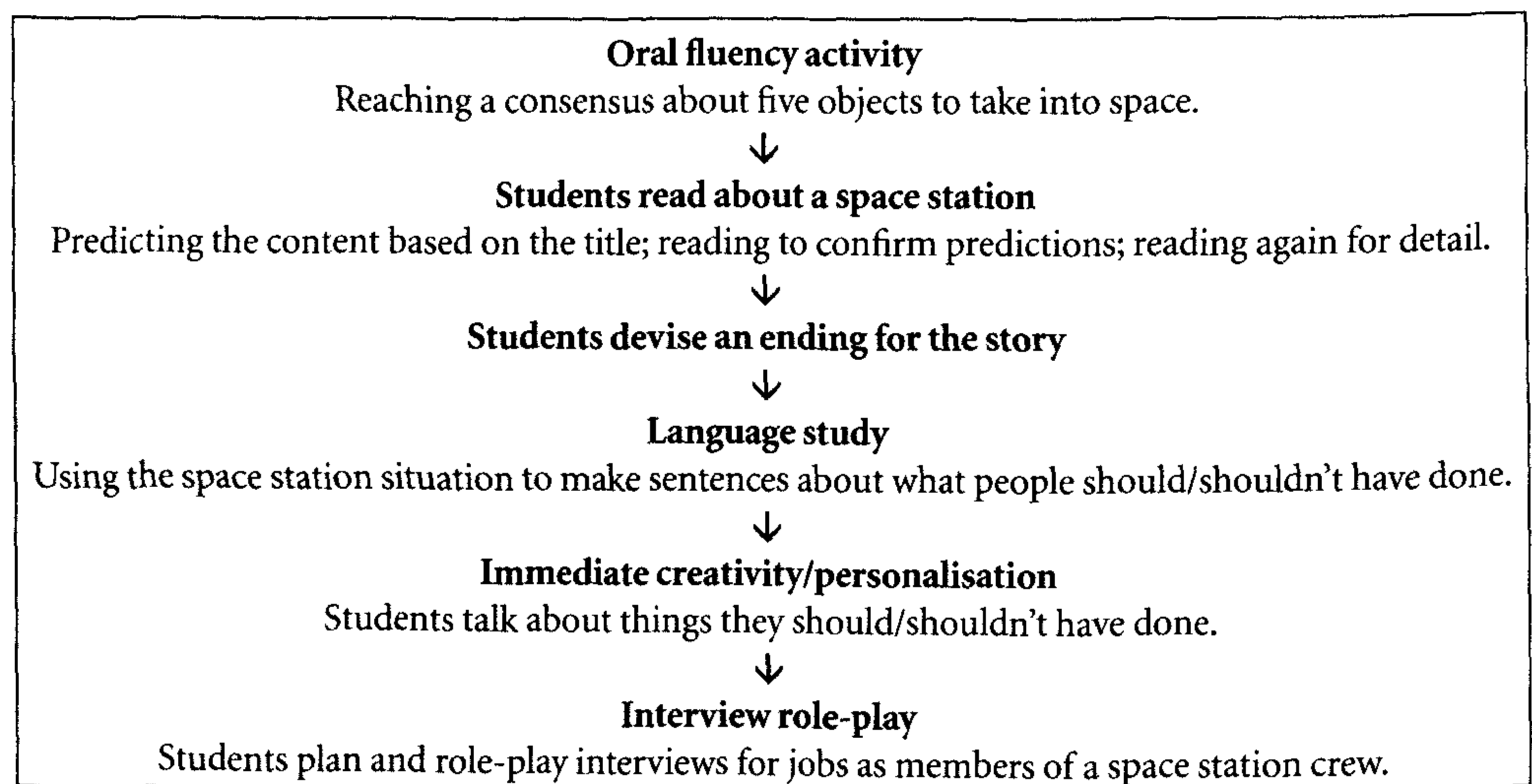


FIGURE 2: A lesson sequence

We have other ideas floating around our heads, too, and we make a note of these in case we can use them later, or instead of some element of the plan which may not be appropriate once the lesson is underway, e.g.

- Interview Cathy years later to find out what happened to her.
- Students write a 'newsflash' programme based on what happened.
- A short extract from a video on future space exploration.
- Students discuss the three things they would miss most if they were on a space station.



Making the plan formal: background elements

Because there are different examination schemes for teachers – and because different institutions and trainers have different preferences – it is impossible to say exactly what a formal plan should look like, or what information should be given, though as shall see in B4 below, there is always a requirement for teachers to detail the procedure they intend to follow. However, certain elements are almost always present, and it is to these which we now turn.

- **Aims:** perhaps the most important element of any plan is the part where we say what our aims are. These are the outcomes which all our teaching will try to achieve – the destinations on our map.

The best classroom aims are specific and directed towards an outcome which can be measured. If we say *My aim is that my students should/can ... by the end of the class*, we will be able to tell, after the lesson, whether that aim has been met or not. Aims should reflect what we hope the students will be able to do, not what we are going to do. An aim such as *to teach the present perfect* is not really an aim at all, except for the teacher. Many trainers used the acronym *SMART* to describe lesson aims, which should be *specific, measurable* (we can say if they have been achieved – see ‘Success indicators’ on page 374), *achievable, realistic* and *timed*.

A lesson will often have more than one aim. We might well say, for example, that our overall objective is to improve our students’ reading ability, but that our specific aims are to encourage them to predict content, to use guessing strategies to overcome lexical problems and to develop an imaginative response to what they encounter.

Aims can be written in plans as in the following example:

AIMS

- 1 To allow students to practise speaking spontaneously and fluently about something that may provoke the use of words and phrases they have been learning recently.
- 2 To give students practice in reading both for gist and for detail.
- 3 To enable students to talk about what people have ‘done wrong’ in the past, using the *should (not) have + done* construction.
- 4 To have students think of the interview genre and list the kinds of questions which are asked in such a situation.

- **Class profile:** a class description tells us who the students are, and what can be expected of them. It can give information about how the group and how the individuals in it behave, as in the following example for an adult class:

CLASS DESCRIPTION

The students in this upper intermediate class are between the ages of 18 and 31. There are five women and eight men. There are two PAs/secretaries, one housewife, five university students (three of these are postgraduates), two businessmen, a musician, a scientist and a waiter.

Because the class starts at 7.45 in the evening, students are often quite tired after a long day at work (or at their studies). They can switch off quite easily, especially if they are involved in a long and not especially interesting piece of reading, for example. However, if they get involved, they can be noisy and enthusiastic. Sometimes this enthusiasm gets a little out of control and they start using their first language a lot.
etc.

We may, in this part of the plan (or in a separate document), want to detail more information about individual students, e.g. *Hiromi has a sound knowledge of English and is very confident in her reading and writing abilities. However, she tends to be rather too quiet in groupwork since she is not especially comfortable with 'putting herself forward'. This tends to get in the way of the development of her oral fluency.* Such detailed description will be especially appropriate with smaller groups, but becomes increasingly difficult to do accurately with larger classes. However, a record of knowledge of individual students, gained through such means as observation, homework and test scores is invaluable if we are to meet individual needs.

- **Assumptions:** some trainers and training exams like teachers to list the assumptions on which the lesson will be based. This means saying what we assume the students know and can do. For our 'space' lesson plan, based round the *Light in space* text, we might say that we assume that students, having previously worked with the third conditional (*would have done*), will have little trouble with the grammar of *should have done*. We assume that they will be able to think of things they want to take into space with them, particularly since in a previous lesson they talked about packing to go away. Moreover, based on a previous unit on interviews, we assume that they will be able to come up with appropriate interview questions.
- **Personal aims:** some trainers and teaching schemes ask teachers to list their personal aims for the lesson as a way of provoking some kind of development and reflection (see Chapter 24A and B). Personal aims are those where we seek to try something out that we have never done before, or decide to try to do better at something which has eluded us before. Thus a personal aim might be *In this lesson I am going to try to give clearer instructions, especially when I get students to read the text.* Perhaps the teacher has chosen this aim because she has been criticised about her instruction-giving in the past, or perhaps she has focused in on this as part of her own reflection or action research (see Chapter 24B). Perhaps the teacher might write *In this lesson I am going to try to introduce the grammar using a pre-prepared PowerPoint presentation* because she has never used PowerPoint before and wants to see if she feels comfortable with it.
- **Skill and language focus:** Sometimes we say what language and skills the students are going to be focusing on in the aims that we detail (e.g. *The students will be able to say what they have just been doing using the present perfect continuous tense*). Sometimes, however, we

may want to list the structures, functions, vocabulary or pronunciation items separately so that an observer can instantly and clearly see what the students are going to study. This is often required by trainers in order to provoke trainees into thinking about the implications of the chosen language or skills.

- **Timetable fit:** We need to say where the lesson fits in a sequence of classes – what happens before and after it. An observer needs to see that the teacher has thought about the role of this lesson within a longer programme (see Section C below).

In the following example, we include information not only about topic fit, but also about the language syllabus which this lesson slots into.

TIMETABLE FIT
 The lesson takes place from 7.45 to 9 pm on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. In the past three lessons, the students have been discussing the issues of journeys and travelling – how people adapt to different travelling environments. They have listened to an interview with someone who lives in a bus and travels around the country looking for places to park it. They have been looking at vocabulary and expressions related to travelling. They have re-visited a number of past tenses, including hypothetical past (third) conditionals (*If he hadn't lost his job he wouldn't have sold his house*).
 Next week the class will start working on a 'crime and punishment' unit which includes a courtroom role-play, work on crime-related lexis and passive constructions.

We will also include information about how the class have been feeling and what kind of activities they have been involved in (e.g. controlled or communicative, pairwork or groupwork). All these factors should influence our planning choices for this lesson.

- **Potential learner problems and possible solutions:** a good plan tries to predict potential pitfalls and suggest ways of dealing with them. It also includes alternative activities in case we find it necessary to divert from the lesson sequence we had hoped to follow (see A2 above).

When listing anticipated problems, it is a good idea to think ahead to possible solutions we might adopt to resolve them, as in the following example:

Anticipated problems	Possible solutions
Students may not be able to think of items to take to a space station with them for Activity 1.	I will keep my eyes open and go to prompt any individuals who look 'vacant' or puzzled with questions about what music, books, pictures, etc. they might want to take.
Students may have trouble contracting 'should not have' in Activity 4.	I will do some isolation and distortion work until they can say /ʃʊdntəv/.

Where we need to modify our lesson dramatically, we may choose to abandon what we are doing and use different activities altogether. If our lesson proceeds faster than we had anticipated, we may need additional material anyway. It is, therefore, sensible, especially in formal planning, to list additional possibilities, as in the following example:

ADDITIONAL POSSIBILITIES

- Extra speaking: If some groups finish first, they can quickly discuss what three things from home they would most miss if they were on a space station.
- News broadcast: Students could write an earth 'newsflash' giving news of what happened at the space station, starting *We interrupt this programme to bring you news of ...*
- Video clip: If there's time, I can show the class an extract from the 'Future of Space Exploration' programme.
- Interview plus: Interview Cathy years later to find out what happened to her.

- **Success indicators:** some centres ask their trainees to list how they will know whether or not their students have been successful. A success indicator might be that students can confidently produce unprompted sentences about what people should have done, or perhaps can give fluent and convincing answers in an interview role-play situation.

The point of including success indicators in our plan background is that then both teacher and observer can easily evaluate if the lesson aims have been achieved.

B4 Making the plan formal: describing procedure and materials

The main body of a formal plan lists the activities and procedures in that lesson, together with the times we expect each of them to take. We will include the aids we are going to use and show the different interactions which will take place in the class.

Teachers detail classroom interactions (e.g. who will be working and interacting with whom) in different ways. Some planners just say *groupwork*, or *teacher working with the whole class*. However we can use 'symbol' shorthand as an efficient way of giving this information, e.g. *T = teacher; S = an individual student, T→C = the teacher working with the whole class; S,S,S = students working on their own; S←→S = students working in pairs; SS←→SS = pairs of students in discussion with other pairs; GG = students working in groups*, and so on.

The following example shows how the procedure of the first activity in our plan (the oral fluency activity) can be described:

	Activity/Aids	Interaction	Procedure	Time
1	Group decision-making	a T→C	T tells SS to list five things they would take into space with them (apart from essentials).	1"
	Pen and paper	b S,S,S	SS make their lists individually.	2"
		c S←→S	In pairs, SS have to negotiate their items to come up with a shared list of only five items to take to a space station.	3"
		d SS←→SS (GG)	Pairs join with other pairs. The new groups have to negotiate their items to come up with a shared list of only five items to take to a space station.	4"
		e T←→GG	T encourages the groups to compare their lists.	3"

on a larger scale, when we plan a scheme of work for a sequence of lessons. We will have to re-visit our original series of plans continually in order to update and amend them, depending upon what has happened in previous classes. Instead of a one-off proposal for action (an individual lesson plan), we now have an over-arching map, which we may have to re-draw, sometimes quite substantially, when we find out what the country we are visiting (the lessons) is really like. We will often modify what we do based on student reactions to what has been taking place (see A2 above).

- **Short- and long-term goals:** however motivated a student may be at the beginning of a course, the level of that motivation may fall dramatically if the student is not engaged or if they cannot see where they are going – or cannot sense when they have got there.

In order for students to stay motivated, they need goals and the potential for success in achieving them. While a satisfactory long-term goal may be ‘to master the English language’, it can seem only a dim and distant possibility at various stages of the learning cycle. In such circumstances (and if we are to prioritise success in the way that we suggested on page 157), students need short-term goals, too, such as the completion of some piece of work (or some part of the programme), and rewards, such as success on small staged lesson tests, or taking part in activities designed to recycle knowledge and demonstrate acquisition.

When we plan a sequence of lessons, therefore, we need to build in goals for both students and ourselves to aim at, whether they are end-of-week tests or major revision lessons. That way we can hope to give our students a staged progression of successfully met challenges.

- **Thematic content:** one way to approach a sequence of lessons is to focus on different thematic content in each individual lesson (much as a topic syllabus – see page 369 – is organised). This will certainly provide variety, but it may not give our sequence of lessons much cohesion or coherence. It might be better, instead, for themes to carry over for more than one lesson, or at least to reappear, so that students perceive some overt topic strands as the course progresses. With such thematic threads, we and our students can refer backwards and forwards, both in terms of language – especially the vocabulary that certain topics generate – and also in terms of the topics we ask them to invest time in considering. As an example, at the upper intermediate level, we might deal with the topic of photography over a two-week period. However, if we keep on dealing with the same aspect of the topic, our students are likely to become very tired of it. And so, instead, we think of different angles. They can look at a photograph which made (or recorded) history and read about or discuss its implications. As a speaking activity, we can get them to judge a photographic competition, too. Later in the sequence of lessons, they can hear people talking about snapshots they have taken, and bring in or describe their own. They can study vocabulary for cameras and photography and role-play dialogues in which they ask people to take photographs for them. They can listen to an interview with a professional photographer about what his or her job entails, and perhaps they can read about other uses of cameras, such as speed cameras, space or scientific photography.
- **Language planning:** when we plan language input over a sequence of lessons, we want to propose a sensible progression of syllabus elements such as grammar, lexis and functions. We also want to build in sufficient opportunities for recycling or remembering language,

and for using language in productive skill work. If we are following a coursebook closely, many of these decisions may already have been taken, but even in such circumstances we need to keep a constant eye on how things are going, and, with the knowledge of 'before and after', modify the programme we are working from when necessary.

Language does not exist in a vacuum, however. Our decisions about how to weave grammar and vocabulary through the lesson sequence will be heavily influenced by the need for a balance of activities.

- **Activity balance:** the balance of activities over a sequence of lessons is one of the features which will determine the overall level of student involvement in the course. If we get it right, it will also provide the widest range of experience to meet the different learning styles of the students in the class (see Chapter 5B).

Over a period of weeks or months, we would expect students to have received a varied diet of activities; they should not have to role-play every day, nor would we expect every lesson to be devoted exclusively to language study with drilling and repetition. While some of the oral activities they are involved in can be discussions, others, by contrast, might involve them in making presentations. Sometimes we will encourage students to work in pairs or groups for consensus-reaching activities, but at other times, we will work with the whole class for lecture-type teaching or divide them into two teams for a game.

- **Skills:** the balance of skills depends to a large extent on the kind of course we are teaching. Some students may be studying principally to improve their speaking and listening. Others may need to concentrate on reading and writing. But many general English courses are designed to involve students in all four skills.

Different skills need to be threaded through a sequence of lessons so that writing, for example, does not get forgotten, and reading does not predominate. We need to have special tasks devoted exclusively to speaking before, then, integrating that speaking task into other skill-area activities.

Although we don't want to inflict anarchy on our classes, we do want to make sure that with skills, as with other areas, such as activities, etc., we are not too predictable. If every Friday is the reading class, every Monday is the presentation class and every Wednesday is where we do speaking and writing, there is a danger that students might become bored.

C1 Projects and threads

Some lesson sequences may, of course, be devoted to longer project work of the kind we discussed in Chapter 16. In such a case, we will try to ensure that a good balance of skills, language, activities and thematic strands is achieved throughout the time in which the students are working on the project. A good project of this kind will involve students in reading, discussion, writing (with language input) and, possibly, oral presentation.

However, where students are not involved in a long-term project, we can still build threads and strands into a sequence. These are the varied connections of themes, language, activities and skills which weave through the sequence like pieces of different coloured thread. They should have sufficient variety built into them so that they are not numbingly predictable, but, at the same time, students and their teachers should be able to trace the threaded elements so that some kind of a loose pattern emerges. Planning a sequence of lessons is somewhat like

creating a tapestry, in other words, but a tapestry full of light, variety and colour rather than some of the darker heavier works which can be found in old houses and museums.

Figure 3 shows an example of five lessons planned around three different threads (vocabulary, tenses and reading), but we could, of course, add other threads, such as activity threads, theme threads and skill threads.

LESSON NOTES					
Threads	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Animals vocabulary thread (10 mins each time)	Parts of cat's body	Review + cat verbs	Review + cat metaphors	Review and start fish vocab	Review and start fish verbs
Tenses thread (30 mins each time)	Regular past simple first person	Review + all persons	Review + negatives	Review + some irregulars	Review and start 'Did you ...?' questions
Reading thread (20 mins each time)	Introduction of graded reader	First two pages + comp. questions	Review and Chap. 1	Study of past forms in Chap. 1	Oral summary of Chap. 1 + vocab in notebook

FIGURE 3: Lesson threads from Woodward (2001: 195)

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Lesson shapes and metaphors**

S Thornbury (1999b) quotes Frank Kermode's 'sense of ending' and both he and P Ur (1996: 213) suggest seeing lessons as, for example, a show, a menu, a story and a film.

M Cattlin (2003) calls his approach to lesson planning Reactive-Proactive. D Kent (2001) suggests a topic-driven strategy for lesson planning within a TBL framework. H A Smith (2003) shows how you can enter a planning cycle through grammatical structure, skills, functions or vocabulary.

T Woodward (2003) is a short article which says how plans can be successful.

- **Student needs**

A Walters and M L Vilches (2001) propose a needs analysis framework when implementing ELT innovations. See also A Boon (2005) and A Almagro Esteban (2005).

- **Aims and objectives**

See G Petty (2004: Chapter 27).

- **Unforeseen problems**

See R Gower *et al* (1995: 178).

22

Testing and evaluation

A Testing and assessment

Teachers and other education professionals spend a lot of time testing, evaluating and assessing students. Sometimes this is to measure the students' abilities to see if they can enter a course or institution. Sometimes it is to see how well they are getting on. Sometimes it is because the students themselves want a qualification. Sometimes this assessment is formal and public, and sometimes it is informal and takes place in day-to-day lessons.

We can make a difference between *summative* and *formative* assessment. Summative assessment, as the name suggests, is the kind of measurement that takes place to round things off or make a one-off measurement. Such tests include the end-of-year tests that students take or the big public exams which many students enter for (see the list at the end of this chapter).

Formative assessment, on the other hand, relates to the kind of feedback teachers give students as a course is progressing and which, as a result, may help them to improve their performance. This is done at a micro-level every time we indicate that something is wrong and help students to get it right (see Chapter 8), but can also take place when teachers go through the results of progress and achievement tests. The results of such formative assessment could well, in certain circumstances, suggest that the teacher change the focus of the curriculum or the emphasis he or she is giving to certain lesson elements. Formative assessment, in other words, means that teachers as well as students may have to change and develop. It is perhaps because of this that many teachers are not keen on adopting a rigorous approach to formative testing (Leung and Lewkowicz 2006: 227), quite apart from the fact that in many institutions such ongoing modification is not encouraged.

However, it is worth remembering that handing back any piece of assessed homework or progress test presents teachers and students with ideal learning opportunities – opportunities which will be wasted if the work is immediately put away, rather than being used as a vehicle for development.

A1 Different types of testing

There are four main reasons for testing, which give rise to four categories of test:

- **Placement tests:** placing new students in the right class in a school is facilitated by the use of placement tests. Usually based on syllabuses and materials the students will follow and use once their level has been decided on, these test grammar and vocabulary knowledge and assess students' productive and receptive skills.

Some schools ask students to assess themselves as part of the placement process, adding this self-analysis into the final placing decision.

- **Diagnostic tests:** while placement tests are designed to show how good a student's English is in relation to a previously agreed system of levels, diagnostic tests can be used to expose learner difficulties, gaps in their knowledge and skill deficiencies during a course. Thus, when we know what the problems are, we can do something about them.

- **Progress or achievement tests:** these tests are designed to measure learners' language and skill progress in relation to the syllabus they have been following.

Progress tests are often written by teachers and given to students every few weeks to see how well they are doing. In this way they can form part of a programme of formative assessment (see above).

Achievement tests only work if they contain item types which the students are familiar with. This does not mean that in a reading test, for example, we give them texts they have seen before, but it does mean providing them with similar texts and familiar task types. If students are faced with completely new material, the test will not measure the learning that has been taking place, even though it can still measure general language proficiency.

Achievement tests at the end of a term (like progress tests at the end of a unit, a fortnight, etc.) should reflect progress, not failure. They should reinforce the learning that has taken place, not go out of their way to expose weaknesses. They can also help us to decide on changes to future teaching programmes where students do significantly worse in (parts of) the test than we might have expected.

- **Proficiency tests:** proficiency tests give a general picture of a student's knowledge and ability (rather than measure progress). They are frequently used as stages people have to reach if they want to be admitted to a foreign university, get a job or obtain some kind of certificate. Most public examinations are proficiency tests of this type.

Proficiency tests have a profound backwash effect (see Section D below) since, where they are external exams, students obviously want to pass them, and teachers' reputations sometimes depend (probably unfairly) upon how many of them succeed.

- **Portfolio assessment:** achievement tests and proficiency tests are both concerned with measuring a student's ability at a certain time. Students only get 'one shot' at showing how much they know. For some people, who say they are 'not good at exams', this seems like an unfair situation, and many educators claim that 'sudden death' testing like this does not give a true picture of how well some students could do in certain situations. As a result, many educational institutions allow students to assemble a portfolio of their work over a period of time (a term or semester), and the student can then be assessed by looking at three or four of the best pieces of work over this period.

Portfolio assessment of this kind has clear benefits. It provides evidence of student effort. It helps students become more autonomous, and it can 'foster student reflection (and) help them to self monitor their own learning' (Nunes 2004: 334). It has clear validity since, especially with written work, students will have had a chance to edit before submitting their work, and this approach to assessment has an extremely positive washback effect.

However, portfolio assessment is not without its pitfalls. In the first place, it is time-consuming, and in the second place, teachers will need clear training in how to select items from the portfolio and how to give them grades. Some students may be tempted to leave their portfolios until the end of the course when, they expect, their work will be at its best (though

there are ways to counter this tendency). But above all, when students work on their own away from the classroom, it is not always clear that the work reflects their own efforts or whether, in fact, they have been helped by others. It is largely for this reason that the British Qualifications and Curriculum Agency, for example, has recommended phasing out coursework in many disciplines in secondary education in Britain and replacing it with external exams, the equivalent of proficiency tests (Qualifications and Curriculum Agency 2006). However, this view is not shared by all; the argument about whether continuous assessment (represented by portfolio assessment) or 'sudden death' (represented by external proficiency tests) is the most appropriate method of assessment is set to continue for some time to come.

A2 Characteristics of a good test

In order to judge the effectiveness of any test, it is sensible to lay down criteria against which the test can be measured, as follows:

- **Validity:** a test is valid if it tests what it is supposed to test. Thus it is not valid, for example, to test writing ability with an essay question that requires specialist knowledge of history or biology – unless it is known that all students share this knowledge before they do the test.

A test is valid if it produces similar results to some other measure – that is if we can show that Test A gives us the same kind of results as Test B (or some other test).

A test is only valid if there is validity in the way it is marked; if we score short written answers to a listening test for spelling and grammar, then it is not necessarily a valid test of listening. We are scoring the wrong thing.

A particular kind of validity that concerns most test designers is face validity. This means that the test should look, on the face of it, as if it is valid. A test which consisted of only three multiple-choice items would not convince students of its face validity, however reliable or practical teachers thought it to be.

- **Reliability:** a good test should give consistent results. For example, if the same group of students took the same test twice within two days – without reflecting on the first test before they sat it again – they should get the same results on each occasion. If they took another similar test, the results should be consistent. If two groups who were demonstrably alike took the test, the marking range would be the same.

In practice, reliability is enhanced by making the test instructions absolutely clear, restricting the scope for variety in the answers and making sure that test conditions remain constant.

Reliability also depends on the people who mark the tests – the scorers. Clearly a test is unreliable if the result depends to any large extent on who is marking it. Much thought has gone into making the scoring of tests as reliable as possible (see C2 below).

B Types of test item

Whatever purpose a test or exam has, a major factor in its success or failure as a good measuring instrument will be determined by the item types that it contains.

B1 Direct and indirect test items

A test item is *direct* if it asks candidates to perform the communicative skill which is being tested. *Indirect* test items, on the other hand, try to measure a student's knowledge and ability

by getting at what lies beneath their receptive and productive skills. Whereas direct test items try to be as much like real-life language use as possible, indirect items try to find out about a student's language knowledge through more controlled items, such as multiple-choice questions or grammar transformation items. These are often quicker to design and, crucially, easier to mark, and produce greater scorer reliability.

Another distinction needs to be made between *discrete-point* testing and *integrative* testing. Whereas discrete-point testing only tests one thing at a time (such as asking students to choose the correct tense of a verb), integrative test items expect students to use a variety of language at any one given time – as they will have to do when writing a composition or doing a conversational oral test.

In many proficiency tests where students sit a number of different papers, there is a mixture of direct and indirect, discrete-point and integrative testing. Test designers find that this combination gives a good overall picture of student ability. Placement tests often use discrete-point testing to measure students against an existing language syllabus, but may then compare this with more direct and integrative tasks to get a fuller picture.

B2 Indirect test item types

Although there is a wide range of indirect test possibilities, certain types are in common use.

- **Multiple-choice questions:** a traditional vocabulary multiple-choice question (MCQ) looks like this:

The journalist was _____ by enemy fire as he tried to send a story by satellite phone.
 a wronged b wounded c injured d damaged

For many years, MCQs were considered to be ideal test instruments for measuring students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Above all, this was because they were easy to mark. Moreover, since the advent of computers, the answer sheets for these tests can be read by machines, thereby cutting out the possibility of scorer error.

However, there are a number of problems with MCQs. In the first place, they are extremely difficult to write well, especially in terms of the design of the incorrect choices. These 'distractors' may actually put ideas into students' heads that they did not have before they read them. Secondly, while it is possible to train students so that their MCQ abilities are enhanced, this may not actually improve their English. The difference between two student scores may be between the person who has been trained in the technique and a person who has not, rather than being a difference of language knowledge and ability.

MCQs are still widely used, but though they score highly in terms of practicality and scorer reliability, their validity and overall reliability are suspect.

- **Cloze procedures:** cloze procedures seem to offer us the ideal indirect but integrative testing item. They can be prepared quickly and, if the claims made for them are true, they are an extremely cost-effective way of finding out about a testee's overall knowledge.

Cloze, in its purest form, is the deletion of every *n*th word in a text (somewhere between every fifth or tenth word). Because the procedure is random, it avoids test designer failings. It produces test items like this:

They sat on a bench attached 1 _____ a picnic table. Below them they 2 _____ see the river gurgling between overgrown 3 _____. The sky was diamond blue, with 4 _____ white clouds dancing in the freshening 5 _____. They could hear the call of 6 _____ and the buzzing of countless insects. 8 _____ were completely alone. etc.

Cloze testing seems, on the face of it, like a perfect test instrument, since, because of the randomness of the deleted words, anything may be tested (e.g. grammar, collocation, fixed phrases, reading comprehension), and therefore it becomes more integrative in its reach. However, it turns out that the actual score a student gets depends on the particular words that are deleted, rather than on any general English knowledge. Some are more difficult to supply than others, and in some cases there are several possible answers. Even in the short sample text above, it is clear that while there is no doubt about items such as 1 and 8, for example, item 4 is less predictable. Different passages produce different results.

Despite such problems of reliability, cloze is too useful a technique to abandon altogether because it is clear that supplying the correct word for a blank does imply an understanding of context and a knowledge of that word and how it operates. Perhaps it would be better, therefore, to use 'rational' or 'modified' cloze procedures (Alderson 1996: 222) where the test designer can be sure that the deleted words are recoverable from the context. This means abandoning the completely random nature of traditional cloze procedure. Instead, every eighth or tenth word is deleted, but the teacher has the option to delete a word to the left or right if the context makes this more sensible.

Modified cloze is useful for placement tests since students can be given texts that they would be expected to cope with at certain levels – thus allowing us to judge their suitability for those levels. They are useful, too, as part of a test battery in either achievement or proficiency tests.

- **Transformation and paraphrase:** a common test item asks candidates to re-write sentences in a slightly different form, retaining the exact meaning of the original. For example, the following item tests the candidates' knowledge of verb and clause patterns that are triggered by the use of *I wish*.

I'm sorry that I didn't get her an anniversary present.
I wish _____

In order to complete the item successfully, the student has to understand the first sentence, and then know how to construct an equivalent which is grammatically possible. As such, they do tell us something about the candidates' knowledge of the language system.

- **Sentence re-ordering:** getting students to put words in the right order to make appropriate sentences tells us quite a lot about their underlying knowledge of syntax and lexicogrammatical elements. The following example is typical:

Put the words in order to make correct sentences.
called / I / I'm / in / sorry / wasn't / when / you

Re-ordering exercises are fairly easy to write, though it is not always possible to ensure only one correct order.

There are many other indirect techniques, too, including sentence fill-ins (*Jan _____ to the gym every Tuesday morning*), choosing the correct tense of verbs in sentences and passages (*I have arrived/arrived yesterday*), finding errors in sentences (*She noticed about his new jacket*), and choosing the correct form of a word (*He didn't enjoy being on the (lose) _____ side*). All of these offer items which are quick and efficient to score and which aim to tell us something about a student's underlying knowledge.

B3 Direct test item types

For direct test items to achieve validity and to be reliable, test designers need to do the following:

- **Create a 'level playing field':** in the case of a written test, teachers and candidates would almost certainly complain about the following essay question:

Why was the discovery of DNA so important for the science of the twentieth century?

since it unfairly favours candidates who have sound scientific knowledge and presupposes a knowledge of twentieth-century scientific history.

However, the following topic comes close to ensuring that all candidates have the same chance of success:

Present a written argument or case to an educated non-specialist audience on the following topic:
Higher mammals, especially monkeys, have rights and should not be used in laboratory experiments.

You should write at least 250 words.

You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience to support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.

General writing question from the *IELTS* exam (see notes at the end of this chapter)

Receptive skill testing also needs to avoid making excessive demands on the student's general or specialist knowledge. Receptive ability testing can also be undermined if the means of testing requires students to perform well in writing or speaking (when it is a test of reading or listening). In such a situation we can no longer be sure that it is the receptive skill we are measuring.

- **Replicate real-life interaction:** in real life when people speak or write, they generally do so with some real purpose. Yet traditional writing tests have often been based exclusively on general essay questions, and speaking tests have often included hypothetical questions about what candidates might say if they happened to be in a certain situation. More modern test writers now include tasks which attempt to replicate features of real life (Weir 1993: 167). They will often look similar to the kind of speaking activities described in Chapter 20.

Tests of reading and listening should also, as far as possible, reflect real life. This means that texts should be as realistic as possible, even where they are not authentic (see Chapter 16, B2). Although there are ways of assessing student understanding (using matching tasks or multiple-choice questions) which do not necessarily satisfy these criteria, test items should be as much like real reading and listening as possible.

The following direct test item types are a few of the many which attempt to meet the criteria we have mentioned above:

SPEAKING

- An interviewer questions a candidate about themselves.
- Information-gap activities where a candidate has to find out information either from an interlocutor or a fellow candidate. (The role-play on page 359 would not need too much modification to serve as a suitable test item.)
- Decision-making activities, such as showing paired candidates ten photos of people and asking them to put them in order of the best and worst dressed.
- Using pictures for candidates to compare and contrast, whether they can both see them or whether (as in many communication games) they have find similarities and differences without being able to look at each other's material.
- Role-play activities where candidates perform tasks such as introducing themselves or ringing a theatre to book tickets.

WRITING

- Writing compositions and stories.
- 'Transactional letters' where candidates reply to a job advertisement or write a complaint to a hotel based on information given in the exam paper.
- Information leaflets about their school or a place in their town.
- A set of instructions for some common task.
- Newspaper articles about a recent event.

READING

- Multiple-choice questions to test comprehension of a text.
- Matching written descriptions with pictures of the items or procedure they describe.
- Transferring written information to charts, graphs, maps, etc. (though special care has to be taken not to disadvantage non-mathematically-minded candidates).
- Choosing the best summary of a paragraph or a whole text.
- Matching jumbled headings with paragraphs.
- Inserting sentences provided by the examiner in the correct place in the text.

LISTENING

- Completing charts with facts and figures from the listening text.
- Identifying which of a number of objects (pictured on the test paper) is being described.
- Identifying who (out of two or three speakers) says what.
- Identifying whether speakers are enthusiastic, encouraging, in disagreement or amused.
- Following directions on a map and identifying the correct house or place.

In the interests of reliability, listening tests are most often supplied on tape or CD to ensure that all candidates have the same opportunities, irrespective of the speakers' voices, speed or expressions. Sometimes, as in the computerised TOEFL test (see the notes at the end of this chapter), candidates work with headphones from an individual computer. Where a group of students listen to the same recording, however, we need to be sure that it is clearly and easily audible.

C Writing and marking tests

At various times during our teaching careers we may have to write tests for the students we are teaching, and mark the tests they have completed for us. These may range from a lesson test at the end of the week to an achievement test at the end of a term or a year.

C1 Writing tests

Before designing a test and then giving it to a group of students, there are a number of things we need to do:

- **Assess the test situation:** before we start to write the test we need to remind ourselves of the context in which the test takes place. We have to decide how much time should be given to the test-taking, when and where it will take place, and how much time there is for marking.
- **Decide what to test:** we have to list what we want to include in our test. This means taking a conscious decision to include or exclude skills such as reading comprehension or speaking (if speaking tests are impractical). It means knowing what syllabus items can be legitimately included (in an achievement test), and what kinds of topics and situations are appropriate for our students.

Just because we have a list of all the vocabulary items or grammar points the students have studied over the term, this does not mean we have to test every single item. If we include a representative sample from across the whole list, the students' success or failure with those items will be a good indicator of how well they have learnt all of the language they have studied.

- **Balance the elements:** if we are to include direct and indirect test items, we have to make a decision about how many of each we should put in our test. A 200-item multiple-choice test with a short real-life writing task tacked onto the end suggests that we think that MCQs are a better way of finding out about students than more integrative writing tasks would be.

Balancing elements involves estimating how long we want each section of the test to take and then writing test items within those time constraints. The amount of space and time we give to the various elements should also reflect their importance in our teaching.

- **Weight the scores:** however well we have balanced the elements in our test, our perception of our students' success or failure will depend upon how many marks are given to each section of the test. If we give two marks for each of our ten MCQs but only one mark for each of our ten transformation items, it means that it is more important for students to do well in the former than in the latter.
- **Make the test work:** it is absolutely vital that we try out individual items and/or whole tests on colleagues and other students before administering them to real candidates.

When we write test items, the first thing to do is to get fellow teachers to try them out. Frequently they spot problems which we are not aware of and/or come up with possible answers and alternatives that we had not anticipated.

Later, having made changes based on our colleagues' reactions, we will want to try out the test on students. We will not do this with the students who are going to take the test, of course, but if we can find a class that is roughly similar – or a class one level above the

proposed test – then we will soon find out what items cause unnecessary problems. We can also discover how long the test takes.

Such trialling is designed to avoid disaster and to yield a whole range of possible answers/responses to the various test items. This means that when other people finally mark the test, we can give them a list of possible alternatives and thus ensure reliable scoring.

C2 Marking tests

When Cyril Weir gave copies of the same eight exam scripts to his postgraduate students (who were doing an MA in TESOL) some years ago, they marked them first on the basis of ‘impressionistic’ marking out of a possible total of 20 marks. The results were alarming. Some scorers gave higher marks overall than others. But for some of the scripts, the range of marks was excessive. For one, the lowest mark awarded was 5, whereas another scorer gave it 20. For another, the range was between 1 and 15. As Cyril Weir writes, ‘the worst scripts ... if they had been marked by certain markers, might have been given higher marks than the best scripts’ (1993: 157)!

There are a number of solutions to this kind of scorer subjectivity.

- **Training:** if scorers have seen examples of scripts at various different levels and discussed what marks they should be given, then their marking is likely to be less erratic than if they come to the task fresh. If scorers are allowed to watch and discuss videoed oral tests, they can be trained to ‘rate the samples of spoken English accurately and consistently in terms of the pre-defined descriptions of performance’ (Saville and Hargreaves 1999).
- **More than one scorer:** reliability can be greatly enhanced by having more than one scorer. The more people who look at a script, the greater the chance that its true worth will be located somewhere between the various scores it is given. Two examiners watching an oral test are likely to agree on a more reliable score than one.

Many public examination boards use *moderators* whose job it is to check samples of individual scorer’s work to see that it conforms with the general standards laid down for the exam.

- **Global assessment scales:** a way of specifying scores that can be given to productive skill work is to create ‘pre-defined descriptions of performance’. Such descriptions say what students need to be capable of in order to gain the required marks, as in the following assessment (or rating) scale for oral ability:

Score	Description
0	The candidate is almost unintelligible, uses words wrongly and shows no sign of any grammatical understanding.
1	The candidate is able to transmit only very basic ideas, using individual words rather than phrases or fuller patterns of discourse. Speech is very hesitant and the pronunciation makes intelligibility difficult.
2	The candidate transmits basic ideas in a fairly stilted way. Pronunciation is sometimes problematic and there are examples of grammatical and lexical misuse and gaps which impede communication on occasions.

Score	Description
3	The candidate transmits ideas <i>moderately</i> clearly. Speech is somewhat hesitant and there are frequent lapses in grammar and vocabulary use. Nevertheless, the candidate makes him/herself understood.
4	The candidate speaks fairly fluently, showing an ability to communicate ideas with not too much trouble. There are some problems of grammatical accuracy and some words are inappropriately used.
5	The candidate speaks fluently with few obvious mistakes and a wide variety of lexis and expression. Pronunciation is almost always intelligible, and there is little difficulty in communicating ideas.

Global assessment scales are not without problems, however: perhaps the description does not exactly match the student who is speaking, as would be the case (for the scale above) where he or she had very poor pronunciation but was nevertheless grammatically accurate. There is also the danger that different teachers 'will not agree on the meaning of scale descriptors' (Upshur and Turner 1995: 5). Global assessment, on its own, still falls short of the kind of reliability we wish to achieve.

- **Analytic profiles:** marking gets more reliable when a student's performance is analysed in much greater detail. Instead of just a general assessment, marks are awarded for different elements.

For oral assessment we can judge a student's speaking in a number of different ways, such as pronunciation, fluency, use of lexis and grammar and intelligibility. We may want to rate their ability to get themselves out of trouble (repair skills) and how successfully they completed the task which we set them.

The resulting analytic profile might end up looking like this:

Criteria	Score (see analytic scales)
Pronunciation	
Fluency	
Use of vocabulary	
Use of grammar	
Intelligibility	
Repair skills	
Task completion	

For each separate criterion, we can now provide a separate 'analytic scale', as in the following example for fluency:

Score	Description
0	The candidate cannot get words or phrases out at all.
1	The candidate speaks hesitatingly in short, interrupted bursts.
2	The candidate speaks slowly with frequent pauses.
3	The candidate speaks at a comfortable speed with quite a lot of pauses and hesitations.
4	The candidate speaks at a comfortable speed with only an occasional pause or upset.
5	The candidate speaks quickly with few hesitations.

A combination of global and analytic scoring gives us the best chance of reliable marking. However, a profusion of criteria may make the marking of a test extremely lengthy and cumbersome; test designers and administrators will have to decide how to accommodate the competing claims of reliability and practicality.

- **Scoring and interacting during oral tests:** scorer reliability in oral tests is helped not only by global assessment scores and analytic profiles but also by separating the role of scorer (or examiner) from the role of *interlocutor* (the examiner who guides and provokes conversation). This may cause practical problems, but it will allow the scorer to observe and assess, free from the responsibility of keeping the interaction with the candidate or candidates going.

In many tests of speaking, students are now put in pairs or groups for certain tasks since it is felt that this will ensure genuine interaction and will help to relax students in a way that interlocutor–candidate interaction might not. However, at least one commentator worries that pairing students in this way leads candidates to perform below their level of proficiency, and that when students with the same mother tongue are paired together, their intelligibility to the examiner may suffer (Foot 1999: 52).

D Teaching for tests

One of the things that preoccupies test designers and teachers alike is what has been called the *washback* or *backwash* effect. This refers to the fact that since teachers quite reasonably want their students to pass the tests and exams they are going to take, their teaching becomes dominated by the test and, especially, by the items that are in it. Where non-exam teachers might use a range of different activities, exam teachers suffering from the washback effect might stick rigidly to exam-format activities. In such a situation, the format of the exam is determining the format of the lessons.

Two points need to be taken into account when discussing the washback effect, however. In the first place, modern tests – especially the direct items included in them – are grounded far more in mainstream classroom activities and methodologies than some earlier examples of the genre. In other words, there are many direct test questions which would not look out of place in a modern lesson anyway. But secondly, even if preparing students for a particular test format is a necessity, ‘it is as important to build variety and fun into an exam course as it is to drive students towards the goal of passing their exam’ (Burgess and Head 2005: 1).

And we can go further: many teachers find teaching exam classes to be extremely satisfying in that where students perceive a clear sense of purpose – and are highly motivated to do as well as possible – they are in some senses ‘easier’ to teach than students whose focus is less clear. When a whole class has something to aim at, they may work with greater diligence than when they do not. Furthermore, in training students to develop good exam skills (including working on their own, reviewing what they have done, learning to use reference tools – e.g. dictionaries, grammar books, the Internet – keeping an independent learning record or diary, etc.), we are encouraging exactly those attributes that contribute towards autonomous learning (see Chapter 23, A and B).

Good exam-preparation teachers need to familiarise themselves with the tests their students are taking, and they need to be able to answer their students’ concerns and worries. Above all, they need to be able to walk a fine line between good exam preparation on the one hand,

and not being swept away by the washback effect on the other. Within this context there are a number of things we can do in an exam class:

- **Train for test types:** we can show the various test types and ask the students what each item is testing so that they are clear about what is required. We can help them to understand what the test or exam designer is aiming for. By showing them the kind of marking scales that are used, we can make them aware of what constitutes success. Getting 'inside the heads' of the test designers will help students to focus on what they are being asked to do and why. After students have completed a test item type, we can tell them what score an examiner might give and why.

We can then give students training to help them approach test items more effectively. As an example, for speaking tasks, we will equip students with appropriate negotiating language to help them get over awkward moments in such tasks. When training students to handle reading test items, we will discuss with them the best way to approach a first reading of the text, and how that can be modified on second reading to allow them to answer the questions asked.

If the test or exam is likely to contain multiple-choice questions, we can help students to appreciate the advantages of finding the obvious distractor(s) first. They can then work out what similarities and differences the other distractors have so that they can identify the area of meaning or grammar that is being targeted.

In all this work our task is to make students thoroughly familiar with the test items they will have to face so that they give of their best, and so that, in the end, the test discovers their level of English, rather than having it obscured by their unfamiliarity with the test items.

- **Discuss general exam skills:** most students benefit from being reminded about general test and exam skills, without which much of the work they do will be wasted. For example, they need to read through questions carefully so that they know exactly what is expected. They need to pace themselves so that they do not spend a disproportionate amount of time on only part of an exam. In writing, for example, they need to be able to apply process skills (see Chapter 19, B1) to the task. As they build up to an exam, they need to be able to organise their work so that they can revise effectively.
- **Do practice tests:** students need a chance to practise taking the test or exam so that they get a feel for the experience, especially with regard to issues such as pacing. At various points in a course, therefore, students can sit practice papers or whole practice tests, but this should not be done too often since not only will it give teachers horrific marking schedules, but it will also be less productive than other test and exam preparation procedures.
- **Have fun:** as we said above, just because students need to practise certain test types does not mean this has to be done in a boring or tense way. There are a number of ways of having fun with tests and exams.

If a typical test item asks candidates to put words in order to make sentences (see B2 above), the teacher might prepare the class for this kind of item by giving students a number of words on cards which they have to physically assemble into sentences. They can hold them above their heads (so that they cannot see the words on them) and their classmates have to tell them where to stand to make a 'human sentence'. Students can play 'transformation

tennis', where one student 'serves' a sentence, e.g. *India is the country I would like to visit more than any other* and the receiving student has to reply with a transformation starting with *The country*, e.g. *The country I would most like to visit is India* (Prodromou 1995: 22–23). They can change the sex of all the people in direct and indirect test items to see if the items still work and if not, why not.

Students can be encouraged to write their own test items, based on language they have been working on and the examples they have seen so far. The new test items can now be given to other students to see how well they have been written and how difficult they are. This helps students to get into the minds of their test and exam writers.

- **Ignore the test:** if students who are studying for an exam only ever look at test types, discuss exam technique and take practice tests, lessons may become monotonous. There is also the possibility that general English improvement will be compromised at the expense of exam preparation.

When we are preparing students for an exam, we need to ignore the exam from time to time so that we have opportunities to work on general language issues, and so that students can take part in the kind of motivating activities that are appropriate for all English lessons.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Public exams**

There are many international exams which students can take.

- Cambridge exams are offered by the University of Cambridge ESOL Cambridge, UK (www.cambridgeesol.org). These include exams in general English, e.g.
 - Key English Test (KET) for elementary candidates (A2)
 - Preliminary English Test (PET) for lower intermediate candidates (B1)
 - First Certificate in English (FCE) for upper intermediate candidates (B2)
 - Certificate of Advanced English (CAE) for upper intermediate/advanced candidates (C1)
 - Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) for very advanced candidates (C2)
 - BEC (Business English Certificate) offered at three levels
 - Cambridge ESOL also offers three exams for young learners (YLE tests): Starters (below A1), Movers (A1) and Flyers (A2).
- City and Guilds Pitman qualifications are offered by City and Guilds, London (www.city-and-guilds.co.uk). Exams are offered in:
 - International ESOL (6 levels)
 - International Spoken ESOL (6 levels)
 - ESOL for Young Learners
 - Spoken ESOL for Young Learners

English for Business Communications (3 levels)

Spoken English Test for Business (6 levels)

English for Office Skills (2 levels)

- IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exams are administered jointly by Cambridge ESOL (see above), the British Council and IDP Education, Australia (www.ielts.org).

IELTS scores (on a 0–9 band) are used especially by British and Australian universities to gauge the level of would-be students or trainers/teachers.

There are papers in listening and speaking. Candidates then choose general or academic writing, and general or academic reading.

- GESE (Graded Exams in Spoken English) and ISE (Integrated Skills in English) exams are offered by Trinity College, London (www.trinitycollege.co.uk). The spoken English exams are one-to-one interviews with an examiner at a level to suit the candidate.

- TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is offered by Educational Testing Services, New Jersey, USA (www.toefl.org).

TOEFL scores are used by colleges and universities in North America and elsewhere to measure English proficiency for would-be students. The tests are now computer-administered in parts of the world where this is possible.

- TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is offered by TOEIC Service International, Princeton, New Jersey (www.toEIC.com).

TOEIC scores are used by a number of companies in the USA and elsewhere to judge the level of English of potential employees.

- Exams for business are offered by Cambridge ESOL (see above), City and Guilds (see above) and by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) (www.lccieb.com).

- **Testing in general**

On testing in general, see McNamara, T (2000), A Hughes (2003) and C Weir (1993). See also C Alderson *et al* (1995). On the history of language testing, see C Weir (2005: Chapter 1).

- **Validity and reliability**

For an investigation into issues of test validity and ‘establishing the validity of the interpretation of scores’, see C Weir (2005). For a polemical view of ‘learner validity’ (e.g. how tests can benefit learners), see B Tomlinson (2005) and a reply to it (Figueras 2005).

- **Portfolio assessment**

For a positive view of portfolio assessment, see K Smith (2002). W Trotman (2004) summarises advantages and disadvantages and P Whitaker (2005) worries about some of the problems associated with this kind of assessment.

- **Cloze procedures**
A Hughes (2003: 191–193) gives an example of a cloze test based on informal spoken English and suggests this is an effective way of measuring oral ability.
- **Oral testing**
B Knight (1992) describes a workshop in which teachers investigate how to measure students' speaking skills.
- **Using rating scales**
J Upshur and C Turner (1995) suggest replacing descriptive rating scales with scales where test markers have to answer a series of binary (*yes/no*) questions about student performance.
- **Washback/backwash**
See A Hughes (2003: Chapter 6), T Green and R Hawkey (2004) and L Prodromou (1995).
- **Teaching for exams**
The best book on the subject – with many examples for different exams tasks – is S Burgess and K Head (2005).
- **Testing in the age of EIL**
In an interesting exchange of views, J Jenkins (2006b) and L Taylor (2006) discuss how testing may have to change in the light of discussions about English as an International language (EIL) – another term for Global English (see Chapter 1B), i.e. the English that is intended for international communication, also referred to as ELF (see page 20).

23

Learner autonomy: learning to learn

However good a teacher may be, students will find it difficult to learn a language unless they aim to learn outside as well as during class time. This is because language is too complex and varied for there to be enough time for students to learn all they need to in a classroom. Even if students have three English lessons a week, it will take a great number of weeks before they have had the kind of exposure and opportunities for use which are necessary for real progress. The problem for teachers is the knowledge that not everything can be taught in class, but even if it could, a teacher will not always be around if and when students wish to use the language in real life (Cotterall 1995: 220).

To compensate for the limits of classroom time and to boost the chances for successful language learning and acquisition, students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies so that as far as possible, they become autonomous learners. As we suggested in Chapter 5, D3, giving students *agency* (enabling them to be the doers rather than the recipients of learning action) is one way of helping to sustain their motivation. However, students are sometimes reluctant to adopt this kind of agency. Attitudes to self-directed learning are frequently conditioned by the educational culture in which students have studied or are studying (see Chapter 4, B1) and this may not always prioritise learner autonomy. And whereas some students see the need to learn for themselves, others, for whatever reason, are less enthusiastic about taking responsibility for their learning, even when we give them every encouragement and opportunity to develop as autonomous learners. This was borne out in a study by Icy Lee (in Hong Kong). She reports that some of her students responded well to learner training work after they had signed a 'learner contract' with their teacher, but that others were not nearly so successful (Lee 1998). The more enthusiastic of her learners spent more time learning on their own and felt more positive about themselves and about learning both during and after a term in which self-directed learning had been actively promoted by their teacher. They were confident that they would continue learning on their own after the course. The less enthusiastic learners, however, suffered from low self-esteem, had an ambivalent attitude to learner autonomy and spent less time in self-study than their peers. They were unlikely to continue studying on their own after the course had finished.

Nevertheless, and despite the danger that some students will find assuming agency a nearly impossible challenge, various commentators see autonomy and associated learner behaviour as crucial. Mark James suggests that a basic goal of English language teaching is that 'students will apply outside the classroom what they have learnt inside the classroom' (2006: 151). For Sarah Cotterall, learner autonomy is not just a goal for highly committed students completing optional courses, but should be seen as 'an essential goal of all learning' (2000: 109).

Learner autonomy is important, in other words, yet it is easier for some than for others. In the face of such a reality, what can teachers do to try to promote autonomous learning, and how far can and should they go? These are the questions which this chapter will attempt to answer.

A Promoting autonomy

Most teachers are keen to talk to students about the importance of becoming autonomous learners. But just telling students that autonomy is in some way a good thing will have little effect unless it is part of a wider course design – and unless we find ways of helping students to become more independent.

Sarah Cotterell suggests that language courses which aim to promote learner autonomy should have a number of defining characteristics. In the first place, the course should reflect the learners' goals in its language, tasks and strategies. This means raising the students' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives and identifying resources which will help them to realise these goals. Next, the course tasks should be explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process. In other words, Sarah Cotterell suggests, students are unlikely to be able to manage their own learning if they have no idea of how learning works; it is by developing an awareness of language-learning theory that they are able to adopt learning strategies for themselves. Course tasks should replicate real-world communicative tasks (or provide rehearsal for such tasks) and, finally, the course should promote reflection on learning (Cotterell 2000: 111–112).

Joanne McClure shares some of the same goals. Working at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, she wanted her students to develop an awareness of themselves as learners. Among other things, she wanted them to develop a systematic approach to their reading, writing and research and to become increasingly aware of the way in which successful writers structure their research (McClure 2001: 143).

What both writers are talking about is how to get students thinking about how they learn so that the more they think in this way, the more they will be able to take charge of their own learning.

A1 Students and teachers

The problem, for some teachers, with getting students to think about learning is that students do not necessarily see the world in the same way as their teachers do. In a memorable article, Kumaravadivelu found that the learners' perceptions of what was going on frequently failed to match the teacher's intentions. For example, when a teacher wanted students to practise scanning by reading advertisements, the students (in post-lesson discussion) veered between thinking they had been studying how to buy through newspaper advertisements to supposing the lesson had something to do with capital letters and commas, even though the teacher had not mentioned this at all, though they had looked at the issue a week previously (Kumaravadivelu 1991: 103).

Ten years later, Carol Griffiths and Judy Parr were interested to see if the learning strategies which students relied on matched their teachers' perceptions of the strategies they were using. The strategies they looked at included using review and flashcards to remember words (memory strategies), trying to find patterns in English or deliberately reading for pleasure

(cognitive strategies), making guesses and skipping words they did not know (compensation strategies), noticing mistakes for future correction (metacognitive strategies), trying to relax when they felt afraid of using English or giving themselves a 'prize' if they did well (affective strategies), and asking English speakers to correct them when they talked and trying to learn about the culture of English speakers (social strategies).

The teachers reckoned that of the six strategies under investigation the priority ratings for the students would be as follows:

6 (most frequent)	Memory strategies
5	Cognitive strategies
4	Social strategies
3	Metacognitive strategies
2	Compensation strategies
1 (least frequent)	Affective strategies

However, the students came up with a very different frequency list:

6 (most frequent)	Social strategies
5	Metacognitive strategies
4	Compensation strategies
3	Cognitive strategies
2	Affective strategies
1 (least frequent)	Memory strategies

(Griffiths and Parr 2001: 252)

Roger Hawkey found the same kind of perception mismatch when he asked his students to rate the prominence of 13 activity categories, such as *listening to the teacher talking to the whole class* and *pair discussions*. Students saw things very differently so that whereas, for example, the teacher thought that *pair discussions* were the second most common activity type, for students they came in at number eight (Hawkey 2006).

When we train or encourage students to be autonomous, therefore, we need to try to ensure that both we and they are hearing the same things. Furthermore, we will need to offer them choices in learning strategies. What may feel appropriate from the teacher's point of view may not seem so appropriate for students. And as we saw in Chapter 5B, what is appropriate for one student may not be appropriate for all.

B Learner training, learner autonomy

It is possible that some students will be keen to take responsibility for their own learning from the very beginning of a course. However, most teachers know that this is unlikely unless they are given help in thinking about how they learn and how this learning can be made more effective (as we saw in Section A above). Learner training, in other words, is a first step on the road to self-directed learning. Together with activities where students are encouraged, or even (sometimes) forced, to take responsibility for what they are doing, learner training gives those who are prepared to take it the possibility of real autonomy.

B1 Thinking about learning

In the following learner training examples, students are encouraged to think about what (and how) they have been learning, are made to think about different ways of listening and are offered different strategies for them to choose from.

Example 1: Finishing a unit

Focus: reflecting on learning

Under the influence of the Common European Framework (see page 95), many teachers and materials writers have students go through a checklist of 'can do' statements at the end of each unit. For example, they have to tick statements such as *I can use the present continuous to talk about the future* or *I can construct a business letter using appropriate language and layout*. If they don't feel they can tick a statement, they have a clear indication that they should go back and study the language or the language skill they still seem to have trouble with.

A more elaborate way of getting students to reflect on what they have done recently is to ask them to complete sentences about, say, last week's work, e.g.

- The thing(s) that I enjoyed most in last week's lessons was/were ...
- The thing(s) I learnt last week that I did not know before was/were ...
- The thing(s) I am going to do to help me remember what I learnt last week is/are ...
- The thing(s) I found most difficult in last week's work was/were ...
- The question(s) I would like to ask about what we have done is/are ...

'Can do' statements and sentences like this prompt the students to think about what they have learnt and start to get them reflecting on their learning.

Example 2: Listening to different things

Focus: listening strategies

In the following activity, students are reminded that one way of making listening easier is to use their knowledge of the world. In other words, if the moment they hear something, they can recognise what kind of a 'something' it is (e.g. a radio commercial, an airport or station announcement, etc.), they will be ready to predict what is coming next and so it will be easier for them to understand what they are listening to.

Students listen to audio clips, such as the beginning of a radio news bulletin (*It is six o'clock. Here is the news ...*), a recorded message (*Welcome to the Clifton Cinemas automated booking service ...*), or the introduction to a lecture (*So I'd like you to give a special welcome to Professor Martha Ellis who is going to address us on the subject of ...*). They have to identify what the listening genres are in each case.

They now have to say how they will listen to each of the listening genres they have just identified. They complete the following chart:

Listening for gist (Getting a general understanding on first listening)	Listening for specific detail (Trying to hear one or two specific pieces of information only)	Listening for all details (Listening for any relevant information in order to know what to do next)

When they have done this, they compare their answers in pairs or small groups before discussing it with the whole class.

Just as Joanne McClure wanted her students to develop a systematic approach to their writing and studying (see page 395), so here we are asking students to think carefully about different ways of listening and how each one suits different listening genres. Although there are no completely right answers, still this kind of activity gets students to start thinking about how they can approach the task of listening so they do it more efficiently when they are on their own without the guidance of a teacher.

Example 3: Note-taking

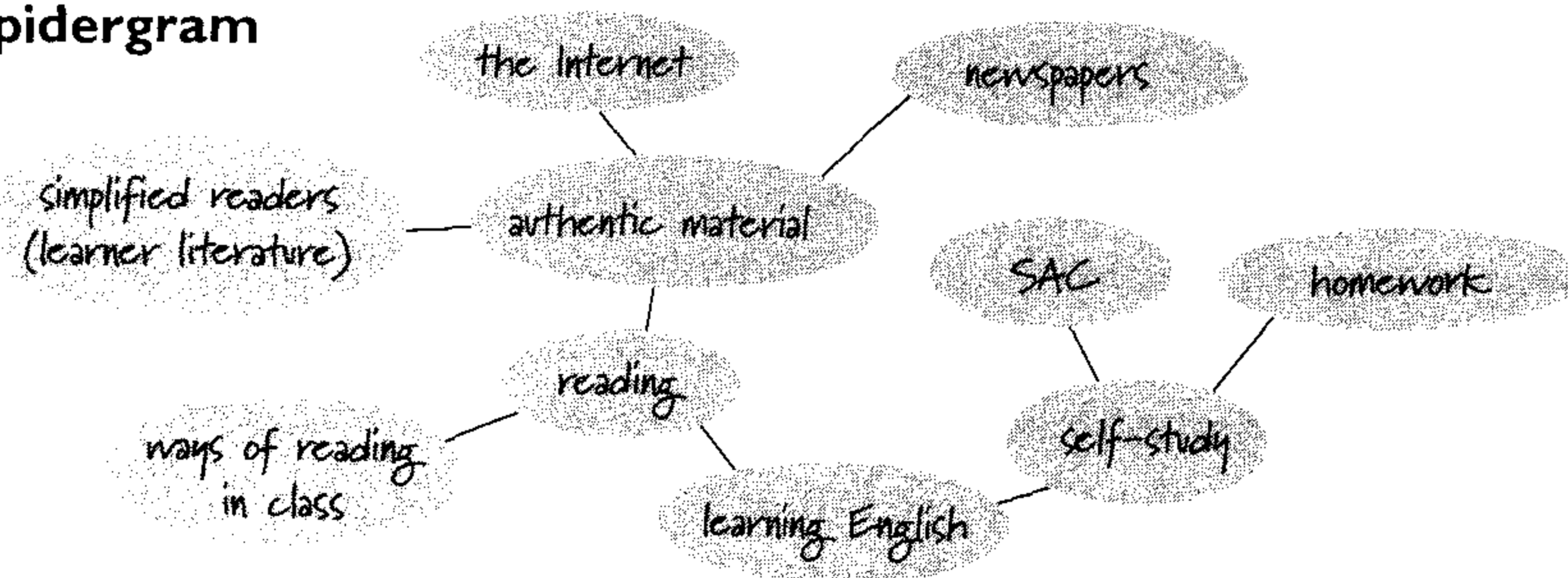
Focus: choosing strategies

One of the skills that our students need, especially (but not only) at tertiary level is that of note-taking. Many students of English are studying the language precisely because they wish to attend academic courses delivered in English. They need to know, therefore, what the best way of taking notes is.

However, here we have a problem since note-taking is a highly personal matter and there is no right way of doing it. And if we looked at the notes of all the students as they left a lecture, we would find a whole range of possibilities. Some would have taken copious notes, while others would only have noted down a few points. Some notes would be highly organised, while others would look chaotic. Yet even notes that seem chaotic to us may be effective (that is, they help students to remember and understand what they have experienced) for some students whose minds and visual memories work in that way.

What this suggests is that rather than telling students how to take notes, we should offer them various possibilities for them to choose from (see Figure 1).

Spidergram



Point by point

- Learning English
- A Self-study
 - 1 Self-access centres
 - 2 Homework
- B Reading
 - 1 Simplified readers (learner literature)
 - 2 Ways of reading in class
 - 3 Authentic material
 - a Newspapers
 - b The Internet

Spaghetti

Learning English

Concentrate on ways of reading in class
Simpl. readers

homework is important

authentic material from e.g. newspapers and Internet

Students should use SACs for autonomous learning

FIGURE 1: Three possible note-taking techniques

However, even these three examples may act only as springboards to a discussion about the best way to make notes for each individual student. The purpose of the activity is, after all, to get students to select a strategy so that they can take responsibility for their own note-taking method, not merely to imitate what we ourselves might think or do.

We can do the same when we encourage students to keep their own vocabulary/lexical notebooks. We can offer them various possibilities starting with (a) a simple alphabetical listing of words (*ankle, elbow, goalkeeper, manager*), (b) words plus translation (*ankle – tornozelo, elbow – cotovelo, goalkeeper – goleiro, manager – técnico*), (c) words in alphabetical order with example sentences (*ankle – I sprained my ankle when I slipped on a banana skin, goalkeeper – The goalkeeper couldn't stop the ball going into the back of the net*) – with or without translation, or (d) words grouped together in lexical fields (*people in football – goalkeeper, manager, referee; parts of the body – ankle, elbow, knee*). We can advise students which of these are the most effective, but in the end, *they* must be the ones to choose the best way of recording words and phrases so that they will remember them.

B2 Taking over

The ideal situation is for the students to take over their own learning – in other words, to do it without having to be shown how by the teacher. There are various ways of trying to bring this about.

In the first place, what we have called the 'immediate creativity' phase (see Chapter 12B) is the moment when we get students to take the language for themselves. They are no longer just repeating what we have told them to; instead, they are trying to use the new language to say things they want to. When we get students to make their own dialogues with new language, the same thing is true; the moment they invent their very own conversations, they are, to some extent, taking the language into their own hands. However, this kind of teacher-provoked creativity is some way from the agency we discussed in Chapter 5, D3.

Magdalena Kubanyiova wants us to leave the students alone (Kubanyiova 2004) and let them decide, for example, how to write questionnaires if they have been asked to do a survey. For her, students do fine if we let them get on with it.

In Chapter 14, D2 we looked at a number of dictionary activities in which students both learnt how dictionaries worked and then learnt how to use them. Once students are capable of using dictionaries in this way, they have, in effect, taken over since they can get word information with or without our help.

When students get to make (or help to make) decisions about what happens in and out of class, they can be seen to have at least partly taken over in the same way. Thus, for example, when a teacher says *You can decide what we do next. We can either listen to someone talking about different kinds of education, we can read a text about a special education experiment or we can have a discussion about different kinds of discipline ...* and the students choose which of these they are going to do, they have a degree of agency. In the same way, Lesley Painter's decision to let students decide what homework they wanted to do (Painter 1999 and see page 103 of this book) is entirely consistent with Jenny De Sonneville's suggestion that students should take a more active role in course design (De Sonneville 2005: 11).

Except in exceptional circumstances, we are not suggesting that students should take over the whole design and running of a course. That, surely, is our job and we bring our professional

skills to bear when we decide on the programme we are going to ask students to follow. But within that programme, the more we can get students to rely on their own decision-making, the better. We can get them to tell us what they want and need to do next via discussion, needs analyses or other forms of action research (see Chapter 24B). We can ensure that some of their time is spent in a self-access centre (see Section C below), and we can do our best to ensure that they learn outside the classroom and after the course.

B3 Learning journals

One way in which teachers try to encourage students to become autonomous is by encouraging them to write journals. But journal writing has other benefits, too. In the first place, writing journals provides good writing practice and helps to improve the students' general writing skills. In the second place, journals allow students to express feelings more freely than they might do in public, in class. If they know that their journals are not going to be read by everyone (unless they want people to read them), they will write more openly. And because the act of writing is less immediate than spontaneous conversation, they have more time to access those feelings. Journals can also provide a kind of teacher–student dialogue that is often impossible in a whole-class environment. We can often learn things about our students which we were previously unaware of when we read what they write in these journals. For example, when Lakshmy Krishnan and Lee Hwee Hoon asked students to keep diaries at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, they found themselves 'listening to voices' which gave them strong messages about individual concerns and needs. As a result of reading these journals, the course leaders found themselves thinking up new ways of helping students from outside Singapore who had shown, through their journal entries, that they were homesick and disoriented (Krishnan and Hoon 2002).

From the point of view of learner autonomy, journals provide an opportunity for students to think both about *how* they are learning (i.e. what is easier or more difficult, and why and how they achieve success), and also about *what* they are learning (i.e. aspects of the language and how it all fits together). This kind of introspection may well lead them to insights which will greatly enhance their progress. Just as teacher journals provoke their writers into reflecting on how and why things have happened so that they can decide what to do next (see Chapter 24, A1), so student journals may well provoke creative introspection in their writers. A marked benefit of such introspection when it occurs is its effect on memory. There are good reasons for supposing that when we have a chance to reflect carefully on what we have done, we are far more likely to remember it than if we simply discard an experience the moment it is over.

Although some students may have kept diaries in the past (and some may still do so), the majority may be either unfamiliar with or unenthusiastic about journal writing. Because of this we need to consider carefully why we want students to take part in the activity so that we can communicate this purpose to them. For example, we might want to set up a teacher–student channel where we can offer help and support on a one-to-one basis. Alternatively, we might want them to write down their reactions to individual lessons or keep a record of what is going through their heads during and after classes. We can then respond to what they write. Perhaps, on the other hand, we may just want them to write about anything that comes into their heads (probably as a result of the lessons they have been taking with us).

Having decided what kind of journal we want students to keep, we will then explain why we want them to write and what kind of thing we want them to say when they are writing. We will tell them what kind of an exercise book or notebook they might want to use or we can, if we think this will help, provide the notebooks ourselves. We are now ready to get the process under way.

- **Starting out and keeping going:** it may help, when we first introduce the idea of journal writing, to give students some examples of possible journal entries. When and if we have done this, we might give them an opportunity or opportunities to write practice journal entries which we can then comment on.

We now have to decide when and how often we expect students to write their journal entries. If we really want to give them agency, this will be up to them, of course, but if we are worried that, despite initial enthusiasm, they might get bored with the idea, we can institute regular journal-writing sessions of about, say, ten minutes a week. At the very least, this gives students good writing practice.

If we are going to respond to student journals in any way (see below), we can institute a regime so that they know when the journals will be collected each week (or fortnight). Together with a regular journal-writing slot, this will ensure that students bring journals with them and continue to focus on making journal entries.

To keep students' interest in their journals going, we should emphasise that it is up to them to decide what they want to put in them (though of course we will make it clear that we do not accept material that is inappropriate or insulting). They can personalise their journals with pictures or drawings, too.

The continuing success of journal writing may well depend upon whether or not we offer written responses to their entries (see below) and, if we do, what kind of response this is.

- **Public or private:** when we encourage students to write journals, they have to know who, if anyone, will be reading them. It is quite feasible to suggest, for example, that students should be allowed to keep what they write completely private. If this is the case, our role would mainly be to provide writing time and to encourage students repeatedly to keep writing. We might also lead discussions in which students talk about the experience of journal writing.

Many students will welcome their teacher's response to their journals. This will give them the motivation of writing for someone apart from themselves (though this is not without its problems – see below). There are good reasons for us to read our students' journals, partly since this give us insights into what they are thinking and worrying about, but also because it informs us about their progress and their reactions to their learning experiences.

A more public version of the journal is to get students to write a blog (see page 338). This has the advantage of providing some excitement about 'going live' online, but will probably have a negative impact if the blog is never replied to by anyone else. There is no point in going public if the public are not interested once you get there!

The best way to resolve the public/private dichotomy is to discuss the most appropriate kind of journal with the students so that they can decide whether they want to stay private,

write for the teacher only or go totally public. It will be our job to make sure that they understand the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative.

- **Responding to journals:** there are many different ways of responding to students' journals, and the one we choose may well determine the success or failure of the whole journal-writing enterprise. We could, for example, write a comment at the end of a journal entry which only showed that we had read what the student had written (e.g. *I enjoyed reading your journal this week. Well done*), or we could refer to a particular part of the entry (e.g. *I think your description of the difficulty of understanding English on the phone is very interesting*). Both comments (especially the second) show that we have at least read the journal. However, we might go further and offer advice (e.g. *The next time you are talking to an English speaker on the phone, you can use phrases such as 'Could you repeat what you just said?' or 'Would you mind speaking a bit more slowly?'*). We could also offer language comments such as *Be careful about 'since' and 'for'. We use 'for' with a period of time (three weeks, two hours, etc.) and 'since' with an actual time (1999, six o'clock, etc.)*. Of course, we can go further than this and underline the mistakes in the students' writing in the same way as we correct some of their written homework.

One of the best ways of deciding how to respond to student journal entries is to discuss what kind of responses they would feel most comfortable with. That's what Richard Watson Todd and his colleagues in Thailand did with their students. What was clear to them was that the students wanted feedback from the teachers who read their journals, provided that trust was established between them and the teacher. It was in this way that appropriate dialogue was established and maintained. But when asked, students made it clear that for them a general comment at the end of a journal entry was not enough. These journal writers wanted comments at the place in the text where the teacher had concerns or other reactions (the same could be achieved, of course, with footnotes). The comments that the students most valued were suggestions, positive evaluation or supportive back-up (Watson Todd *et al* 2001). However, it is worth remembering that individual students may have different views from the group as a whole. We should be sensitive to this and, where possible, ask individual students if they are comfortable with the level and type of feedback that they are receiving.

Responding to learner journals can dramatically increase a teacher's workload, especially if more than one class is involved in doing this. No teacher can reply adequately to 150 journal entries a week on top of lesson preparation, classroom teaching and homework marking. But there are ways round this. We can, for example, make 'appointments' to read an individual's journal. Instead of reading it every week, we might say we will read it twice a term, and say when that will be. We could read one group's journals one week and another group's the next. We can ask students to restrict themselves to writing no more than one or two pages.

Journal-writing provokes students into reflecting on their own learning while also giving them good English writing practice. If we organise it properly, it can have enormous benefits for both students and teachers.

B4 Forcing agency?

Before we leave the subject of getting students to assume agency (to take responsibility for their learning), we need to discuss limits to our attempts to make this happen. If, as we have suggested, learning is conditioned both by the student's educational culture and also by his or her individual learning styles and preferences, then the idea that all students should be forced to become autonomous seems unnecessarily prescriptive. Why should students who are, for whatever reason, reluctant to become autonomous, have autonomy thrust upon them?

The fact is that in the words of an old English proverb, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. And if it doesn't want or need to drink, you shouldn't make it do so anyway. Some students, like horses at the water's edge, just don't get it; for them the teacher is the one who is responsible for their learning, and they expect the teacher to do their job.

Faced with the reluctance of at least some of the students in a group to assume agency, we have to consider what we can do both for those students and for others in the group who are keener on the idea of taking learner responsibility.

The first thing we will offer our students is the kind of learner training we discussed in B1. It will never be wasted, even if some students respond to it less enthusiastically than others. The second thing we will do is give students the chance to take over as often as possible, whether this is in the form of getting them to tell us if they want to be corrected during a fluency activity (see Chapter 8, C3), allowing them to make decisions about homework tasks or simply leaving them alone to construct their own questionnaires, for example.

But however much students do or do not take up our offer of training for autonomy, there is a group of activities which at the very least make their participation mandatory. These are activities where students have to take part in order for the activity to be a success. For example, the story-circle writing on page 337 only works because every member of the group is obliged to write a new sentence every time they are given a new piece of paper. Opting out is not an option (unless, of course an individual student has a serious behaviour problem, but that is another issue – see Chapter 9A). The jigsaw reading activity on page 299 also encourages mandatory participation since the story of why a concert was so special (which the students are introduced to at the beginning of the sequence) can only be fully understood – the jigsaw can only be successfully completed – if every student shares the knowledge they have read in their own short texts. William Littlewood's numbered heads technique (see page 347) also ensures that all individual students are more or less obliged to participate.

C The self-access centre (SAC)

A useful adjunct to classroom learning – or indeed alternative to it – is the self-access or (open) learning centre. In SACs students can work on their own (or in pairs and groups) with a range of material, from grammar reference and workbook-type tasks to audio and video excerpts. They can work with books, worksheets, CDs and DVDs, or they can access material from computers, whether hooked up to an Intranet – that is all programs working from a main server run by the institution where the SAC is located – or whether they have access to the Internet.

Some modern SACs consist of little but banks of computers. Others, which rely on books and paper, will almost certainly have large collections of learner literature (see Chapter 17,

A1), dictionaries (see Chapter 11, G1), reading texts and listening materials. Where possible, SACs either have separate rooms or have one large room divided into sections for different kinds of material, though it is also possible to put large amounts of self-access material on a trolley that can be wheeled from class to class. As Lum Yoke Lin and Ray Brown make clear, each self-access centre is unique. Working in Malaysia, they showed that each of the 28 centres they were involved in which incorporated SACs had 'their own unique local problems and preferences, and this gives them their individual characters' (Lum and Brown 1994: 155).

In well-regulated SACs, students drop in either as a regular part of the timetable or in their own spare time. Some students may have signed up to be allowed to use the SAC even though they are not in any English class; they are, therefore, not actually following a regular course. Once inside the room (or hooked up to a computer), they will decide what work to do, find the right kind of material and activities, and settle down to complete the learning task.

C1 Characteristics of a good self-access centre

One way of setting up a SAC is just to put piles of material in a room or have computers that students can hook themselves up to. However, this is unlikely to be advantageous for students who may not know what to do or where to go to do it. In order for a SAC or a computer website to work successfully, various issues have to be resolved.

- **Classification systems:** nothing will demotivate a student more than trying to work on something that is too easy or way outside their reach. Yet this is a distinct possibility unless there is a clear system of classification which details the type of material and the level it is designed for. Thus when students access the main screen of the SAC computer, they should find it easy to get to the listening menu (if listening is what they want to do), there should be a clear description of what listening material there is, and the levels should be clearly signposted. In general, the website should be easy to navigate around.

Where SACs have a preponderance of book and paper materials on bookshelves, in files or in boxes, these should be clearly classified by skill, activity and level. Such classification information should be visually prominent, using colour coding and/or clear labelling. Students should also be able to consult a card index or database.

- **Pathways:** once students have completed an exercise, they can be given suggestions about where to go next. The material they have been using can list other items on the same topic; on the computer screen, students can return to the main menu when they have completed an exercise, and that menu can offer a range of further possibilities. With paper worksheets, suggestions can be incorporated for related material, e.g. *Now you have done this scanning exercise, you might want to try R/6/32 which asks you to skim a text – another important reading skill.* In both cases, the activity becomes a jumping off point for students to follow pathways suggested by software and SAC.

SAC assistants and teachers have a major role to play in helping students to use the centres successfully and follow appropriate pathways. Students can be shown where things are, can be helped with hardware and software problems and directed down new pathways. In order to help students in this way, assistants and teachers need to be fully aware of a centre's contents and benefits, and trained – through induction materials, specially designed SAC lessons, and staff seminars – to help students appropriately (O'Dell 1992).

- **Training students:** most students, left to their own devices in a SAC or on a computer website, will not know how to use the facility to its best advantage, however good the menu or classification system is. Websites and SACs are likely to look either boring or intimidating. To prevent this situation, students need to be trained to use programs and centres appropriately.

Some teachers provide training in class, giving students clear tasks and then taking them directly to the SAC to have them complete these. This can happen on a regular basis over a period of weeks, at the end of which time the students are thoroughly familiar with what is in the centre and how best to use it. Many teachers design quizzes to get students hunting around the website or the centre itself. Alternatively, we could tell students to explore the website or SAC on their own so that they can produce leaflets or computer-based manuals showing other students what is on offer and how to use them. With highly motivated and potentially autonomous learners, the need to make things clear for their colleagues will force them to get to grips with what is on offer.

Even when students have been trained to use a SAC, they will still benefit from the help that assistants and teachers can give them in the centre itself.

- **Making self-access centres appropriate for students:** one view of a SAC has a group of individual students sitting apart from each other in silence (often at a computer screen), working profitably and autonomously. Yet as Jeremy Jones points out, 'To make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity' (Jones 1995: 229). Working at Phnom Penh University in Cambodia, he was concerned to make SAC use appropriate to the styles of learning which his students found most comfortable. Clear evidence suggested that students enjoyed working collaboratively and so, instead of the usual individual seating spaces in many SACs, students could choose more 'coffee-table' places, designed specifically to have groups working together. There was a higher tolerance of noise than might be expected in some other places, and tasks were designed which specifically encouraged pair and group interaction.

Anyone setting up a SAC or designing material and tasks for use in it should think carefully about who is likely to use it and what patterns of use will be most culturally appropriate. One way of doing this is to set up a student advisory panel to take part in planning and evaluating the centre. Apart from guaranteeing the involvement of those particular students, this has the potential for a SAC design which really meets the needs of its users.

- **Keeping interest going:** SACs really come into their own when students take the decision to go and study there by themselves – and continue to do so over a period of time. For this reason, administrators and teachers have to devise methods to keep users involved and interested.

One way of doing this is to give students a feedback sheet to fill in after every activity. Though such forms are ostensibly for the centre's use, the process of reflecting on an activity helps to maintain the user's engagement and prepares them for the next task.

Another means of maintaining student involvement is through a SAC-users' committee which students can apply to become members of. With monthly meetings which bring about change and improvement, they have a genuine part to play in directing the centre's present and future course.

An ideal way of keeping users on board is for the centre to provide a monthly or quarterly

newsletter and/or website in which students and centre administrators list new material and new ways of using things. Different pathways can be explored and different users can be profiled. The newsletter/website can run competitions and include the kind of news and gossip that newsletters in other fields use to keep their members involved.

Many computer programs can track an individual student's use and progress through the various activities available. Students can also be asked to sign in every time they visit a SAC, and attendance can be rewarded in some way (or made part of a course requirement).

C2 Evaluating self-access resources

In order to make sure that SACs or computer sites are fulfilling their functions of allowing students to work and study on their own, we need some process of evaluation, some way of measuring whether or not the centres or sites are effective.

Hayo Reinders and Marilyn Lewis have designed a checklist for self-access materials which is 'an attempt to strike a balance between the ideal, lengthy survey which would leave no question unasked and a shorter one which had more chance of being used' (Reinders and Lewis 2006: 277). In their case, their concern has been with self-access material in book form (see Figure 2). It is clear that for them selection, ease of access, clear learning goals and procedures and learner training are key characteristics for book-based self-access materials.

Features	Yes/No/Unsure	Comments
<i>Selecting the resource</i>		
Claims to be suitable for self-access		
Clearly describes the student level		
Needs to be used sequentially		
<i>Accessing parts of the resource</i>		
An index		
A table of contents		
A detailed 'map'		
A glossary		
Chapter previews or summaries		
<i>The learning process</i>		
Information summarised		
Examples provided for tasks		
Objectives provided for tasks		
Keys/answers/criteria for tasks		
<i>Learning to learn</i>		
Notes on the learning process		
Shows how to set goals		
<i>Other features</i>		

FIGURE 2: An evaluative checklist for self-access material (Reinders and Lewis 2006: 277)

The authors have included a comment column so that users can say how useful the checklist is and what they might want added to it (or amended).

A checklist for computer-based self-access materials would look somewhat different from this, of course. We would be unlikely to talk about chapters and indexes or tables of contents.

Instead, we would be concerned with issues such as menus, ease of navigation, interactivity and whether or not (and in what form) answers or hints were provided on the screen. But whatever kind of checklist we make, we will want to design a questionnaire, list or table which allows us to measure whether the material we are asking students to access matches the criteria we discussed in C1 above.

D After (and outside) the course

As Susan McLean Orlando suggests, the kind of learning that occurs in formal settings 'may represent only a fraction of the learning experienced by participants' (McLean Orlando 2006: 45). If they are studying in a target-language community such as Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand or the USA, for example, they are likely to hear and see English all around them in shopping malls, on advertising billboards or on TV or the radio. Increasingly, even when they are studying in what were once considered EFL situations (see page 19), they may have access to the Internet for a wide variety of genres from newspaper reports to blogs, from poetry to pop songs. As English becomes more and more of a lingua franca (see Chapter 1, B1), there is more and more chance that students will be exposed to English in the real world outside the classroom, too. In most situations, teachers and students can have access to competent English speakers who, for example, work for international companies or who take part in English-language theatre productions or other recreational activities.

When students are attending our lessons, we can do our best to make them aware of all these resources. We need to remind them of all the ways they can access English on their own. We can set them tasks, such as bringing in English they have found on their own every Monday morning, or having them report on what they have done to enhance their English outside the class. We will promote extensive reading and listening, of course, and we can also ask them to use their learning journals (see B3 above) as records of the English they have investigated on their own.

However, sooner or later students will stop attending our lessons (or may not want to or be able to attend lessons of any kind). Now they really are on their own, and unless they can find some way of continuing to learn autonomously, their English is unlikely to improve and might even begin to deteriorate. There is a lot we can do to help our students plan for the teacher-free future.

D1 Training students to continue learning

Much of the advice that students are given about continued learning is not taken up (Braymen 1995). It is too general and though students know it is all sound counsel, they cannot follow the advice because the whole idea is too 'big', too amorphous. We need, therefore, to offer specific guidance which will allow them to focus on exactly what suits them best.

The first thing we need to do is to include 'continuing learning' as a topic in the syllabus. We can involve students in awareness-raising activities; together we can list all available sources of English before discussing which are most appropriate for their individual needs and how and where to get hold of them. We can consider the various skills that the students might want to work on, and re-visit various styles of language study and language research which they can usefully carry out on their own.

To train students in ways of using resources at their disposal, we can organise 'self-study' projects in class, which they can later replicate when they are on their own. For example, we might direct them to watch an English language news channel on TV and note down the main story headlines before following up those stories in newspapers or on the Internet. We can start, perhaps, by providing the material on CD, tape or DVD. Later, students can start accessing news material on their own, using the techniques we have practised earlier. By the time the course is over, they may have acquired the habit of accessing this kind of material on their own.

We can get students to use classroom techniques on their own, encouraging them to predict the content of texts before they read in detail, and then decide on a maximum of ten unknown words to look up in their dictionaries after they have read. We can train them to be their own language researchers by looking for new words and patterns that they have come across in subsequent texts. In this sense, all the learner training we do in class (see B1 above) has enormous potential for students working on their own, since, once having considered the best ways to learn, they can use these ways to improve without the necessity of teacher supervision.

One way of helping students to continue learning once a course is over is to negotiate *personal plans* which they can use for the weeks after lessons finish. The following example is the personal plan of an intermediate level student who works in an office where the British magazine *The Economist* is available, who has their own MLD (see Chapter 11, G1), and who has a copy of the vocabulary book *English Vocabulary in Use* by Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell (published by Cambridge University Press):

Aim: to improve my vocabulary

Tasks:

1. Read at least three magazine articles from *The Economist* every week. For each article note down three words I want to know the meaning of. Look the words up in my dictionary. Find the words again in next week's articles and check (with the dictionary) that they mean the same in the new articles.
2. Do one unit from *English Vocabulary in Use* every week and check with the answer key and my dictionary.

Of course, we may not have time for personal plans if we have a large number of students. Instead, we can offer general work plans for anybody and everybody in which we list, for example, three good techniques for maintaining listening ability (and where to find listening material), or give details of Internet sites for language learners.

A powerful way of getting students to continue with their language use, especially where a successful group is coming to an end, is to encourage them to stay in touch with each other. They can do this by email or by setting up a users' group on the Internet (e.g. with Yahoo groups – see <http://groups.yahoo.com> – where it is extremely easy to set up a discussion group so that people can talk to a whole group at the same time).

Finally, students can access the many sites for language learners which are available online. Some of these are attached to schools the students have studied at, but there are many other sites, too, which provide free language exercises and other material for people who want to continue studying on their own.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Learner autonomy**

For theoretical studies of learner autonomy, see P Benson and P Voller (eds) (1997) and P Benson (2001). B Sinclair *et al* (2000) edit a collection of articles about the future – from a 2000 perspective – of learner autonomy and A Scharle and A Szabó (2000) have written a book about the practical side of learner autonomy. See also a short article by J Taylor (2002).

- **Learner training**

G Ellis and B Sinclair (1989) expound a theory of learner training and then provide a range of activities for preparation and skills training. M Geldicke (2000) describes how she gives learners ‘action plans’ to guide their learning.

- **Student journal writing**

See J Harmer (2004: Chapter 8) and K Richards (1992). A Kwamleh Johnson (2002) discusses the kind of notebooks that students can use for journal writing.

- **Self-access centres (SACs)**

See D Gardner and L Lambert (1999). P Vettori’s short article (2005) discusses setting up a SAC. C Gierse (1993) and L Barnett and G Jordan (1991) discuss SAC pathways.

G Aston (1993) describes getting students to write leaflets, etc. for their colleagues.

- **Learning outside the classroom**

Two articles which are well worth reading are D Braymen (1995) and N Pickard (1996).

- **Learner sites on the Internet**

It is impossible to list all the sites that are available for students of English, but a few which are worth recommending are:

- *Learning English* (bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish), a site run by the World Service arm of the BBC, has a good range of activities.
- *Dave’s ESL Café* (elscafe.com) has a large number of activities for students and a great links page which will take users to many other different websites.
- *The Internet Tesol Journal* has lots of activities for students (including quizzes) at <http://a4esl.org/>. But their links page (at <http://iteslj.org/links/>) is a great place for students to start looking around. For example, they have a large list of podcast sites as well as grammar exercises, webquests and quiz links.
- *The University of Illinois, Chicago*, has a good links page for students at www.uic.edu/depts/tie/coolsites.htm.

In reality, however, students are best served by either getting sites from their school or tutors, or by using Google or another search engine to track down good English material.

24

What teachers do next

In her course for language teachers, Penny Ur discussed the difference between teachers 'with 20 years' experience and those with one year's experience repeated 20 times' (Ur 1996: 317). Naturally we admire the first teacher and disapprove of (or sympathise with) the second. Nothing could be more deadening for a teacher than 20 years of repetition, especially in the interactive and dynamic world of the classroom. Our students, too, deserve teachers who are alive to the possibility of change and who keep up-to-date with what is going on, not only in the world of English language teaching, but also in the world at large.

The truth, however, is that no matter how much we enjoy meeting new students at the beginning of a new course, it is sometimes difficult to maintain a sense of excitement and engagement when using the same old lesson routines or reading texts time after time. The increasing predictability of student reactions and behaviour can – if we do not take steps to prevent it – dent even the most ardent initial enthusiasm. Teaching should be different from this, though. It can and should be a permanent process of change and growth.

At the beginning of our careers we go on teacher training courses where we are taught what to do. It is as our careers develop, however, that instead of being trained (or in addition to be trained), we should seek to develop ourselves and our teaching.

Teacher development means many different things to different people. Brian Tomlinson suggests that in a teacher development approach teachers are given new experiences to reflect and learn from (Tomlinson 2003). For him, the best of these tools is to involve teachers in writing teaching materials since when they do this they have to think carefully about what they want to do, why they want to do it and how to make it happen. Bill Templer, on the other hand, thinks that 'we need to hold up mirrors to our own practice, making more conscious what is beneath the surface' (Templer 2004). Paul Davis says that 'as development becomes more powerful, the role of the trainer will become less important' (Davis 1999). Sandra Piai was extremely impressed to hear a participant in a teacher development workshop say 'You can train me, and you can educate me, but you can't develop me – I develop' (Piai 2005: 21).

In this chapter we will look at a variety of ways in which people can either hold up mirrors to their practice, investigate what is going on in their classes, develop in cooperation with others, look outside the immediate world of the classroom for stimulation or continue studying.

A Reflection paths

Holding up mirrors to our practice (in Templer's words – see above) means being a reflective teacher. In other words, we need to think about (to reflect on) what we are doing and why. Some reflection is simply a matter of thinking about what is happening in our lessons (and our lives) as we take the metro home from work, but there are a number of more organised ways of doing this.

A1 Keeping journals

One way of provoking self-analysis and reflection on our teaching is by keeping our own journals in which we record our thoughts about our teaching and our students. Journals are powerful reflective devices which allow us to use introspection to make sense of what is going on around us. Bill Templer calls the classroom journal, kept on a regular basis, 'the best single interactive mirror' (Templer 2004).

Naoko Aoki came to realise that proper action research (see Section B below) was too much for the teachers she was working with. This, coupled with her belief that teachers' knowledge is narrative-based, led her to try something that was less time-consuming. Accordingly, she got her trainees to write stories about their teaching (of Japanese as a foreign language). The results were stories of emotional conflict with – and pressure from – senior colleagues and difficulty in classroom management. But they also referred 'to dilemmas between the ideals the students hold and the reality they face. I saw tears in the eyes of story tellers' (2004: 4).

Although the journals that Naoko Aoki is describing were produced as part of a training exercise, they nevertheless tell us something of the power of journals that we might keep by ourselves and for ourselves – in other words, as part of our own development. Lindsay Millar suggests six stages in journal-keeping (Miller 2004b). These include deciding what kind of journal we want to keep, preparing a format for the journal, deciding which class we want to write our journal about, and setting aside a time when we are going to write up our journal. This last stage is of crucial importance since unless we build routine into our journal-writing, it will often be difficult to sustain the momentum necessary to write it.

As we shall see in D1 below, journal-keeping is also a valuable tool for teachers who engage in self-development by learning another language. The journals that people have kept in such situations have often led to powerful insights into the nature not only of their own learning but also of the way they teach.

Journal-writing is powerful for two main reasons. In the first place, the act of writing the journal forces us to try to put into words thoughts which, up till then, are inchoate, offering, in this condition, little chance for real introspection. Secondly, the act of reading our own journals makes us engage again with what we experienced, felt or worried about. As a result of this re-engagement, we might quite possibly come to conclusions about what to do next.

A2 Negative and positive

If real development can only come from within, then it is by looking inside ourselves and seeking to understand or change what we find there that is likely to be the most effective way of moving forward and making things better.

Linda Bawcom, in an article devoted to preventing stress and countering teacher burnout, suggests making lists and seeing what they tell us. For example, we might draw up a list of professional priorities, such as the one in Figure 1. In the left-hand column we say what actually happens by numbering the items 1–12. Then, in the right-hand column, we re-prioritise the items as we would like them to be. The difference between the reality and what we wish for gives us the beginnings of a development plan.

___ Attending conferences	___
___ Getting a certificate/diploma/degree	___
___ Peer observations	___
___ Peer counselling (time spent talking to colleagues)	___
___ Lesson planning/creating materials	___
___ Reading professional journals/books	___
___ Time with students (outside the classroom)	___
___ Time getting to and from place of work	___
___ Writing articles	___
___ Syllabus design/writing a (text)book	___
___ Doing (classroom) research	___
___ Doing administrative duties	___

FIGURE 1: Professional priorities (from Bawcom 2005: 50)

We can do the same, Linda Bawcom suggests, with personal priorities, too (such as spending time with partners, children, friends or attending to our spiritual growth, having holidays, etc.).

Bill Templer suggests questioning other teachers as a lead-in to examining our own beliefs and practices. In an activity called 'Ghostwriter' (Templer 2004), he offers various questions for us to put to colleagues, such as *What are your two greatest strengths/weaknesses as a teacher?* Or *Reflect on a recent class. What worked well and why? OR What didn't work and why?* Once we have discussed this with another teacher, he suggests we should write a brief sketch as if we were the person we have just interviewed.

What both Bawcom and Templer are suggesting is that we can think for ourselves, about ourselves. What we need to do, perhaps, is to set time aside to do this so that by making lists (in Bawcom's case) or trying to see ourselves from the outside (Templer's suggestion) we can come to conclusions about where we are with a view to deciding where we want to be.

A3 Recording ourselves

Another way of reflecting upon our own teaching practice is to record ourselves. Bill Templer (see above) suggests using a cheap tape recorder which we can leave running during the lesson. When the lesson is over, we can listen to the tape to remind us of what went on. Frequently, this will lead us to reflect on what happened and perhaps cause us to think of how we might do things differently in the future.

Many teachers have derived benefit (and some surprise) from having their lessons filmed. Watching ourselves at work is often slightly uncomfortable, but it can also show us things which we were not aware of. Here, for example, is a teacher (Louise) who has just seen a film of herself teaching:

Um, it was quite a shock the first time, um, because I think you tend to focus in on all the negative things rather than any of the, any of the positives. Um, but it was, it was interesting to sort of see how the students would, would see you, um, and see it from a, from a different perspective.

Louise's colleague Philip found it interesting to watch film of himself because of 'the way I'm acting, the way I'm – my body language, things, gestures that I don't know, for example, that I

have or things that I don't know I do in class'. Both gained significant insights from what they saw. Louise, for example, noticed

... this sort of perspective of the timing when you ask students things; often when you're waiting for a reaction it seems like it takes forever, um, and I saw that I had a tendency to sort of put words into their mouths or answer their questions for them and sort of push them along a bit. So I think what I might change is giving them a bit more time, because actually from their perspective, having seen the video clips, they might need that extra thinking time.

Rolf Tynan, a teacher whose lesson is included on the DVD which accompanies this book, found watching himself 'frightening and slightly disturbing', but

... after watching it a few times, it's definitely made me much more aware of what I do and what I think I do. And that is definitely one of the most valuable things I've had in a long time.

Watching film of other people teaching can also be extremely insightful. A colleague of Louise and Philip's (mentioned above), having watched film clips of other teachers in his school said:

I think it's really good to put oneself in the context of other teachers as well because I think if – if one only watched oneself, um, it might – you might run the risk of being quite solipsistic, but watching other people puts you in the context and you see your own strengths and weaknesses and particularly you see other teachers', other teachers' strengths which you can, um, you can perhaps learn from.

A4 Professional literature

There is much to be learnt from the various methodology books, journals and magazines produced for teachers of English. Books and articles written by teachers and theorists will often open our eyes to new possibilities. They may also form part of action research or 'search' and 'research' cycles (see Section B below), either by raising an issue which we want to focus on or by helping us to formulate the kinds of questions we wish to ask.

There are a number of different journals which cater for different tastes (see the list at the end of this chapter); whereas some report on academic research, others prefer to describe classroom activities in detail, often with personal comment from the writer. Some journals impose a formal style on their contributors, whereas others allow for a variety of approaches, including letters and short reports. Some journals are now published exclusively on the Internet, while others have Internet archives of past articles.

When teachers join professional teacher organisations (see C4 below), they often receive that organisation's journal or newsletter. Members of special interest groups (such as the Teacher Development Special Interest Group – TD SIG – of IATEFL) will also get publications for that SIG. These newsletters and journals are a valuable way of keeping in touch with what is going on in the world of English language teaching. Not only do they inform us about new developments and ideas, but they also keep us in touch with colleagues whose concerns, it soon becomes apparent, are similar to ours.

B Action research

Action research is the name given to a series of procedures teachers can engage in, perhaps because they wish to improve aspects of their teaching, or, alternatively, because they wish to evaluate the success and/or appropriacy of certain activities and procedures. Teachers sometimes embark on action research because there is a problem that is worrying them and they want to try to decide what to do about it. In all of these cases they gather data to enable them to make decisions about what they or their students do in class.

Alan Maley sees a significant difference between research and what he calls *inquiry*. The former is often done by outsiders and concerns itself with either building or testing out some kind of hypothesis. The principal aim is to abstract a theory from classroom practice. The main reason for pursuing inquiry, on the other hand, is 'to solve immediate problems, or answer urgent personally-relevant questions' (Maley 2003). We want to find out why certain things happen, what would happen if we did something differently or whether we can find a different way of doing something. This kind of inquiry is a continuing process of development leading us to both small and sometimes more significant insights.

Although the difference between theoretical research and inquiry may not be as great as Alan Maley has suggested, nevertheless action research (i.e. teachers investigating their own and their students' behaviour) is far more like inquiry than scientific research conducted by outsiders.

B1 Action research cycles

Julian Edge describes a process where a teacher, feeling unhappy about what she is doing, sets out on her own course of action to see how she might change things for the better (Edge 1999 – see also Edge 2003). The teacher is worried about the kind of feedback she gives in distance-learning courses. She feels her criticisms often seem very negative. How, then, can she (a) find out if what she fears is true and (b) do something about it if this proves to be the case.

The teacher starts by doing some reading on the subject of feedback and then sends out her conclusions about the best way to give feedback (based on this reading) to students and colleagues for their opinions. Once she has synthesised all these opinions, she issues her new criteria for giving feedback. Her students are then asked to grade her feedback according to these criteria. Now she tries giving recorded spoken feedback on tape and finds that student response is very favourable (though one student points out that written notes were much easier to refer back to later). The teacher then talks to her colleagues about what has happened so far. Some of them decide to try taped oral feedback; some decide to remain with written feedback. The teacher then writes up the whole process as an article for a teachers' magazine.

Edge's teacher has conducted the kind of action research inquiry we discussed above. Michael Wallace suggests using case studies as a form of action research. Such case studies should have special significance for the teacher concerned, and the boundaries of the case study should be clearly set (in other words, we should know exactly what we are looking at and for). We must make sure that we will end up having sufficient evidence to draw conclusions from, and that what we are investigating has at least the potential for having an impact on our practice. And finally, any case study (any piece of research we do) should allow for alternative perspectives (i.e. the opinions of others) (Wallace 2000: 16).

What we have described are versions of a classic action research cycle (see Figure 2). This starts when we identify an issue we wish to investigate. We may want to know more about our learners and what they find motivating and challenging. We might want to learn more about ourselves as teachers – how effective we are, how we look to our students, how we would look to ourselves if we were observing our own teaching. We might want to gauge the interest generated by certain topics or judge the effectiveness of certain activity types. We might want to see if an activity would work better done in groups rather than pairs, or investigate whether reading is more effective with or without pre-teaching vocabulary. We might want to find out why something isn't working.

Whichever of these issues we choose, we will want to formulate questions we want answered so that we can decide how we are going to gather data. Having collected the data, we analyse the results, and it is on the basis of these results that we decide what to do next. We may then subject this new decision to the same examination that the original issue generated (this possibility is reflected by the broken line in Figure 2). Alternatively, having resolved one issue, we may focus on a different problem and start the process afresh for that issue.

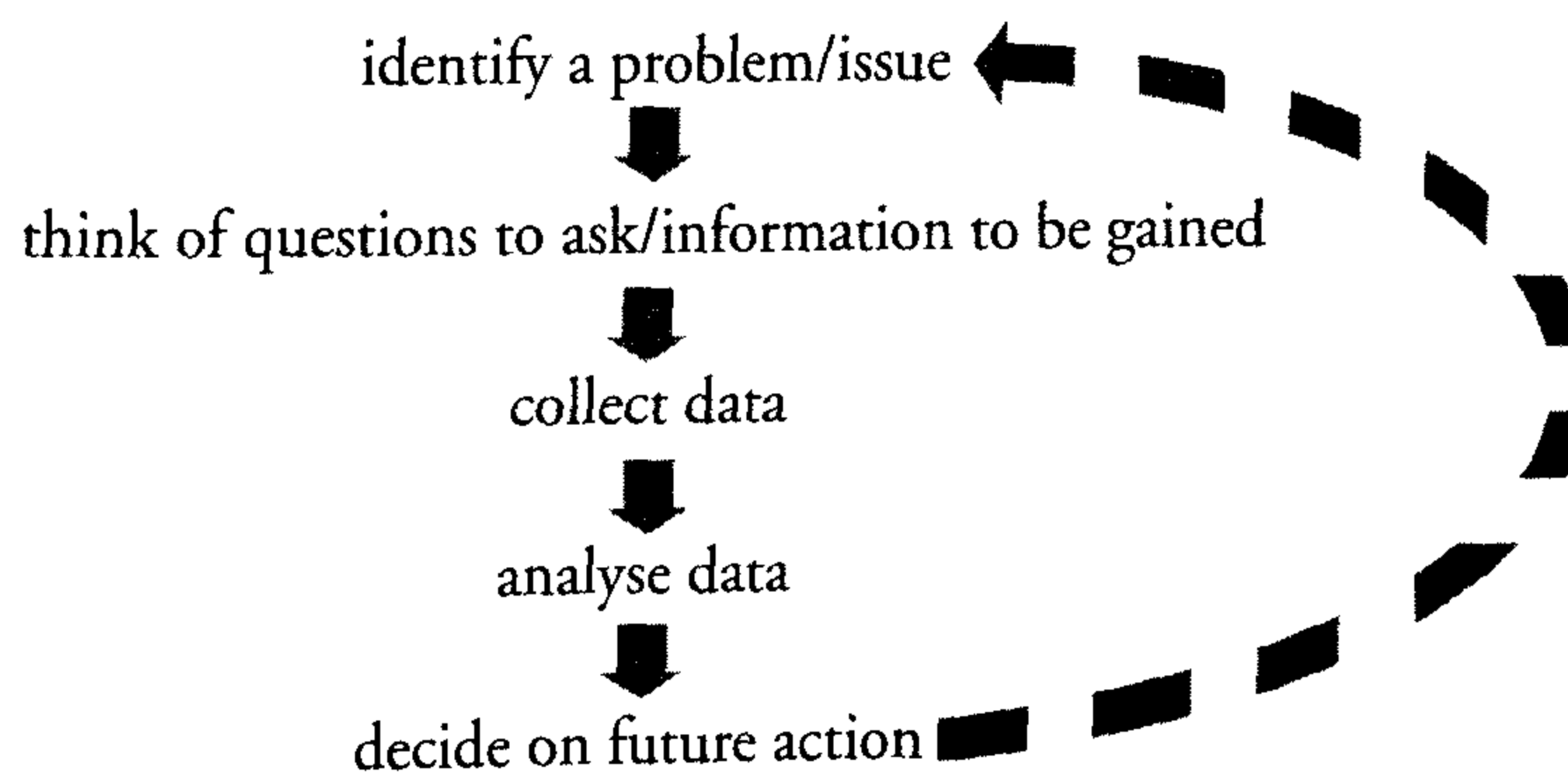


FIGURE 2: An action research cycle

B2 Gathering data

In order for our inquiry or case study to be effective, we have to gather data. There are many ways of doing this, but two of them have already been mentioned in Section A above. For example, we might decide to keep a journal about one specific aspect of teaching (e.g. what happens when students work in groups) and write entries about this at the end of every day's teaching. After, say, 14 days of this, we will have a lot of evidence. Alternatively, we might record ourselves (or have ourselves filmed) doing particular tasks so that we can assess their effectiveness. But there are other data-gathering methods, too.

- **Observation tasks:** we can design data-gathering worksheets which are easy to use, but which will give us valuable information. For example, we could have a list of student names in a column. Each time a student says something, we can put a tick against his or her name. After a few lessons we will have a much clearer and more accurate idea of individual participation. We might restrict our ticks to times when students ask us for help. Perhaps we will keep a written record of who chooses to sit with whom in freely-chosen pairs. We could design a form where we could record how many times specific words are used in the three weeks following their introduction during a PPP sequence (see page 65). We could keep

a record of what we wear to class and in columns next to this record examples of student indiscipline (to see if there is any correlation between the two). And, of course, quite apart from having ourselves filmed or audio-recorded (see above), we can film just the students at certain stages of lessons and watch (or listen) to these incidents again and again in order to gain some insight into students' reactions and behaviour.

- **Interviews:** we can interview students and colleagues about activities, materials, techniques and procedures. However, a lot will depend upon the manner and content of such interviews. When we discuss something with the whole class, for example, the results we get will be unreliable since not all students are prepared to offer an opinion, especially if it runs counter to a perceived majority opinion. Even with one-to-one interviews (if there is enough time for this), a lot will depend upon the questions we ask and how well we listen to the answers we are given.

If we are going to interview students, it makes sense to plan our questions very carefully. This involves being clear about what we want to find out and perhaps brainstorming a set of questions with colleagues before trying them out with the students. When we get to the interview itself, we should tell the students what we are doing and why.

All this preparation is designed to make the interview effective and successful. If possible, it helps to record the interview, too, so that we can listen to it again and, perhaps, transcribe it.

- **Written questionnaires:** questionnaires, which are sometimes more effective than the interviews we described above, can get respondents to answer open questions such as *How did you feel about activity X?*, *yes/no* questions such as *Did you find activity X easy?* or questions which ask for some kind of rating response, e.g.

Activity X was:

extremely easy easy quite easy
 difficult very difficult impossible

We can also ask students to rate the qualities of an activity in order of importance or write a short paragraph about an activity, some material or a unit.

When Philip Harmer wanted to know if and how his correction techniques were effective, he conducted research by sending a questionnaire to all 150 students in the language school where he worked. Among the questions that students had to answer were:

Speaking

A. Which of the following correction techniques do you prefer?

- I like being corrected at the moment of speaking.
- I like the teacher to do correction work at the front of the class after the task has finished.
- I don't like being corrected at all.

Writing

B. Which of the following correction techniques do you prefer?

- Underlining.
- The teacher writes the correct answer.
- The teacher highlights the type of mistake (e.g. SP for spelling).
- The teacher only corrects a certain type of mistake (e.g. *This time I'm only going to correct tenses*).

As a result of his research, he writes that he is not sure that he now corrects differently, but what has changed is ‘that I now incorporate the questionnaire into long-term courses ... for the learner it provides an opportunity for actively contributing to the way the class works’ (Harmer, P 2005: 75).

We can also ask students to fill in charts or priority lists to see how they perceive what is happening in lessons (though we should bear in mind the potential for teacher–student mismatch that we discussed in Chapter 23, A1).

- **Breaking rules and changing environments:** in a groundbreaking work, John Fanselow (1987) suggested that one way of developing is to break our own rules and see what happens. If we normally teach one way, in other words, we should try teaching in the opposite way and see what effect it has. If we normally move around the class all the time, perhaps we should see what happens if we spend the whole lesson sitting in the same place. The results may be surprising and will never be less than interesting.

Luke Prodromou decided after some years of teaching adults and young adults that he needed to reassess what he was doing, and one way was to be ‘Luke in Lilliput’ (Prodromou 2002b: 57) – in other words, to involve himself in teaching a completely different age group (in this case eight year olds).

Breaking rules and changing environments are not for the faint-hearted. We need to have the confidence and enthusiasm for investigation and discovery. Sandra Piai and Kate Threadgold got their trainees to try something new and different as a piece of supervised action research because this ‘gave them a *real* reason for trying out, reflecting on, ideas and activities’ (2001: 12). Teacher schemes such as the DELTA (see page 428) do the same kind of thing.

One way to help us think about doing things differently is a technique called ‘Cataloguing nightmares’ (see Figure 3). In this we complete the left-hand column with a list of the things that go wrong – or that we are frightened might go wrong – in our lessons. In the next column, we say what happens which makes these things go wrong. Finally, in the right-hand column, we write down an opposite procedure from the one described in the middle column. We now have a plan of action for breaking rules – or at least completely upending the routines we use. Our new ‘opposite procedure’ may not work, but at least it will allow us to view the problem differently and maybe gain some insights into how to change things (again) in the future.

Nightmares	Procedure	Opposite procedure
When I put students in pairs and give them instructions, they never listen and the pairwork is always chaotic.	I put students in pairs, give out material and then give instructions.	Give instructions, hand out material, put students in pairs.

FIGURE 3: Cataloguing nightmares

C Developing with others

Not all reflection, reading or action research needs to be done by teachers working alone. There are many ways teachers can confer with each other and develop together, either face-to-face or, increasingly, online.

C1 Cooperative/collaborative development

Teachers, like anyone else, need chances to discuss what they are doing and what happens to them in class so that they can examine their beliefs and feelings. However much we have reflected on our own experiences and practice, most of us find discussing our situation with others helps us to sort things out in our own mind. The question, however, is how ‘the others’ – that is the people we are talking to – should behave. Do we want them merely to listen to our stories and thoughts, or are we expecting them to give us suggestions and advice? We are all familiar with occasions when we think we want people to advise us and then resent them when they do.

Julian Edge coined the term *cooperative development* (Edge 1992a and b) to describe a specific kind of relationship between speakers and the people listening to them – whose role is crucial since ‘the queen of facilitative skills is listening in a non-judgmental, respectful and empathetic way’ (Underhill 1992: 79).

In cooperative development ‘a relationship of trust is necessary’ (Edge 2003: 58) between *speakers* who interact with *understanders*; a teacher, in this case, talks to an empathetic colleague. The empathetic colleague (the understander) makes every effort to understand the speaker but crucially, in Edge’s realisation, does not interpret, explain or judge what he or she is hearing. All that is necessary is for the understander to say ‘This is what I’m hearing. This is what I’ve understood. Have I got it right?’ (Edge 1992a: 65). The understander’s side of the bargain is that ‘she will put aside her own thoughts, ideas and evaluations in order to concentrate on understanding what the speaker has to say’ (Edge 2003: 58).

This style of empathising is similar to ‘co-counselling’, where two people agree to meet and divide the allotted time in half so that each is a speaker and listener for an equal time period (Head and Taylor 1997: 143–144).

Charles Lansley, while sympathetic to the idea of empathetic colleagues, suggested that just listening does not change anything (Lansley 1994) and that ‘phatic communion’ may even reinforce the opinions that the speaker started with. He cites conversations where unfrontational listening can reinforce negative stereotyping, as when people on train journeys wish to avoid argument and so end up agreeing with propositions they really disagree with, e.g.

A: *I don’t think much of the government.*

B: *Oh, they’re not so bad.*

A: *I don’t say they’re bad.*

B: *They’re all right.*

A: *Yes.*

(Lansley 1994: 53)

Something similar seems to happen when speakers use tag questions, with the implicit assumption that what they are saying is so obvious that listeners couldn’t possibly disagree,

e.g. *Adults find learning a new language difficult, don't they?* or *It's difficult to get Japanese students to speak in class, isn't it?* According to Charles Lansley, 'The danger of being in the teaching profession for too long (especially without much or any INSETT [in-service teacher training]) is that one's teaching can end up being based on one's own uncritical subjective principles' (1994: 54). He proposes, instead, a form of *collaborative development* where the listener engages in active debate with the speaker, provoking them to question their assumptions and justify their opinions.

Steve Mann wants the understander to go further, too, and suggests other moves that can be made. For example, the understander can ask *focusing* questions, such as *From what you've talked about so far, is there one thing that you think is the most important?*, *thematizing* questions, such as *Earlier you were talking about classes being better if they are unplanned, and then you were talking about giving students more responsibility for choosing materials. Are they connected for you?* or *challenging* questions, such as *A while back you said that correcting learners in class seems like a waste of time and now you're saying that Keiko and Junko have really responded to correction. Do these two statements hang together for you?* (Mann 2001: 59).

Perhaps the best way to reconcile these differing views of similar processes is to suggest that co-development is a three-stage process. At first, it is the job of the understander to help establish trust by listening empathetically. Once the trust is there, stage 2 allows understanders to challenge what they are hearing, so that in stage 3 there can be some kind of resolution of the situation the speaker is talking about. But if at any time the relationship of trust is broken and the speaker loses confidence, the understander can go back to stage 1 until that relationship is re-established.

Talking with colleagues is one of the best ways of resolving our doubts and uncertainties and it can help us understand what it is we think. As listeners (understanders), too, we can have a powerful effect on our colleagues' development.

02 Peer teaching, peer observation

In our teaching lives we are frequently observed by others. It starts on teacher training courses and goes on when academic coordinators or directors of study come into our lessons as part of some quality control exercise. In all these situations the observed teacher is at a disadvantage since the observers – however sympathetically they carry out their function – have power over the teacher's future career. There are very few teachers who welcome this kind of visitation.

However, many of us would welcome the opportunity to talk to someone about a lesson we have just taught, hoping that they would help us to understand what happened at certain moments or suggest ways of making things more effective. This was the case with a teacher called Poh in Hong Kong who invited her colleague Thomas Farrell into her lessons as part of her own self-development. She wanted an outsider's view of her teaching practices, a view which was not totally dependent on her own or her students' reactions. Thomas Farrell thus became her 'critical friend' and soon noted, with interest, that even before Poh had seen his observation notes, she 'addressed most of the issues I had raised'. Perhaps Farrell had taken on a 'proactive role of promoting reflection within our friendship by acting as a catalyst for Poh to look at her teaching' (Farrell 2001: 372).

It sounds like the ideal arrangement – equal colleagues observing each other so that they (or at least one of them) can develop. And there are various ways of doing this. In the first,

two teachers hold a dialogue in front of the class about a language point, a text or an aspect of culture. Students gain from hearing different views on the same topic, and the participating teachers learn through their public interaction with each other. Sometimes two teachers can take different parts of the same lesson so that at one stage one might be acting as organiser and then observer, while the other plays the roles of prompter and resource (see Chapter 6, B1). At other points in the lesson, one teacher could explain a grammar point before the other takes over to run a short controlled practice session. All of these techniques mean that both teachers can discuss what went on after the lesson and understand the lesson better since, in the old cliché, 'two heads are better than one'.

A more formal way of organising peer teaching and observation is for two teachers to plan a lesson which one of them then teaches and the other observes. After the lesson, they both describe what happened to their joint plan and detail their experiences of the lesson. They can then discuss how it could be improved. For the next class, the position is reversed. As a result, both teachers get the benefit of each other's advice and insights.

However, peer teaching of this sort is not without its problems. Thomas Farrell, whose 'critical friendship' we discussed above, suggested that his observation worked because his colleague was comfortable with her teaching and so was 'in a strong psychological state to allow someone to observe her classes' (2001: 373). But even in such a situation he sometimes felt reluctant to give his opinions, partly because neither he nor the teacher had established any ground rules. Aliye Kasapoglu and Bill Snyder, in an admittedly small-scale study, found that while the participating teachers enjoyed being observed, they all wanted to be observed by someone more experienced than themselves. The younger teachers, especially, seemed to have wanted training rather than development. And like Thomas Farrell's colleague, observation seemed a one-way street where the observer helps the person being observed.

But this is to underuse the enormous development potential of peer observation. Being observed is never an entirely comfortable experience, of course, and where peer observation is part of an institutional scheme in which colleagues are obliged to watch each other, teachers often view it with some trepidation. Jill Cosh, in the ELT department of Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge found that 'teachers will still feel nervous about being observed and implicit judgements being made about their teaching' (Cosh 1999: 25).

The scheme that Jill Cosh worked on tackled this situation in two ways. In the first, she and colleagues recognised that the great development potential of peer observation is for the observer, not the person being observed. The observer doesn't judge whoever he or she is observing based on their own assumptions, but rather assesses those same assumptions on the basis of what he or she sees the observed teacher doing. And the only way to make this happen is to make sure that the observer has some kind of feedback form which guides his or her observation. Jill Cosh feels strongly that we should not be making judgements about the teaching of others because 'notions of good teaching are very subjective; they are to a large extent intangible and unable to be addressed through a list of criteria, and giving constructive feedback is a difficult skill where the observer risks giving offence' (Cosh and Woodward 2003: 20). But questioning one's own assumptions while observing can be a genuinely intrapersonal development event.

C3 Teachers' groups

One of the most supportive environments for teachers, where real teacher development can take place, is in small teacher groups. In this situation colleagues, usually working in the same school, meet together to discuss any issues and problems which may arise in the course of their teaching.

Some teacher development meetings of this kind are organised by principals and directors of study. Outside speakers and animators are occasionally brought in to facilitate discussions. The director of studies may select a topic – in conjunction with the teachers – and then asks a member of staff to lead a session. What emerges is something halfway between bottom-up teacher development and top-down in-service teacher training (INSETT). At their best, such regular meetings are extremely stimulating and insightful. In many schools an INSETT coordinator is appointed to arrange a teacher development programme. Where this is done effectively, he or she will consult widely with colleagues to see what they would most like to work on and with.

Paul Davis suggested that this kind of organisation, while helpful, is not teacher development in the sense that he wants to see it. For him, a teacher development group will 'normally be comprised of people who work together or work in the same geographical area. Although they may have different levels of experience and/or status, because their participation in the group is voluntary or because they come from different workplaces, they should be able to act as a peer group' (Davis 1999). What he is proposing is a situation where a group of teachers makes the decision to meet once a week and runs what is, in effect, its own support group (Plumb 1994). Any member of the group can suggest topics for future meetings; topics can range far and wide, from new ideas for pronunciation teaching to how to react when students make complaints, from the most appropriate kind of clothes to wear for teaching to five new uses for the camera. Teachers themselves are in charge of the group and, indeed, as Paul Davis suggests, certain people such as academic and administrative managers may be deliberately excluded so that the group can maintain its peer status.

C4 Teachers' associations

There are many teachers' associations around the world. Some of them are international, such as IATEFL, based in Britain and TESOL, based in the USA; some are country-based, such as JALT (in Japan), FAAPI (in Argentina), ELICOS (in Australia) or ATECR (in the Czech Republic); still others are smaller and regional, such as APIGA (in Galicia, Spain) or CELTA (in Cambridge, England).

Teachers' associations provide two possible development opportunities:

- **Conferences and seminars:** conferences, meetings and workshops allow us to hear about the latest developments in the field, take part in investigative workshops and enter into debates about current issues in theory and practice. We can 'network' with other members of the ELT community and, best of all, we learn that other people from different places, different countries and systems even, share similar problems and are themselves searching for solutions.

Perhaps the best moments in conferences are the conversations that participants have with each other after they've been to talks and workshops. As we walk out of other people's sessions, we compare notes with fellow attenders, and as we do so, we find ourselves having to justify why we have reacted as we have to what we have heard. These exchanges are often

significantly more important than the sessions themselves since they offer very real (even if short) self-development opportunities as we grapple with our feelings and thoughts about what we have experienced.

- **Presenting:** submitting a paper or a workshop for a teachers' association meeting, whether regional, national or international, is one of the most powerful catalysts for reflecting upon our practice. When we try to work out exactly what we want to say and the best way of doing it, we are forcing ourselves to assess what we do. The challenge of a future audience sharpens our perceptions.

Some teachers get very nervous about presenting, and it is true that standing up in front of colleagues can be extremely daunting, especially when there are a lot of them wanting to listen to you. Yet most presenters find that audiences of their peers are on the whole overwhelmingly supportive and friendly. As a result, teachers who present to them, work with them or lead discussions usually find their self-esteem enhanced, their beliefs challenged and expanded, and their possibilities for the future enlarged.

Giving (and preparing) presentations has many of the better advantages of other development opportunities since not only do we have to think about our topic in a more 'inquiring' manner than we normally do, but also because we are actually undertaking real professional development by learning a new skill and by perhaps making ourselves visible to future employers or collaborators.

C5 The virtual community

When Paul Davis suggested that teachers' groups were normally made up of people from the same geographical area, he was writing in 1999 when the virtual world was considerably less developed than it is today and when broadband access was less ubiquitous than it has become.

There is no real substitute for people meeting together in the same physical space to share experiences, ideas, hopes and fears. But there are alternatives, and the plethora of different sites and user groups on the Internet offers teachers considerable scope in talking to colleagues all over the world at all hours of the day or night. There are many different groups of this kind. There are also people who meet when taking part in real-time chat forums (quite apart from conference calls using audio or videoware). In the future it will be increasingly common and unsensational for people to contact each other online like this.

We have said that real face-to-face communication is always better than online discussion whether or not it takes place in real time or whether it is the result of emails posted on a group noticeboard at different times. Yet the huge advantage of online communication is the fact that someone from Ankara, say, can talk to someone from Vermont very easily – and that all the other members of the group, whether or not they are participating or lurking (i.e. reading all the postings without replying), can be members of the group wherever they are located.

D Moving outwards and sideways

In order to enhance professional and personal growth, teachers sometimes need to step outside the world of the classroom where the concentration, all too frequently, is on knowledge and skill alone. There are other issues and practices which can be of immense help in making their professional understanding more profound and their working reality more rewarding.

D1 Learning by learning

One of the best ways of reflecting upon our teaching practice is to become learners ourselves again, so that our view of the learning–teaching process is not always influenced from one side of that relationship. By voluntarily submitting ourselves to a new learning experience, especially (but not only) if this involves us in learning a new language, our view of our students' experience can be changed. As Luke Prodromou found when he decided to learn Spanish, 'Going back to school, and being on the receiving end of the foreign language learning process, confronted me with challenge after challenge to my assumptions about good language teaching' (2002b: 58).

Language teachers who have started to learn a new language are often surprised by what they discover about themselves – and about language learning in general. Some have become aware, as if for the first time, how frightening it can be to speak in class (Lowe 1987). Patricia Ahrens, on the other hand, discovered that many 'communicative' activities she was asked to take part in were mundane and uninvolved. She found it extremely difficult to talk in a foreign language in class when she had nothing to say (Ahrens 1993a). Roger Gower, meanwhile, realised, among other things, how much he wanted to understand every single word in the reading texts he worked with (Gower 1999).

It can be eye-opening to find out how important our teacher's approval is to us, how susceptible we are to teacher criticism, or to realise how important it is for the teacher to set us clear goals and guide us in other ways.

Those who teach a language which they themselves learnt as a foreign or second language – such as the vast majority of EFL/ESOL teachers in the world – will, of course, have highly relevant memories of the experience of learning that language. Teachers who teach their first language will not have the same history and for them going back into the language classroom as students will be extremely challenging but, as Luke Prodromou points out, 'learning a foreign language has the advantage of offering personal and professional development at the same time for the same price' (2002b: 58).

Even if we cannot or do not want to learn a foreign language, however, the experience of learning almost anything will be of benefit, not only for our own development, but also for our understanding of the process of learning. Taking up a musical instrument, enrolling in an art class or trying to master any other new skill will help us to see what the world looks like from our students' point of view, and this can only help us and, we hope, them.

D2 Supplementing teaching

One way of countering the potential sameness of a teacher's life is to increase our range of occupations and interests so that teaching becomes the fixed centre in a more varied and interesting professional life.

There are many tasks that make a valuable contribution to the teaching and learning of English. First among these is writing materials – whether these are one-off activities, longer units or whole books. Materials writing can be challenging and stimulating, and when done in tandem with teaching can provide us with powerful insights, so that both the writing and the teaching become significantly more involving and enjoyable.

Teachers often find it difficult to break into the world of publishing, but in fact publishers are always looking for people with new and exciting ideas, and for people who would be

prepared to trial new materials or write reports. The first thing that teachers need to do if they want to become involved with writing, therefore, is to get in touch with publishing houses and say that they are eager to pilot material or write reports. They can find out how to get in touch with publishers by visiting their representatives at the book exhibitions which are a feature of teachers' conferences, or they can find the addresses of the publishers of their favourite books by searching on the Internet.

Some of the best materials have been written by teachers who have found themselves producing teaching ideas because they were not satisfied with what was on offer. This is certainly a powerful motivation for writing, but it is what happens next that may make the difference between being published and being ignored. Publishers are sent large numbers of unsolicited manuscripts, and many of these works are fairly swiftly rejected. Authors are more likely to be successful, however, if they start by first finding out the name of the individual in the publishing house who deals with the area they work in and then writing a short letter to that person, explaining who they are and what they are working on. It may be helpful to include a brief one- or two-page synopsis of their proposal at this stage, but that is all. Publishers are far more likely to be interested in this approach than in a large pile of paper that they are too busy to wade through.

The publishers of magazines and journals (see the chapter notes on page 427) are also extremely interested in hearing from potential contributors. Editors are always looking for people to write articles, send in teaching ideas or review books. However, before submitting articles for possible publication (or offering book reviews or teaching ideas), teachers should read the notes for contributors very carefully since material that is sent in but which does not match the editor's requirements is unlikely to get accepted.

Teachers can become involved in far more than just materials (or article) writing, however. The various exam boards such as Cambridge ESOL, Trinity Exams, TOEFL and TOEIC are always on the lookout for markers, examiners and item writers. As with publishing, teachers who are interested in this area should find out the name of the relevant subject officer and write to them, expressing their interest and saying who they are and where they work.

Many people now set up their own websites where they provide material either by subscription or free of charge. It is no longer difficult or expensive to record material which can be made available as MP3 files (and so be downloaded as podcasts). Other teachers help to organise entertainments for their students or run drama groups, sports teams or conversation get-togethers.

Many teachers see a change of teaching sector as a developmental move, both as a way of researching teaching (see B2 above), and also as a way of making life more challenging and more interesting. Perhaps the most interesting move, in this sense, is to become involved in training teachers since this is not only extremely rewarding but also forces us to examine what we do and how we do it in a way that has huge developmental benefits. But any move to a different kind of teaching (such as one-to-one, exam teaching or business English, if these are things we have not done before) will force us to look at our teaching afresh and, by providing us with new challenges, has the power to revitalise our professional lives.

Finally, some teachers become involved in the running and organising of teachers' associations (see page 426). Most associations allow any member to stand for election and there is no doubt that those who become committee members, treasurers and presidents

of, say, IATEFL or TESOL get a huge amount of personal satisfaction from being involved in running organisations like this. When things go well, they also have the satisfaction of knowing that they are doing something incredibly important and valuable for their fellow teachers. Equally, we can become involved in running small teachers' groups such as those mentioned in C3 above.

D3 More training?

One way of developing as a teacher is to undertake more training. Those who have an initial teaching certificate such as the TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test), CELTA (Certificate in Language Teaching for Adults), offered by Cambridge ESOL, or the Trinity Certificate may want to think of going further in the future. They might, for example, enhance their basic course by doing a special supplement on the teaching of young learners or business English, for example. They might want to study for a more advanced qualification such as the Cambridge ESOL DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching for Adults).

Many organisations offer their own specialised courses for different teaching sectors, and if and when teachers have exhausted these, they can think of going forward to study at Master's or Doctoral level.

What we choose to study depends entirely on our own interests and what we hope to achieve as a result of the course of study we undertake. However, it is worth remembering that we should be especially careful to make sure that the institution we choose to study with has the appropriate accreditation and that its reputation among colleagues and the world at large is a satisfactory one. As with many other professions and specialities, English language teaching has its fair share of unscrupulous and untrustworthy operators. Further training usually costs money and so, as with any other expenditure, we should try to ensure that our money will be well and wisely spent.

E Being well

In his article 'Finding the centre', Alan Maley suggested that because teachers have stressful jobs they need to pay attention to their physical well-being, not only so that they can teach better, but also so that they can survive, learn and grow as people (1993: 14).

Teachers need to care for their bodies to counteract stress and fatigue. Katie Head and Pauline Taylor (1997: Chapter 6) suggest techniques for breathing and progressive relaxation. They advocate the use of disciplines such as tai chi, yoga and the Alexander technique to achieve greater physical ease and counteract possible burnout.

One of a teacher's chief physical attributes is the voice. Roz Comins observes that at least one in ten long-serving teachers need clinical help at some time in their career to counteract vocal damage (1999: 8). Yet voice is part of the whole person, both physically and emotionally. When we misuse it, it will let us down. But when we care for it, it will help to keep us healthy and build our confidence. We can do this by breathing correctly and resting our voice and ourselves when necessary. We can drink water or herbal tea rather than ordinary tea, coffee or cola if and when we suffer from laryngitis; we can adjust our pitch and volume and avoid shouting and whispering.

Many teachers work long hours in stressful and challenging situations. At the primary level they seem to be vulnerable to many of the minor illnesses that their students bring with them to school. Keeping healthy by taking exercise and getting between six and a half and eight hours' sleep a night are ways of counteracting this.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **The developing teacher**

On teacher development, see especially the excellent K Head and P Taylor (1997), S Bax (1995), D Nunan (1989) and J Edge (ed) (2002).

- **Reflective teaching**

The concept of the reflective teacher was first (and best) articulated in D Schön (1983) and further developed in Schön (1987). J Richards and C Lockhart (1996) have a book devoted to reflective teaching in second language classrooms.

- **Keeping journals**

The most impressive published teacher journal is J Appel (1995) – a whole book of reflections on his teaching experiences. On journals as training tools, see J McDonough (1994).

- **Action research**

See the excellent M Wallace (1997). On teachers as researchers, see L Miller (2004a).

- **Observation tasks**

D Kurtoglu Eken (1999) suggests having students themselves perform observation tasks as a way of collecting lesson data.

- **Teachers interview students**

See L Miller (2005).

- **Teacher development groups**

K Head and P Taylor (1997: Chapter 5) describe different experiences with teacher development groups.

- **Teachers as learners**

See J McDonough (2002) and B Hyde (2000).

- **Voice**

A Maley (2000) has written a book on the teacher's voice. See also R Comins (1999) and R Whitehead, quoted in K Head and P Taylor (1997: 137–139).

- **Teachers' associations**

Two of the major international teachers' associations are:

- (IATEFL) The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, 3 Kingsdown Chambers, Kingsdown Park, Tankerton, Whitstable, Kent CT5 2DJ, UK (www.iatefl.org).

- (TESOL) Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 1600 Cameron Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, Virginia 22314, USA (www.tesol.edu).

Most countries have teachers' organisations. Some of these are affiliated to either TESOL (e.g. Mextesol in Mexico, TESOL Greece) or IATEFL (i.e. IATEFL Poland, IATEFL Chile). A list of 12,871 links to teachers' associations (at the time of writing) can be found at <http://iteslj.org/links/TESL/Associations/>.

- **Journals for teachers**

Some of the more useful journals for teachers are:

- *English Language Teaching Journal (ELTJ)*, published by Oxford University Press (www.oup.co.uk/eltj/). Articles are both practical and research-based and cover the full range of topics to do with language, methodology, class management and theory.
 - *TESOL Quarterly*, published by TESOL (see www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=209&DID=1679). This contains largely research-based articles and covers a full range of topics to do with language, culture, bilingualism and methodology.
 - *Modern English Teacher (MET)*, published by Keyways Publishing, has a variety of practical articles with classroom ideas, current issues, 'about language' sections, and tips and hints for individual activities (www.onlinemet.com).
 - *English Teaching Professional (ETP)* published by Keyways Publishing is a practical magazine with (usually) short articles on background theory, classroom activities, teacher development, etc. (www.etprofessional.com).
 - *Essential Teacher*, published by the TESOL organisation (see www.tesol.org/s_tesol/secet.asp?CID=1391&DID=7400) has short articles offering guidance for teachers working in varied ESL and EFL workplaces.
 - *Humanising Language Teaching* (www.hltmag.co.uk) is a free online journal published by Pilgrims that offers an eclectic mix of articles, comments, jokes and book reviews. It has an extremely useful search by author and topic facility.
 - *The Internet TESL Journal* (see <http://iteslj.org>). This site from Japan (which has been going since 1995) offers articles, lessons, techniques, questions, games, jokes and a fantastic series of links to other websites.
- **Teacher examination schemes**
- Among the international exams which teachers can take are the following:
- Cambridge exams are offered by the University of Cambridge ESOL Cambridge, UK (www.cambridgeesol.org).
 - TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test): this is a PET-level (see page 391) multiple-choice exam which tests basic knowledge of some teaching theory.
 - CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults): this is a (mostly) pre-service practical course which prepares candidates to teach English to adults.

- CELTYL (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Young Learners): as its name suggests, this is an exam for people who want to specialise in teaching English to children. It includes a large practical element.
- DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults): this is for candidates who have substantial experience before they start studying for the DELTA. It examines both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

There are other qualifications too, such as ICALT (In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching) which helps to develop teacher knowledge and competence within the context where they are working and IDLTM (International Diploma in Language Teaching Management).

- Trinity College (www.trinitycollege.co.uk) offers a range of teacher certification schemes. These include:
 - CertTESOL: this is designed for those with little or no knowledge of teaching English. It equips candidates with basic teaching skills.
 - LTCL Diploma TESOL: this is designed for experienced teachers and has four distinct units.
 - CertTEYL (Certificate in Teaching English to Young Learners): this is designed for people whose first language is not English and who have little or no knowledge of teaching English, but who wish to teach children between 6 and 12 years of age.
 - ICT in the Classroom: designed in collaboration with The Consultants-E (www.theconsultants-e.com), this course is for teachers who want to become better users of information technology.

Individual institutions offer their own qualifications. For example, the International House World Organisation (www.ihworld.com) offers qualifications in teaching English, teaching other languages, teaching younger learners and business teaching. In the USA many teachers enter the profession via an MA in TESOL such as that offered online by the New School (a university in New York – www.newschool.edu/matesol). Many universities in the USA, the UK and many other countries – e.g. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc. – offer similar face-to-face or online undergraduate or postgraduate courses of study.