6 Describing teachers

A What is 'teaching'?

It is often helpful to use metaphors to describe what teachers do. Sometimes, for example, teachers say they are like actors because they feel as if they are always on the stage. Others talk of themselves as orchestral conductors because they direct conversation and set the pace and tone. Yet others feel like gardeners because they plant the seeds and then watch them grow. The range of images – these and others – that teachers use about themselves indicates the range of views that they have about their profession.

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

Zoltan Dörnyei and Tim Murphey see the business of teaching as the exercise of group leadership (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003: Chapter 6). It is our role as group development practitioners that really counts, they suggest. One of our principal responsibilities, in other words, is to foster good relationships with the groups in front of us so that they work together cooperatively in a spirit of friendliness and harmonious creativity. But how can this best be achieved? Dörnyei and Murphey suggest that 'a group conscious teaching style involves an increasing encouragement of and reliance on the group's own resources and the active facilitation of autonomous learning that is in accordance with the maturity level of the group' (2003: 99). When teachers and groups first meet each other, they suggest, students expect leadership and direction. This gives them a clear focus and makes them feel secure at the same time. But as groups develop their group identity, teachers will want to relax their grip and foster more democratic class practices where students are involved in the process of decision-making and direction-finding.

Two things need to be said about this view of the teacher's craft. In the first place, being democratic and letting students participate in decision-making takes more effort and organisation than controlling the class from the front. Furthermore, the promotion of learner autonomy (where students not only learn on their own, but also take responsibility for that learning), is only one view of the teaching–learning relationship, and is very culturally biased. In some situations both teachers and learners (and society in general) may feel more comfortable with a more autocratic leadership style, and while this might not suit the preferences of some, especially methodologists, it is highly attractive to others.

It is worth pointing out that being a 'democratic' teacher (where the teacher shares some of the leadership with the students) is simply one style of teaching, informed by strong beliefs, of course, but nevertheless only one way of doing things. Some teachers are effective when teaching in this way, but others may find it more difficult.

Whether or not we are more autocratic or democratic as teachers, we are called upon to play many different roles in a language learning classroom. Our ability to carry these out effectively will depend to a large extent on the rapport we establish with our students, and on our own level of knowledge and skill.

B In the classroom

'Students can pick up much from the way their teacher walks into the room at the start of that first lesson,' writes Rose Senior (Senior 2006: 93). The way we dress, the stance we adopt and our attitude to the class make an immediate impression on students. In this sense we need to make some kind of distinction between who we are, and who we are *as teachers*. This does not mean that we should somehow be dishonest about who we are when we face students. There will always be a need to be 'congruent' (Rogers 1961), that is being honest to oneself and appropriately honest with our students. But it does mean thinking about presenting a professional face to the students which they find both interesting and effective. When we walk into the classroom, we want them to see someone who looks like a teacher whatever else they look like. This does not mean conforming to some kind of teacher stereotype, but rather finding, each in our own way, a persona that we adopt when we cross the classroom threshold. The point is that we should be able to adopt a variety of roles within the classroom which facilitate learning. Some of these roles come naturally to most teachers, while others have to be thought about more carefully.

B1 The roles of a teacher

Many commentators use the term *facilitator* to describe a particular kind of teacher, one who is democratic rather than autocratic, and one who fosters learner autonomy through the use of groupwork and pairwork and by acting as more of a resource than a transmitter of knowledge. However, since we can say that the aim of all committed teachers is to facilitate learning, however they go about it, it makes more sense to describe different teacher roles in more detail and say what they are useful for, rather than make value judgements about their effectiveness in terms of their 'facilitator' credentials.

- **Controller:** when teachers act as controllers, they are in charge of the class and of the activity taking place and are often 'leading from the front'. Controllers take the register, tell students things, organise drills, read aloud and in various other ways exemplify the qualities of a teacher-fronted classroom.

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

Of course, there are times when acting as a controller makes sense, for example when giving explanations, organising question and answer work, lecturing, making announcements or bringing a class to order. Indeed, such leadership may have a highly beneficial effect on a group, especially in the early stages. In many educational contexts it is the most common teacher role, and many teachers fail to go beyond it since controlling is the role they are used to and are most comfortable with. Yet this is a pity because by sticking to one mode of behaviour, we deny ourselves and the students many other possibilities and modes of learning which are good not only for learning itself, but also for our students' enjoyment of that learning.

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

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

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

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

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

  The danger when teachers act as participants, of course, is that they can easily dominate the proceedings. This is hardly surprising since teachers usually have more English at their disposal than their students do. But it is also due to the fact that even in the most egalitarian classroom, the teacher is still frequently perceived of as 'the authority' and tends to be listened to with greater attention than other students. It takes great skill and sensitivity to by-pass this perception for the times when we wish to participate in the way we are suggesting here.

- **Resource:** in some activities it is inappropriate for us to take on any of the roles we have suggested so far. Suppose that the students are involved in a piece of group writing, or that they are preparing for a presentation they are to make to the class. In such situations, having the teacher take part, or try to control them, or even turn up to prompt them might be entirely unwelcome. However, the students may still have need of their teacher as a resource. They might need to ask how to say or write something or ask what a word or phrase means. They might want to know information in the middle of an activity about that activity or they might want information about where to look for something – a book or a website, for example. This is where we can be one of the most important resources they have.

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

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

- **Tutor:** when students are working on longer projects, such as process writing (see Chapter 19, B1) or preparation for a talk or a debate, we can work with individuals or small groups, pointing them in directions they have not yet thought of taking. In such situations, we are combining the roles of prompter and resource – in other words, acting as a tutor.

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

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

The role that we take on is dependent, as we have seen, on what it is we wish the students to achieve. Where some activities are difficult to organise without the teacher acting as controller, others have no chance of success unless we take a less domineering role. There are times when we will need to act as a prompter where, on other occasions, it would be more appropriate to act as a resource. A lot will depend on the group we are teaching since our leadership style may well depend on the particular students we are working with; whereas some students might be more comfortable with using the teacher as a resource and a tutor, others may hunger for us to adopt a more controlling role.

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

B2 Organising students and activities

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

The first thing we need to do when organising something is to get students involved, engaged and ready. In most cases, this means making it clear that something 'new' is going to happen and that the activity will be enjoyable, interesting or beneficial. At this point teachers will often say something like *Now we're going to do this because ...* and will offer a rationale for the activity students are to be asked to perform. Thus, instead of just doing something because the teacher says so, they are prepared, hopefully with some enthusiasm, for an activity whose purpose they understand.

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

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

Finally, we stop the activity when the students have finished and/or when other factors indicate that it is time to stop. This might be because the students are bored or because some pairs or groups have already finished before the others (see Chapter 10, B4). Perhaps the lesson is coming to the end and we want to give some summarising comments. At this point, it is vital to organise some kind of feedback, whether this is merely a *Did you enjoy that?* type of question (a vitally important question, of course) or whether it is a more detailed discussion of what has taken place.

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

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

We can summarise the role of organiser as follows:

Engage → instruct (demonstrate) → initiate → organise feedback

B3 The teacher as performer

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

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

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

If, then, teachers are all performers in the classroom at some level, what does this mean for a teacher who wants to promote learner autonomy? Can we 'perform' and still act as a resource? What kind of performance should we adopt when giving feedback? Does 'performance' automatically mean that we must be standing at the front of the class putting on a show? For clearly if this was the case, teacher performance would describe only one kind of teacher role and might be criticised for the very transmissive and teacher-centred behaviour it demonstrated. But as W and X show, different teachers perform differently. Not only that, but any one teacher probably also has many different performance styles, depending on the situation. One minute we may be standing at the front commanding or entertaining, but a few minutes later we will be working quietly with a pair while the other students are working in their own pairs.

Knowing that different teachers act differently and that individual teachers vary their behaviour, depending upon what they are doing, gives us insights into classroom behaviour. It suggests that an alternative to saying *what* role teachers should be playing is to describe *how* they should be playing it. Just as stage directions give actors an insight into what lines mean, so similar descriptions in teaching may give us insights into how activities can best be managed. Thus, for an activity where the students are involved in a team game, we will want to behave energetically (because a game needs excitement and energy), encouragingly (if students need a nudge to have a go), clearly (because we don't want the game to fail through misunderstanding) and fairly (because students care about this in a competition situation). If, on the other hand, students are involved in a role-play, we should 'perform' clearly (because students need to know exactly what the parameters of the role-play are), encouragingly (because students may need prompting to get them going), but also retiringly (because, once the activity has got going, we don't want to overwhelm the students' performance) and supportively (because students may need help at various points). Figure 1 shows how we might describe these and other activities.

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

FIGURE 1: Describing teacher performance styles

What seems to be clear is that while we certainly need to be aware of the roles and tasks we described in B1 above, and while we need to be able to use each of these different roles, it is also vitally important to consider how we actually behave during their performance.

C Rapport

In order to work well with the different roles we have been describing – and if we wish to develop a good learning environment in the classroom – we need to establish an appropriate relationship with our students. We need to spend time making sure that teacher–student rapport is positive and useful.

Rapport means, in essence, the relationship that the students have with the teacher and vice versa. Although it may be, in Jim Scrivener's words, 'notoriously difficult to define or quantify' (Scrivener 2005: 23), nevertheless we can recognise it when we see it: a class where there is a positive, enjoyable and respectful relationship between teacher and students, and between the students themselves.

In part, successful rapport derives from the students' perception of the teacher as a good leader and a successful professional. If, when teachers come to the class, students can see that they are well-organised and well-prepared (that is, they have thought about what they are going to do in the lesson), they are likely to have confidence in their teacher. Such confidence is an essential component in the successful relationship between students and their teachers. It extends as well to the teachers' demonstrable knowledge of the subject they are teaching and to their familiarity with classroom materials and equipment. All of these things tell the students that they are 'in good hands'.

However, rapport (and effective classroom management, as we shall see in Chapter 9) also depends on the way that we interact with students. We might be the most well-prepared and knowledgeable teachers in our school, but if that interaction isn't working well, our ability to help students to learn will be seriously compromised.

Successful interaction with students depends on four key characteristics:

- **Recognising students:** students want their teachers to know who they are. They would like their teachers to know their names, of course, but they also appreciate it when teachers have some understanding of their characters.

  It is extremely difficult for teachers to know the names of all their students, especially at the beginning of a term or semester when they have, say, nine large groups. As a result, teachers have developed a number of strategies to help them cope with this situation. One method is to ask the students (at least in the first week or two) to put name cards on the desk in front of them or stick name badges to their sweaters or jackets. We can also draw up a seating plan and ask students always to sit in the same place until we have learnt their names. However, this means we can't move students around when we want to, and students – especially younger ones – sometimes take pleasure in sitting in the wrong place just to confuse us.

  Many teachers use the register to make notes about individual students (Do they wear glasses? Are they tall? etc.) and others keep separate notes about the individuals in their classes. Some teachers study the register or class seating plan before the lesson starts or when it is finished to try to fix student names in their heads.

  There is no easy way of remembering students' names, yet it is extremely important that we do so if good rapport is to be established with individuals. We need, therefore, to find ways of doing this that suit us best.

  But knowing students' names also involves knowing about students. At any age, they will be pleased when they realise that their teacher has remembered things about them, and has some understanding of who they are. Once again, this is extremely difficult in large classes, especially when we have a number of different groups, but part of a teacher's skill is to persuade students that we recognise them and who and what they are.

- **Listening to students:** students respond very well to teachers who listen to them. Although there are many calls on our time, nevertheless we need to make ourselves as available as we can to listen to individual students' opinions and concerns, often outside the lessons themselves.

  But we need to listen properly to students in lessons, too. And we need to show that we are interested in what they have to say. Nothing demotivates a student more than when the teacher is dismissive or uninterested in what they have to say. Of course, no one can force us to be genuinely interested in absolutely everything and everyone, but it is part of a teacher's professional personality – part of our skill as teachers – that we should be able to convince students that we are listening to what they say with every sign of attention.

  As far as possible, we also need to listen to the students' comments on how they are getting on, and which activities and techniques they respond well or badly to. If we just go on teaching the same thing day after day without being aware of our students' reactions, it will become more and more difficult to maintain the rapport that is so important for successful classes.

  Finally, we should point out that listening is not just done with the ears! We need to show that we are listening and paying attention to our students, and this will mean approaching them, making eye contact and generally looking interested. As Hongshen Zhang points out, 'eyes talk' (Hongshen Zhang 2006).

- **Respecting students:** correcting students is always a delicate event. If we are too critical, we risk demotivating them, yet if we are constantly praising them, we risk turning them into 'praise junkies', who begin to need approval all the time (see page 138). The problem we face, however, is that while some students are happy to be corrected robustly, others need more support and positive reinforcement. In other words, just as students have different learning styles and intelligences, so, too, they have different preferences when it comes to being corrected. But whichever method of correction we choose, and whoever we are working with, students need to know that we are treating them with respect, and not using mockery or sarcasm – or expressing despair at their efforts!

  Respect is vital, too, when we deal with any kind of problem behaviour (see Chapter 9). We could, of course, respond to indiscipline or awkwardness by being biting in our criticism of the student who has done something we do not approve of. Yet this will be counter-productive. It is the behaviour we want to criticise, not the character of the student in question.

  Teachers who respect students do their best to see them in a positive light. They are not negative about their learners or in the way they deal with them in class. They do not react with anger or ridicule when students do unplanned things, but instead use a respectful professionalism to solve the problem.

- **Being even-handed:** most teachers have some students that they warm to more than others. For example, many teachers react well to those who take part, are cheerful and cooperative, who take responsibility for their own learning, and do what is asked of them without complaint. Sometimes teachers are less enthusiastic about those who are less forthcoming, and who find learner autonomy, for example, more of a challenge. Yet, as a teenage student once told me, 'a good teacher should try to draw out the quiet ones and control the more talkative ones', and one of her colleagues echoed this by saying that 'a good teacher is ... someone who asks the people who don't always put their hands up.'

  The reasons that some students are not forthcoming may be many and varied, ranging from shyness to their cultural or family backgrounds. Sometimes students are reluctant to take part overtly because of other stronger characters in the group. And these quiet students will only be negatively affected when they see far more attention being paid to their more robust classmates. At the same time, giving some students more attention than others may make those students more difficult to deal with later since they will come to expect special treatment, and may take our interest as a licence to become over-dominant in the classroom. Moreover, it is not just teenage students who can suffer from being the 'teacher's pet'.

  Treating all students equally not only helps to establish and maintain rapport, but is also a mark of professionalism.

D The teacher as teaching aid

In a language classroom there are specific ways in which we can help our students both hear and understand language.

D1 Mime and gesture

One of the things that we are uniquely able to do on the spot is to use mime, gesture and expression to convey meaning and atmosphere. It is not difficult to pretend to be drinking or to pull a sad face. Demonstrating words like *frightened* or *old* is fairly easy for many teachers. Shrugging the shoulders can be used to indicate indifference and we can use gestures to indicate the meaning of words such as *big, small, short, tall*, etc., as well as to suggest concepts such as past time (a hand pointing backwards over the shoulder) or future time (a hand pointing forwards).

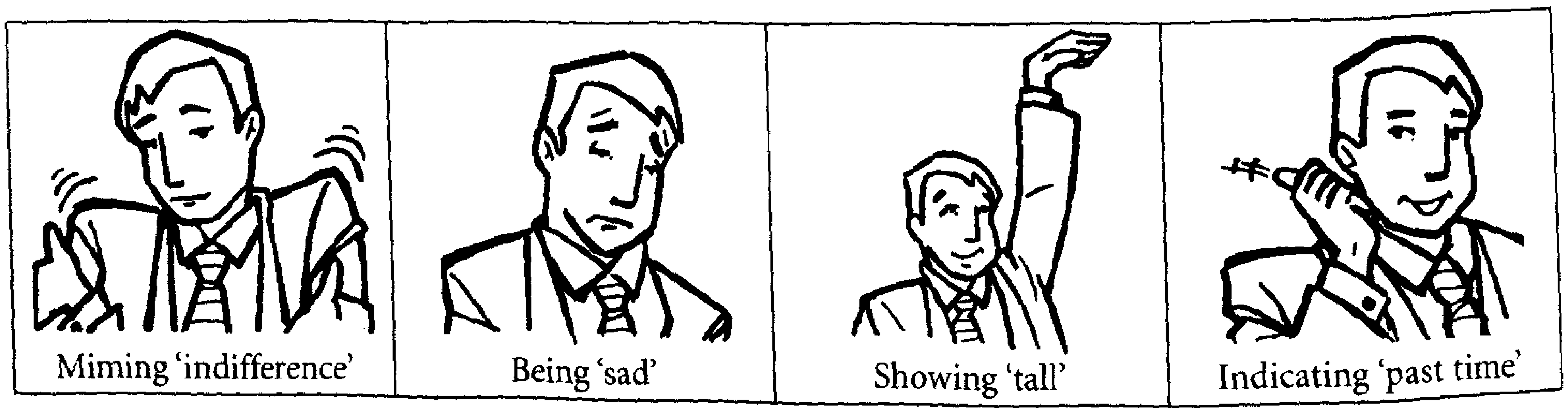

FIGURE 2: Mime, expression and gesture

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

One gesture which is widely used, but which teachers should employ with care, is the act of pointing to students to ask them to participate in a drill or give some other form of response. Though it is quick and efficient, especially when we are having trouble with our students' names, it can seem aggressive and it may make it depressingly obvious to the students that, in having failed to learn their names, we are less than respectful of their identity. In many cultures it is, anyway, just plain rude. An alternative is to use the upturned palm of the hand in an inclusive gesture which is far more welcoming (see Figure 3).

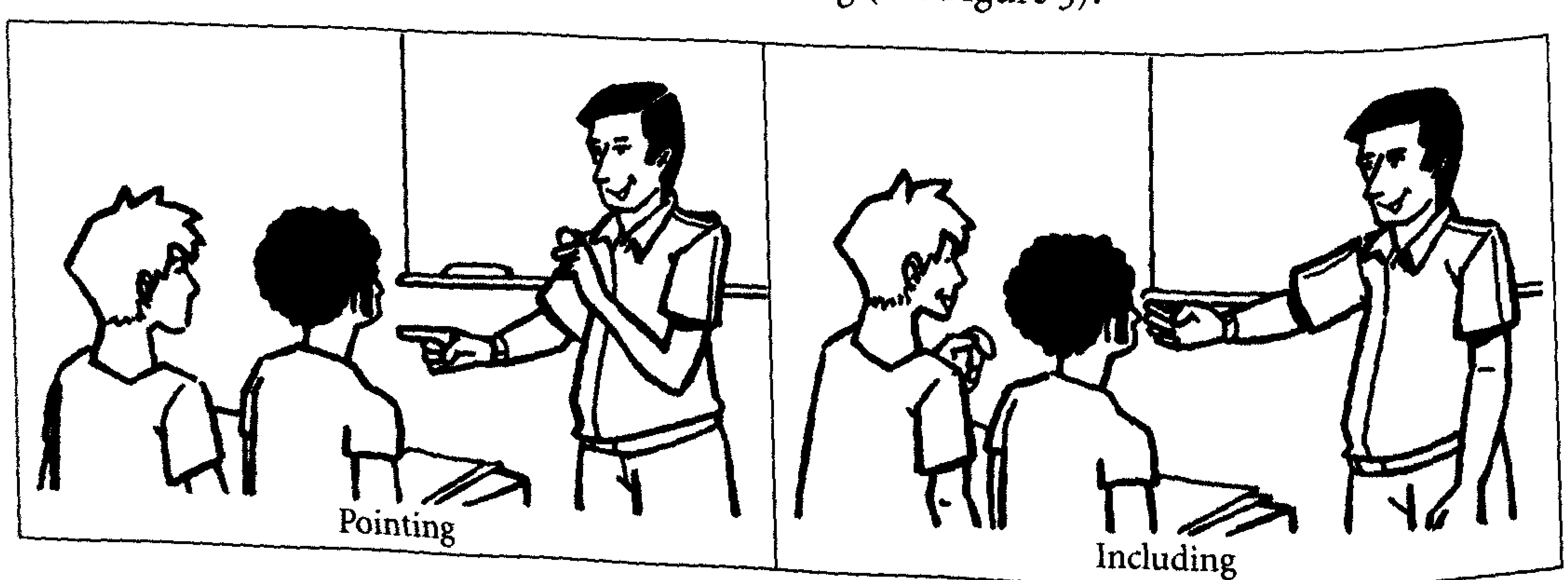

FIGURE 3: Pointing and including

D2 The teacher as language model

Students get models of language from textbooks, reading materials of all sorts and from audio and video tapes. But we can also model language ourselves. This does not only mean the giving of a clear language model as in the PPP procedure described in Chapter 4, A2, but also, for example, the performance of a dialogue or the reading aloud of a text.

One way in which we can model dialogues is to draw two faces on the board and then stand in front of each of them when required to speak their lines (see Figure 4). For such activities we should make sure that we can be heard, and we should animate our performance with as much enthusiasm as is appropriate for the conversation we are modelling. We should judge the appropriate speed, too, making sure that however slowly we speak, a natural rhythm is maintained and normal intonation patterns preserved as far as possible.

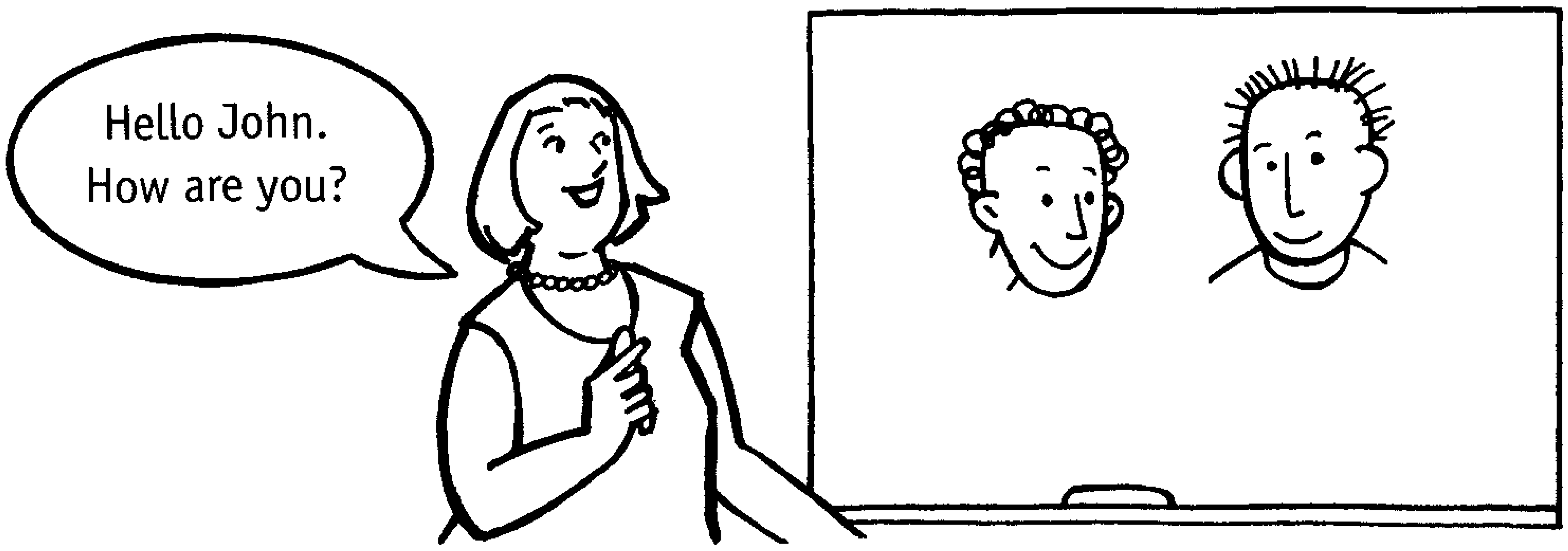

FIGURE 4: Board face dialogue

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

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

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

D3 The teacher as provider of comprehensible input

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

On most training courses a distinction is made between student talking time (STT) and teacher talking time (TTT). As we shall see in Chapter 10, it is the concern to maximise the former that leads many teachers to use pair- and groupwork; it has been assumed that on the whole we want to see more STT than TTT, since, as trainers frequently point out to their student teachers, 'you don't need the language practice, they do!'

It is certainly true that some teachers talk too much and that this is not necessarily advantageous for their students, especially since what those teachers say is unlikely to be always interesting. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, it is widely accepted that a vital ingredient in the learning of any language is exposure to it. The more comprehensible input the students get, the better. Yet where can they go for such language input? In the world outside the classroom, English, if they have access to it, will frequently appear incomprehensible, especially when they are at a low level. They need something or someone to provide language which has been 'roughly-tuned' to be comprehensible to them. And we are right there in the classroom to give them just that!

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

As a result, it may be a good idea to consider not just how much the teacher talks, but also teacher talking quality (TTQ). It is the quality of what we say that really counts. As to when we say it, that depends on how it fits in with the need for students to get production opportunities and all the other myriad aspects of the curriculum.

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

E Native-speaker teachers and non-native-speaker teachers

Jacinta Thomas, a professional with years of teaching experience and a PhD under her belt, writes of the situations where she and other non-native-speaker teachers of English have to establish their 'credibility as teachers of English' because they are not seen as 'native speakers'. She tells the following story of life in the USA:

> A 95-year-old neighbour of mine, a dear sweet old lady, recently introduced me to her daughter as a college teacher and quickly added 'Guess what she teaches?' 'What?' her daughter asked. 'English. Imagine someone coming from India to teach here,' replied my neighbour with a sweet chuckle. (Thomas 1999: 2)

For many years an opposition has been created between native-speaker teachers of English and non-native-speaker teachers. And for much of that time, many non-native-speaker teachers have felt a sense of injustice and sometimes even inferiority at what they perceive as the assumed superiority of the native speaker (this is the 'enervating inferiority complex' described by Rajagopalan and quoted on page 17 of this book). Although, if and when we reach the age of 95, we might expect people to treat our opinions a little more leniently than before, nevertheless we can say that Jacinta Thomas's neighbour demonstrated a widely-held prejudice born out of ignorance about what teachers do and what effect they can be expected to have on their students. Her neighbour would have been unaware, too, of the discussions about the role of English in the modern world and the growing importance of World English (see Chapter 1, A3) which have taken place since she made her remark.

Nevertheless, what Adrian Holliday calls *native-speakerism* – which he describes as 'a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that "native speaker" teachers represent a "Western culture" from which springs the ideals both of the English language and English language teaching methodology' (2006: 385) – is still alive and well in some quarters, not least in the minds of some students, who seem to think that being taught by someone who has English as a mother tongue will somehow help them learn better.

But the world is changing, as we saw in Chapter 1, and English is no longer owned by anybody in particular, least of all the native speakers of the world who are in a minority which is becoming daily less significant – at least in numerical terms. It is clear, therefore, that any superiority that native speakers might once have had is rapidly becoming less sustainable. In the end, the value of a teacher depends not just on their ability to use a language, but also on their knowledge about that language and their understanding of how to facilitate both that ability and that knowledge in the minds of their students. This is not to suggest that there is anything intrinsically wrong with native-speaker teachers; on the contrary, good native-speaker teachers are worth their weight in gold. But then so are good non-native-speaker teachers, which is the whole point.

Non-native-speaker teachers have many advantages that their 'native' colleagues do not. In the first place, they have often had the same experience of learning English as their students are now having, and this gives them an instant (even if only subconscious) understanding of what their students are going through. Where they teach a group of students who speak their own native language, they are able to maximise the benefits of L1 and L2 use in the ways we will discuss in Chapter 7 (although many primary and secondary school classes around the world are becoming increasingly multilingual, especially in urban areas – see page 16). Non-native-speaker teachers are frequently considerably more familiar with local mores and learning styles than visiting native speakers are.

Native speakers, on the other hand, often have the advantage of a linguistic confidence about their language in the classroom which non-native-speaker teachers sometimes lack – indeed, it may be differences in linguistic confidence which account for some differences in teaching practices between the two groups, as Peter Medgyes suggested many years ago (Medgyes 1992).

In certain circumstances, a native-speaker teacher's inability to communicate effectively in the students' L1 (because they have only recently arrived in the country they are working in, for example) has a positive rather than a negative effect in much the same way as multilingual classes provoke inter-student communication in English. Native-speaker teachers are often – but not always – seen in a positive light by their students (which can have a good effect on motivation), and by their non-native colleagues. David Carless, for example, reporting on NET (Native English Teacher)/LET (Local English Teacher) peer teaching in Hong Kong primary schools suggests that there are 'a number of reasons why the primary school can be a positive site for NET/LET collaboration' (2006: 335).

As recently as ten years ago it would have been impossible to find a single non-native-speaker teacher working in a language school in, say, Britain or Australia. But that is no longer the case. Progress may be slow in this respect, but there are signs of such progress. In the end, provided teachers can use the language (and know about it), it is the quality of their teaching that counts, not where they come from or how they learnt or acquired English.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Teacher's roles**
  An important book on teacher roles is T Wright (1987).

- **Teacher talking time**
  As long ago as 1985, T Lowe was discussing the value of teacher talking time as roughly-tuned input. On classroom language, see B Winn-Smith (2001). On the nature of teacher talk in more facilitative classrooms, see J Clifton (2006).

- **Native-speaker teachers and non-native-speaker teachers**
  Apart from the references in this chapter, see G Braine (ed) (1999), A and Y Tajino (2000), who talk about team teaching with native and non-native speakers in a Japanese context, A Davies (2003) and Y Park (2006), who asks whether non-natives will ever get a 'fair chance'. Icy Lee (2005a) discusses empowering non-native-speaker teachers. See also M Szwaj (1999) and J Suarez (2000).

7 Describing learning contexts

A The place and means of instruction

We have already seen that English is studied for a number of reasons (Chapter 1, B4). People engaged in commerce – or who are hoping to work in a business environment – study business English. Students who are about go to university – or who are already there – study EAP (English for Academic Purposes), while others may study English for tourism, science and technology, medicine, etc.

- **Schools and language schools:** a huge number of students learn English in primary and secondary classrooms around the world. They have not chosen to do this themselves, but learn because English is on the curriculum. Depending on the country, area and the school itself, they may have the advantage of well-equipped rooms and the latest classroom equipment and information technology (IT), or they may, as in many parts of the world, be sitting in rows in classrooms with a blackboard and no other teaching aid.

  Private language schools, on the other hand, tend to be better equipped than some government schools (though this is not always the case). They will frequently have smaller class sizes and, crucially, the students in them may well have chosen to come and study.

- **In-school and in-company:** the vast majority of language classes in the world take place in educational institutions such as the schools and language schools we have already mentioned, and, in addition, colleges and universities. In such situations teachers have to be aware of school policy and conform to syllabus and curriculum decisions taken by whoever is responsible for the academic running of the school. There may well be learning outcomes which students are expected to achieve, and students may be preparing for specific exams.

  A number of companies also offer language classes and expect teachers to go to the company office or factory to teach. Here the 'classroom' may not be quite as appropriate as those which are specially designed for teaching and learning. But more importantly, the teacher may need to negotiate the class content, not only with the students but also with whoever is paying for the tuition.

- **Real and virtual learning environments:** language learning has traditionally involved a teacher and a student or students being in the same physical space. However, the development of high-speed Internet access has helped to bring about new virtual learning environments in which students can learn even when they are literally thousands of miles away (and in a different time zone) from a teacher or other classmates.

  Some of the issues for both real and virtual learning environments are the same. Students still need to be motivated (see pages 98–104) and we still need to offer help in that area. As a result, the best virtual learning sites have online tutors who interact with their students via email or online chat forums. It is also possible to create groups of students who are all following the same online programme, and who can, therefore, 'talk' to each other in the same way (i.e. electronically). But despite these interpersonal elements, some students find it more difficult to sustain their motivation online than they might as part of a real learning group.

Virtual learning is significantly different from face-to-face learning for a number of reasons. Firstly, for the most part, students can attend lessons when they want (though real-time chat forums have to be scheduled), rather than when lessons are timetabled (as in schools). Secondly, it no longer matters where the students are since they can log on from any location in the world.

Online learning may have these advantages, but some of the benefits of real learning environments are less easy to replicate electronically. These include the physical reality of having teachers and students around you when you are learning so that you can see their expressions and get messages from their gestures, tone of voice, etc. Many learners will prefer the presence of real people to the sight of a screen, with or without pictures and video. Of course, some communication software (such as MSN Messenger and Skype) allows users to see each other on the screen as they communicate, but this is still less attractive – and considerably more jerky – than being face to face with the teacher and fellow students. And, of course, whereas in real learning environments learning can take place with very little technical equipment, virtual learning relies on good hardware and software, and effective and reliable Internet connections.

B Class size

English language classes vary greatly in size. Some students opt for private lessons, so the teacher only has to deal with one student at a time. However, some teachers have classes of as many as 100 (and sometimes even more)! Everything depends on the particular education system that a teacher is working in. That is why, if you ask a teacher what a 'large class' is, they might answer 20, 40, 60 or 80 students.

The techniques we use will depend to some extent on how big our classes are. Whereas pairwork, for example, is extremely useful for larger groups (see Chapter 10, A4) if we want to maximise individual student talking time, it is perhaps less necessary in a group of, say, five students where everyone will have plenty of opportunities to speak during a lesson. Having students make mini-presentations is clearly less stressful for them in small groups than it is if they find themselves talking in front of 50 of their peers. Having 80 students milling around the classroom presents more extreme logistical problems than it does when there are 14 students in the room.

We will look at the two extremes of the class-size debate, one-to-one teaching and large classes.

B1 Teaching one-to-one

A special teaching context is that of an individual student working alone with a teacher over a period of hours or weeks in what are often referred to as 'private classes'. Such one-to-one teaching is extremely popular, especially for business students. But it is also ideal for students who cannot fit into normal school schedules or who are keen to have individual attention rather than being part of a group.

One-to-one lessons have considerable advantages over classes with two or more students in the group. In the first place, whereas in a group an individual student only gets a part of the teacher's attention, in a private lesson the teacher is focused exclusively on one person. In such circumstances, too, the student has opportunities to do all the student speaking, rather than only receiving a fraction of the total speaking time. Even more importantly than this, both teacher and student can tailor the course to exactly what is appropriate for that one student, rather than having to reach a compromise based on what is suitable for a group as a whole. This has enormous advantages not only for the designing of a programme of study (where the syllabus and content can be matched to a particular student's needs and interests), but also in terms of the student's learning style and what kind of stimulus (visual, audio, etc.) they respond to best (see Chapter 5, B4). One-to-one students get greatly enhanced feedback from their teachers.

It is also much easier to be flexible when teaching individual students than it is when managing a class. Changing an activity and moving on to something completely different presents less of a problem with one student than with 30. If appropriate, the teacher and the student can, on the spur of the moment, agree to leave the classroom (to do some language research, for example) and this does not cause the kind of organisational and logistical problems that moving a whole group around is likely to entail. Above all, one-to-one teaching allows teachers to enter into a genuinely dialogic relationship with their students in a way that is considerably less feasible in a large group situation.

Nevertheless, one-to-one teaching is not without its drawbacks. The intensity of the relationship makes the rapport (or lack of it) between teacher and student vitally important. Some teachers find individual students difficult to deal with – sometimes simply because they don't like them very much – and the same can be true of a student's feelings towards the teacher. Some private students are lacking in confidence or untalkative for other reasons. Some find the teacher's methodological style difficult to deal with because it is unfamiliar to them. Students and teachers can often become tired and sleepy in one-to-one sessions because the dynamic of a crowded classroom is missing. Some individual students can be very demanding and constantly expect more and more from their teacher. And some students seem to expect a private teacher to do all the work for them, forgetting that one-to-one learning demands just as much, if not more, from the student as it does from the teacher.

It is difficult to be prescriptive about one-to-one teaching, especially since so much will depend on exactly who the people involved are, but the following guidelines are almost always appropriate:

- **Make a good impression:** first impressions count with groups of any size, but are especially important when teaching one-to-one. With no group to help create an atmosphere, the way the student perceives the teacher at their first encounter is of vital importance. This is especially so since some one-to-one courses are of relatively short duration and there will be less time to change a student's misconception.

  A good impression is created by the way we present ourselves (in terms of our appearance) and how we behave during the first lesson.

- **Be well-prepared:** one of the most important ways of creating a good impression is to show the student that we are well-prepared and that we have given thought to what we are going to do in the lesson. This does not mean we are going to stick to exactly what we have planned, come what may; as with all lessons (but especially with one-to-one teaching), we must be alert to what happens and respond accordingly, perhaps moving right away from what we had intended to do. But if the student sees that we come well-prepared and with a range of possible activities which might suit them, this will greatly boost their confidence in us.

- **Be flexible:** one-to-one lessons provide enormous opportunities for flexibility for the reasons stated above. If a student is beginning to get tired, for example, it is not difficult to suggest a two-minute break involving getting up and walking around. If a planned topic is failing to arouse the student's interest (or the teacher's), it is relatively easy to switch to something else, or to ask the student whether they would like to approach the topic in another way. If language work is proving more or less difficult than anticipated, we will not find it impossible to change the pace, move forwards or go back to something we studied earlier.
- **Adapt to the student:** one of the great benefits of one-to-one lessons is that we can adapt what we do to suit a particular student's preferences and learning style. Robert E Jones, for example, had problems with a 60-year-old Japanese student who was convinced she could not learn. He was at his wits' end about how to help her make progress until, after a cycling trip with his wife, he published a little magazine with photographs of his travels around Hokkaido. Suddenly his student perked up. She was extremely interested in his trip, so interested in fact that she had read the mini-magazine, translating every single word (in defiance of orthodox wisdom), and she arrived for the next lesson happy, enthusiastic and without her usual confidence-sapping doubts. Jones (2001) referred to this as 'Machiko's breakthrough', but in a sense it was his own breakthrough because now he had found a key to open Machiko's learning door. He could adapt to her interests (she liked to hear about her teacher's life) and let her influence his methodology (however he might feel about going through texts in this way).
- **Listen and watch:** adapting to students can only take place if we are extremely observant about how individual students respond to different activities, styles and content. One-to-one teachers need to listen just as much as they talk – indeed the balance should always be in favour of listening. But we can also ask students to tell us how they are getting on, what they need more or less of, and what they would like. Our ability to be flexible means that getting such feedback (and observing our students) can help us to amend our plans to suit specific individuals.
- **Give explanations and guidelines:** when we first meet one-to-one students, it is important to explain what is going to happen, and how the student can contribute to the programme they are involved in. It is important to lay down guidelines about what they can expect the teacher to do and be, and what the teacher expects of them. It is especially important, at this stage, for students to know that they can influence what happens in the sessions by saying what they want and need more and less of.
- **Don't be afraid to say no:** one-to-one teachers should not be afraid to say no in two specific situations. Firstly, the personality match with a student is sometimes, unfortunately, completely unsuccessful. Normally we can get over this by being extremely professional,

maintaining a distance between ourselves and the student, and letting the content of our lessons drive matters forward successfully. Sometimes, however, things just don't work. In such rare situations teachers should be prepared to terminate the classes (if they are working for themselves) or expect that the institution they work for will make alternative arrangements for themselves and the student.

Some one-to-one teachers feel extremely pressurised when their student appears to want more and more from them as if this will solve all their problems and teach them English effortlessly. We have to be able to tell a student when their demands are excessive and say that we cannot do everything they are asking for. Most students will understand this.

One-to-one teaching, just like teaching larger groups, has huge advantages and some disadvantages. By maximising the former, there is a good chance it can be rewarding for both teacher and student.

B2 Large classes

Many commentators talk about large classes as a problem, and it is certainly true that they present challenges that smaller classes do not. How, for example, can we give students personal attention? How can we get students interacting with each other? What can we do to make organisation smooth and effective?

However, there are also many benefits to teaching large classes. As Natalie Hess points out (Hess 2001: 2–4), in large classes there are always enough students to get interaction going, and there is a rich variety of human resources. Furthermore, there are many possible 'teachers' in the class, and, as she says, we will never get bored because the challenge is great!

There are a number of key elements in successful large-group teaching:

- **Be organised:** the bigger the group, the more we have to be organised and know what we are going to do before the lesson starts. It is much more difficult to change tack or respond to individual concerns with a large class than it is with a group of four or five students.

- **Establish routines:** the daily management of a large class will be greatly enhanced if we establish routines that we and our students recognise straight away. This will make jobs like taking the register, setting and collecting homework, getting into pairs and groups, etc. far easier. They will be done far more quickly and more efficiently if students know what is expected because they are routine operations. Part of our job at the start of a course, therefore, will be to establish good routines; this might take some time in the beginning, but will save time later on.

- **Use a different pace for different activities:** in a small class – or in one-to-one teaching – it is not difficult to vary the pace of what we do on the basis of how the students are reacting. Fairly early on in a course we will come to understand the strengths and weaknesses of individuals. However, this is far more difficult in large groups and, as a result, we will need to be more careful about how we organise different activities with them. If we ask students to say something in a large class, for example, we need to give them time to respond before charging ahead. If we are conducting drills, we may be able to work at quite a fast pace, but if we are asking students to think about something, we will want to slow the pace right down.

- **Maximise individual work:** the more we can give students individual work, even in a large class, the more we can mitigate the effects of always working with a large group 'as a whole'. Perhaps we can get students to use graded readers (see page 283) as part of their individual reading programme. We will show how this can be done in Chapter 17. When we get students to build their own portfolio of work (see page 340), we are asking them to work as individuals, too. We can get students to write individually – offering their own responses to what they read and hear. We can encourage students to make full use of a school library or self-access centre (see page 403). We can direct them to language learning websites, or we can get them to produce their own blogs (see page 193).

- **Use students:** we can give students a number of different responsibilities in the class. For example, we can appoint class monitors whose job it is to collect homework or hand out worksheets. Students can take the register (under our supervision) or organise their classmates into groups.

  We can ask some of our students to teach the others. This might mean asking individuals to be in charge of a group who are preparing arguments for a debate, for example, or who are going through a worksheet. It might mean telling individual students that it is their job to explain some language to their group.

  We need to choose our student 'leaders' with care, and we will then monitor their performance very carefully. However linguistically able a student is, we will not want to use them if they consistently offend their classmates, or if they panic when we ask them to perform a task. As far as possible, we will try to give all students some responsibility some of the time. Even where students are not doing extremely well at their language learning, there may be tasks they can do, such as handing out worksheets. This will not only be useful for us, but may give them some satisfaction, too, and this may affect their motivation very positively.

- **Use worksheets:** one solution is for teachers to hand out worksheets for many of the tasks which they would normally do with the whole class, if the class were smaller. When the feedback stage is reached, teachers can go through the worksheets with the whole group – and all the students will get the benefit.

- **Use pairwork and groupwork:** in large classes, pairwork and groupwork play an important part since they maximise student participation. Even where chairs and desks cannot be moved, there are ways of doing this: first rows turn to face second rows, third rows to face fourth rows, etc. In more technologically equipped rooms, students can work round computer screens.

  When using pairwork and groupwork with large groups, it is important to make instructions especially clear, to agree how to stop the activity (many teachers just raise their hands until students notice them and gradually quieten down) and to give good feedback.

- **Use chorus reaction:** since it becomes difficult to use a lot of individual repetition and controlled practice in a big group, it may be more appropriate to use students in chorus. The class can be divided into two halves – the front five rows and the back five rows, for example, or the left-hand and right-hand sides of the classroom. Each row/half can then speak a part in a dialogue, ask or answer a question or repeat sentences or words. This is especially useful at lower levels.

- **Take account of vision and acoustics:** big classes often (but not always) take place in big rooms. This has advantages if we want students to move around, but we also have to ensure that what we show or write can be seen and that what we say or play to the whole group (from an audio track or film clip) can be heard.

- **Use the size of the group to your advantage:** big groups have disadvantages, of course, but they also have one main advantage – they are bigger, so humour is funnier, drama is more dramatic and a good class feeling is warmer and more enveloping than it is in a small group. We should never shy away from the potential that lecturing, acting and joking offer in such a situation. We can organise activities which allow students to perform in this way, too.

No one chooses to have a large group: it makes the job of teaching even more challenging than it already is. However, some of the suggestions above will help to turn a potential disaster into some kind of a success.

C Managing mixed ability

Many teachers are extremely worried about the fact that they have students in their classes who are at different levels of proficiency. Indeed, mixed-ability classes are a major preoccupation for most of us because they appear to make planning – and the execution of plans in lessons – extremely difficult. Many teachers see mixed-ability classes as especially problematic. Yet in a real sense all classes have students with a mixture of different abilities and language levels. We know this to be true given what we said about multiple intelligences and differing primary perceived systems (what stimuli individual students respond best to – see page 90). And it is inconceivable that any two students will have exactly the same knowledge of English at any one time. Even if we were able to assemble a class of complete beginners, it would soon be clear that some were learning faster than others – or learning different things.

In private language schools and language institutes, we try to make this situation manageable by giving students placement tests (see page 379) so that they can be put into classes with people who are at roughly the same level as they are. Within other school environments, students are often streamed – that is re-grouped for language lessons according to their abilities. In other situations, however, such placement and streaming is not possible and so teachers are faced with individuals who have different language knowledge, different intelligences, different learning speeds, and different learning styles and preferences. There is particular concern for the needs not only of students who are having difficulty at the lower end of the scale, but also for 'gifted' children (Dinnocenti 1998). And even in placed and streamed groups, as we have suggested, we will still have a range of abilities in front of us.

The response to this situation is to view the teacher's role with a group in terms of *differentiation*. In a differentiated classroom there are a variety of learning options designed around students' different abilities and interests (Tomlinson 1995). We may, for example, give different students different tasks. Perhaps we could give them different things to read or listen to. We could respond to them differently, too, and group them according their different abilities. Of course, there are also times when we don't want to differentiate between individuals. For example, if we are giving students instructions or presenting new language, there are very good reasons for teaching the group as a whole (see page 161). Furthermore, in some situations (see C4 below) real differentiation is extremely difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, it is clearly desirable to respond to the needs of the individual even though they are part of a group.

C1 Working with different content

One way of working with students at different levels and with different needs is to provide them with different material, tailoring what we give them to their individual needs. Thus, for example, we might give student A a text from an English language newspaper about a certain topic. Student B might be directed to a website on the same topic but where the information is not so dense. Student C might look at a simplified reader on the topic, and we might provide Student D with a short text that we ourselves have written on the subject, written in such a way as to be comprehensible to them. In this way, all the students are working at their own individual levels.

One way of offering different content is to allow students to make choices about what material they are going to work with. For example, we can offer them a range of possible grammar or vocabulary exercises and they can choose which ones they want to do. If we wish them to read outside the class, we will encourage them to choose which books they want to read (in terms not only of topic, but also of level), since when they make their choice – rather than having books chosen for them – they are far more likely to read with enthusiasm (see Chapter 17, A1).

Giving students different content is an ideal way to differentiate between them. Nevertheless, it is extremely problematic in large classes as we shall see in C4 below. Not only does it involve considerably more teacher preparation time than non-differentiated content (because we will have to search out a range of different exercises and materials for different individuals), but giving feedback to students in class becomes a lot more complicated when we are responding to a number of different tasks than it is when we are giving feedback about one. However, content is only one area where we can differentiate between individuals.

C2 Different student actions

If we cannot (or do not want to) offer students different materials, we can, instead, get them to do different things in response to the content they are all looking at or listening to.

- **Give students different tasks:** we might ask all students to look at the same reading text, but make a difference in terms of the tasks we ask them to do in response to that text. Group A, for example, might have to interpret the information in the text by reproducing it in graphic form (say in charts and tables). Group B, on the other hand, might answer a series of open-ended questions. Group C – the group we perceive as having the greatest need of support – might be offered a series of multiple-choice questions (see page 382); their task is to pick the correct response from two or more alternatives because we think this will be easier for them than having to interpret all the information themselves.

- **Give students different roles:** within a task we can give students different roles. If students are doing a role-play, for example, in which a police officer is questioning a witness, we might give the student playing the police officer the questions they should ask, whereas the student playing the witness has to come up with their own way of expressing what they want to say. We will have done this because the student or students playing the police officer clearly need more guidance than the others. If students are preparing for a debate, we might give Group A a list of suggested arguments to prepare from whereas Group B (whom we think need less support) are told to come up with their own arguments.

- **Reward early finishers:** if all the students are doing the same tasks with the same content, some may well finish earlier than others. We need to be able to offer such students extension tasks to reward their efforts and challenge them further (see page 173). However, such tasks should be chosen with care, since asking them to do 'the regular work, plus' inevitably seems punitive to them (Tomlinson 1995: 1).

- **Encourage different student responses:** we can give students exactly the same materials and tasks, but expect (and accept) different student responses to them. Seth Lindstromberg discusses the use of *flexible tasks* (Lindstromberg 2004). These are tasks which make a virtue out of differences between students. For example, we ask students to write some true statements containing the words *in, tomorrow, my, hope, the moon* and *five.* Each sentence must contain one of these words, and the maximum number of sentences is 12. The more proficient students have a clear but high target to aim for, but everyone, including those who are not so able, have something purposeful to do. In response to a reading text, we can give students a number of tasks but know that not all of the students will complete all of them.

  Almost any time we ask students to respond creat ively to a stimulus, we are allowing for differences in such a response. For example, we might ask students to complete a sentence such as *One of the things I would really like to do before I am* 30 *is* ...; their completions will depend to some extent on how language proficient they are. In a poetry activity we might ask them to describe someone as if they were a kind of weather. Some students might just write *You are sunshine*, whereas others might go one step further and write something like *You are sunshine after the rain*, and yet others whose language level is considerably higher might come up with *You are the gentle breeze of a dreamy summer afternoon*, which might not be great poetry, but it does suggest a degree of linguistic sophistication.

  Many activities are, by their very nature, flexible in the way that Seth Lindstromberg suggests. Such activities are extremely appropriate when considering students of mixed ability.

- **Identify student strengths (linguistic or non-linguistic):** one of the ways we can make a virtue of different student abilities is to include tasks which do not necessarily demand linguistic brilliance but instead allow students to show off other talents they have. Students who are good artists, for example, can lead the design of a poster or wall chart. A student with developed scientific intelligence may be asked to explain a scientific concept before students are asked read a science-based text. If students have special knowledge of contemporary music, we can ask them to select pieces to be played while groupwork takes place. These examples are ways of giving individual students a chance to be 'best' at something, even where they might be weaker, linguistically, than some of their colleagues.

C3 What the teacher does

Although there are many occasions when we work with the students in our lessons as one big group (see C4 below), there are others when we may want to put them in different (smaller) groups depending on their different abilities. But whether we are working with the whole class, with smaller groups or with individuals, we will treat different students differently.

- **Responding to students:** during lessons we frequently have to respond to students, giving them feedback about how they are doing (see Chapter 8), or acting as a resource or tutor (see page 110). In such circumstances we always try to tailor our response to the particular individual we are dealing with. Some students are more sensitive than others, and so we will correct them with more care than their more robust colleagues. Some students need to see things in order to be able to respond to them, whereas others respond better by having things explained to them orally.

  When students are working in pairs or groups and we are monitoring their progress (see page 172), we will react to them (or intervene) depending on how well they are getting on. Students who are experiencing difficulty may need us to help them clear up some problems; we might have to correct some language use, or help them to organise information logically, for example. If they are working on a webquest on the Internet (see page 191), we might have to show them which link to follow or what to do next. But we can also push the higher achieving groups to go further by asking them how they might say something more effectively, or suggesting an extension to what they are doing. This kind of flexible response is one of the main aspects of differentiation. However, we need to make sure that in spending time with particular groups we do not ignore or exclude others (see below).

- **Being inclusive:** a big danger for students in mixed-ability classes is that some of them may get left behind or may become disengaged with what is happening. If we spend a lot of time with the higher-level students in a class, the students who are less linguistically able may feel that they are being ignored and become demotivated as a result. If, on the other hand, we spend all our time with students who we think need our help more than others, the higher-level students may feel neglected and unchallenged. Such students can quickly lose interest in the class and develop an attitude which makes them difficult to work with.

  The skill of a mixed-ability teacher is to draw all of the students into the lesson. When setting a task with the whole group (perhaps by asking initial questions to build up a situation), teachers will want to start by working at a level that all of the students are comfortable with. She will ask questions that all the students can understand and relate to so that their interest is aroused and so that they all understand the goal they are aiming for. Once they are all involved with the topic or the task, she may allow for differentiation in any of the ways we have discussed above. But her initial task is to include and engage everyone – because students who *feel* they are excluded will soon start to behave as if they *are* excluded!

- **Flexible groupings:** we can group students flexibly for a number of tasks. Sometimes we might put them in different groups so that each group can do different tasks. We might group them so that different groups can read different texts, depending on the difficulty of the texts. At other times, however, we might put students at different levels in the same group because we believe that the weaker students will benefit from working with students at a higher linguistic level and because, at the same time, we believe the higher-level students will gain insights about the language, for example, by having to explain it to their colleagues.

In Chapter 10 we will discuss student groupings in detail since there are many issues to be taken into account when deciding when and how students should work in pairs, as a whole group or individually.

C4 Realistic mixed-ability teaching

In an ideal classroom we would have time and the opportunity to work with individuals-as-individuals all the time. However, this is extremely difficult in large classes, and especially problematic when teachers see, for example, up to nine different groups of students in any one week. Planning for significant differentiation in such a situation is a far more daunting prospect than building differentiation into lessons for a group we see all day every day (in a primary school, for example).

The degree to which we are able to differentiate between individuals depends on the physical situation in which their learning takes place. If we teach in overcrowded classrooms, it will be difficult to set up different corners in the room where different students can go to perform different tasks. On the other hand, if the school is equipped with a well-stocked self-access centre (see page 403) where students can go and work individually on a range of materials which are available there, then it will be much easier to build individual learning programmes into the curriculum. If different students can have access to different computers in a lesson, they can be doing different Internet-based tasks, but with only one computer this will be more difficult (yet even here, of course, we can have different students going to the computer at different times).

While we recognise the need for differentiation, we need to be realistic about how we can achieve it – and how much differentiation we can achieve. For example, it is much easier, logistically, to gauge our response to individuals based on their ability and who they are than it is to plan individual schemes of work for nine groups of 30 students each. Responding differently demands great sensitivity to our students, but it is physically possible, whereas handing out 25 different worksheets to different students or pairs of students presents us with greater problems. Perhaps it makes sense, therefore, to concentrate more on the kind of flexible tasks we have described above. When considering differentiation, therefore, we need to work out what is possible and what is not.

We need to remember, too, that there are times when we want to teach the class as a whole. This may be because we want to build or reinforce the group's identity or it may be because we believe that everyone in the group should learn the same thing or be offered the same information. As with so many other areas of learning and teaching, we do the best we can in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that learner training and the encouragement of learner autonomy (see Chapterr 23B) is the ultimate achievement of differentiation. If we can get individual students to take responsibility for their own learning, they are acting as autonomous individuals, and differentiation has thus been achieved. However, the need for such autonomy and the way that we promote it to and with our students raises many complex issues, as we shall see in Chapter 23.

D Monolingual, bilingual and multilingual

At a conference in Singapore, Peter Martin (2006) quoted an English language teacher from Brunei whom he had interviewed:

> I try not to [use Malay] but sometimes you have to. If we don't use Malay, they won't understand, especially some of the textbooks. The words are difficult. I don't like to use Malay if inspectors are here but I sometimes do. Otherwise they [the pupils] won't understand and they [the inspectors] might consider us as bad teachers.

In one short contribution this teacher encapsulates many of the issues that surround the use of the students' first language (L1) in an English-language (L2) classroom. Perhaps the most striking aspect of her contribution is the suggestion that the inspector would frown upon her use of the students' language in a lesson. Clearly, she would be doing something wrong.

The idea that the only language teachers and students can use in the foreign language classroom is the one they are learning came about because of the Direct Method (see page 63). And it came about, too, because teachers from English-speaking countries were travelling the world teaching people whose first language they themselves could not speak. Perhaps it was also the result of a methodology grounded – at least from countries such as Britain, the USA, Canada and Australia – in the problems and advantages of teaching classes where students had a mixture of first languages so that English became not only the focus of learning but also the medium of instruction. But for whatever reason, there is still a strong body of opinion which says that the classroom should be an English-only environment. However, this opinion is now seriously questioned by the majority of methodologists and, instead, a view of how and when to use the L1 in the classroom has become the main subject for debate. This is especially the case since the teacher above notes that if she doesn't 'use Malay, they won't understand'.

D1 Foreign-language students and their first language

There are some powerful arguments in favour of English-only classrooms. Chief of these is the idea that if English is the medium of communication in a classroom, then students will be provoked into more and more communication attempts, and in the process language learning may well 'take care of itself' (a view we questioned in Chapter 3, A3). Furthermore, as we have suggested, in classes where students have different first-language backgrounds, such a policy may be the only realistic option. Nevertheless some kind of a ban on the use of a person's L1 seems unfortunate for a number of reasons. In the first place, it seems highly probable that our identity is shaped to some extent by the language or languages we learn as children. This is the case when children are brought up monolingually, or more commonly bilingually, where they often have a *home* language and a *public* language. Any of these will help to shape their way of seeing and, of course, enable them to communicate in the world around them. And our natural inclination to communicate in our mother tongue is non-negotiable; it is just part of what makes us 'us', even if this is sometimes politically uncomfortable. Why else, after all, would dictators try to suppress the use of languages whose speakers they come into conflict with, as they have done countless times in history?

And so, whether we like it or not, students in our classrooms are going to be operating both in their first language and in the language they are studying. They may do this because we encourage it. They may use their L1 in the classroom to communicate with each other (whether we want them to or not – Harbord 1992), or they may be translating what they are learning in their heads. Indeed, this latter process is a natural part of any language learner's behaviour. We are bound to try to make sense of a new linguistic (and conceptual) world through a linguistic world we are already familiar with. This kind of code-switching between L1 and L2 is naturally developmental (Eldridge 1996: 310), and not some example of misguided behaviour.

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that irrespective of whether students grow up mono- or bilingually, the likelihood is that, especially in urban areas and on the Internet, they are likely to be operating in more than one language. That is the way the world is.

For all of these reasons it seems possible to make a strong case either for the careful and measured use of the students' first language or, at least, for an acknowledgement of the place of a first language in the learning of a second.

D2 The benefits of using the L1 in the L2 classroom

There are many occasions when using the students' L1 in the classroom has obvious advantages. For example, D Jabr Dajani (2002) suggests its use in planning, self-evaluation and learner training, where, if the teacher speaks the students' L1, these topics can be discussed fluently instead of in the halting English of a beginner or elementary student. Sheelagh Deller (2003) suggests that, among other things, it is useful for students to notice differences between their L1 and the target language, that when students use their L1 between themselves and with the teacher, it has a positive effect on group dynamics, and that it allows students to give ongoing feedback about the course and their experiences of learning much more fluently than they would if they were only using English. Daniel Linder (2002) suggests a number of translation activities for use in the general classroom. These include straight translation of short texts and a translation summary of a longer text. His recommendation is that these activities should be done in groups because a discussion of the issues they raise is likely to be more revealing with two or more people than when we just think about it ourselves. Boris Naimushin (2002), echoing our earlier comments about language use in the modern world, sees translation as the 'fifth skill' after reading, writing, speaking and listening.

There seem to be three strands operating here: in the first place, many commentators recognise the desirability of using the students' L1 when talking about learning. So, for example, if teachers want to discuss making a learning contract (see page 156) with their students, or to ask students what they want or need (a needs analysis), then they will get more from lower-level students if they do it in the students' L1 than if they try to struggle through with English. If we want to explain things, help students with learner training or discuss matters personally with students, then again, we will have more success at lower levels if we can use the students' L1.

Secondly, there is clearly a lot to be gained from a comparison between the L1 and the L2. Students will make these comparisons anyway, so we may as well help them do it more effectively. It will help them to understand certain classes of error (see page 137) if we are able to show them such differences. The kind of translation activities suggested above will also help in this respect, making a virtue out of the students' natural language-processing behaviour. Translation can also be a very good way of reviewing how well students have understood grammar and lexis at the end of a unit of study.

Finally, students (and their teachers) can use the L1 to keep the social atmosphere of the class in good repair. There is a case for saying that rapport is enhanced when teachers can exchange jokes with students or talk to them about aspects of their lives.

D3 The disadvantages of using the L1 in the L2 classroom

There are problems with an unquestioning use of the students' L1 in the L2 classroom, just as there were with the idea of a total ban on its appearance. The first, of course, is that as we have pointed out, the teacher may not always share the students' L1 – or at least the L1 of all the students in the classroom. This does not mean that students will no longer make comparisons between their L1 and English; as we have said, they will do this consciously or subconsciously anyway. Nor does it mean that the teacher is unable to ask students questions such as *Do you have an expression for this in your language? Is it literally the same? Can you translate it back into English?* This is extremely rich territory when discussing idioms or metaphorical usage. For example, colours have different metaphorical meanings and uses in different languages and cultures, and the variety of idiomatic ways of saying that something is obvious (*as plain as the nose on your face* in some varieties of British English) in different languages that have been reported to me (translated here into English) – *as straight as a wire* (Polish); *if it's a dog, it bites* (Cuban Spanish); *when you can see the village, you don't have to ask for directions* (Turkey); *there's an elephant in the field* (Burma-Myanmar) – is breathtaking. But we can encourage students to translate grammatical concepts and lexical items, too, and draw their attention to different writing conventions and genres (see Chapter 19). However, our interaction with the students' L1 is obviously limited when we do not, for whatever reason, share it.

A more serious objection to the use (especially the over-use) of the students' L1 is that it restricts the students' exposure to English. It is possible, for example, to make a good case for the use of their L1 when we give instructions, but this reduces their exposure to a type of English that is 'an ideal source of language for student acquisition' (Harbord 1992: 353). Indeed if, as we said in Chapter 6, D3, the teacher is a principal source of useful comprehensible input, then the more time we spend speaking English, the better.

Teachers can sometimes find themselves using the L1 more than they intended. When Linda Bawcom transcribed her lessons with two students in Spain, she found that the three of them were speaking Spanish 33 per cent of the time (2002: 50). While she speculated that this might have contributed to the good atmosphere and relaxed setting of the lessons, nevertheless she felt that there was just too much L1 being used and set out, with the students' agreement, to ration its occurrence more judiciously.

When visiting a secondary class in the Czech Republic, Simon Gill (2005) found that a particular teacher he observed only used English 5 per cent of the time, and I have encountered similar situations in classrooms in a number of countries. In such situations the students' exposure to the English language has been unnecessarily restricted; the balance has tipped too far.

There is one other situation in which the use of the L1 seems counter-productive and this is when we are encouraging students to use English in communicative speaking tasks, whose purpose, after all, is to give students chances to try out speaking in English. We may understand their natural inclination to communicate in the best way they can (i.e. in their L1), but it will not be useful for the purposes of the activity we have asked them to engage in.

D4 Taking a stand

In the light of the previous discussion, we need to come to some conclusions about how and when to use (or allow the use of) the students' L1 in the classroom. There are a number of points we can make:

- **Acknowledge the L1:** it makes no sense to deny the importance of the students' L1 in their L2 learning. Even where we do not share the students' language or languages, we can show our understanding of the learning process and discuss L1 and L2 issues with the class.
- **Use appropriate L1, L2 activities:** we can use sensible activities which maximise the benefits of using the students' L1. These may include translation exercises of the kind we have mentioned, or specific contrasts between the two languages in areas of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or discourse. We might also use the students' L1 to discuss learning matters such as the establishment of a code of conduct, or the best ways of keeping vocabulary notebooks or the giving of announcements. However, this will be done in the context of a largely English-use classroom.
- **Differentiate between levels:** while it may make sense to use the students' L1 for explanations and rapport-enhancement at lower levels, this becomes less appropriate as the students' English improves. The more they work in English, the better their English will get, and the better their English is, the less need we have of the L1 for reasons of rapport-enhancement or discussion and explanation of learning matters. However, we may still want to make comparisons between L1 and L2 and encourage the 'fifth skill' of translation.
- **Agree clear guidelines:** students need to know when mother-tongue use is productive and when it is not. While, for example, we may not worry about it when they are discussing answers to a reading comprehension in pairs, we will be less happy (as we have said) if they speak in the L1 for an oral communicative activity.

  We will discuss the issue of L1 use with our class either as the subject comes up or when establishing some kind of code of conduct (see page 156). We will ask the students for their opinions on L1 use and give our own guidelines, too, so that we can make some kind of a bargain (see page 77). Students will have then agreed about when L1 use is appropriate and when, on the contrary, it is counter-productive.

  We have seen how some teachers over-use the students' L1, often unintentionally. But if we agree clear guidelines with the class, then we should follow them ourselves if we want our students to adhere to them.
- **Use encouragement and persuasion:** teachers all over the world spend a lot of their time going round to students, especially during speaking activities, saying things like, *Please speak English!* or *Why not try to stop using Turkish/Arabic/Portuguese/Greek?* etc. and it often works, especially if students have discussed the issue of L1 use with the teacher previously.

  If such encouragement doesn't work, we can temporarily stop the activity and explain to students that since the activity is designed to give them practice in speaking English, it makes little sense if they do it in another language. This sometimes changes the atmosphere so that they go back to the activity with a new determination.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Mixed ability**
  See C A Tomlinson (1999), J Tice (1999), B Bowler and S Parminter (2000) and S Ainslie and S Purcell (2001). J Harmer (2002) describes a dictogloss writing activity in a mixed-ability group. A Artusi (2002) shows how putting differentiated tasks up on the board can be helpful.

- **One-to-one teaching**
  See P Osborne (2005).

- **Dialogic teachers and students**
  Scott Thornbury argues for a dialogic relationship between teacher and student (Thornbury 2001b), a view discussed by Angeles Clemente (2001).

- **Using the L1/mother tongue**
  S Deller and M Rinvolucri (2002) have written a book of activities to take advantage of/ enhance the use of the mother tongue.

8 Mistakes and feedback

In a widely-quoted study, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam found that feedback on students' work probably has more effect on achievement than any other single factor (Black and Wiliam 1998). Such *formative assessment* (see page 379) is, they believe, 'at the heart of effective teaching' (1998: 2). They based this assumption on an extensive reading of the research evidence available to them. Richard Cullen agrees, showing how the teacher's 'follow-up moves' when a student has said something 'play a crucial part in clarifying and building on the ideas that the students express' (2002: 126). It is important, therefore, to make sure that the feedback we give is appropriate to the students concerned and to the activity they are involved in, and that we recognise feedback as a crucial part of the learning process.

A Students make mistakes

One of the things that puzzles many teachers is why students go on making the same mistakes even when those mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. Yet not all mistakes are the same; sometimes they seem to be deeply ingrained, yet at other times students correct themselves with apparent ease.

In his book on mistakes and correction, Julian Edge suggested that we can divide mistakes into three broad categories: 'slips' (that is mistakes which students can correct themselves once the mistake has been pointed out to them), 'errors' (mistakes which they can't correct themselves – and which therefore need explanation) and 'attempts' (that is when a student tries to say something but does not yet know the correct way of saying it) (Edge 1989: Chapter 2). Of these, it is the category of 'error' that most concerns teachers, though the students' 'attempts' will tell us a lot about their current knowledge – and may well provide chances for opportunistic teaching.

It is widely accepted that there are two distinct sources for the errors which most, if not all, students display.

- **L1 'interference':** students who learn English as a second language already have a deep knowledge of at least one other language. Where that L1 and the variety of English they are learning come into contact with each other, there are often confusions which provoke errors in a learner's use of English. This can be at the level of sounds: Arabic, for example, does not have a phonemic distinction between /f/ and /v/, and Arabic speakers may well say *ferry* when they mean *very*. It can be at the level of grammar, where a student's first language has a subtly different system: French students often have trouble with the present perfect because there is a similar form in French but the same time concept is expressed slightly differently; Japanese students have problems with article usage because Japanese does not use the same system of reference, and so on. It may, finally, be at the level of word usage, where similar sounding words have slightly different meanings: *librería* in Spanish means *bookshop*, not *library*, *embarasada* means *pregnant*, not *embarrassed*.

- **Developmental errors:** for a long time now researchers in child language development have been aware of the phenomenon of 'over-generalisation'. This is best described as a situation where a child who starts by saying *Daddy went, they came*, etc. perfectly correctly suddenly starts saying *Daddy goed* and *they comed*. What seems to be happening is that the child starts to 'over-generalise' a new rule that has been (subconsciously) learnt, and, as a result, even makes mistakes with things that he or she seemed to have known before. Later, however, it all gets sorted out as the child begins to have a more sophisticated understanding, and he or she goes back to saying *went* and *came* while, at the same time, handling regular past tense endings.

  Foreign language students make the same kind of developmental errors as well. This accounts for mistakes like **She is more nicer than him* where the acquisition of *more* for comparatives is over-generalised and then mixed up with the rule that the student has learnt – that comparative adjectives are formed with an adjective + *-er*. Errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process.

  When second-language learners make this kind of error, therefore, they are demonstrating part of the natural process of language learning. Developmental errors are part of the students' interlanguage, that is the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of development, and which is continually re-shaped as he or she aims towards full mastery. Especially when responding to errors, teachers should be seen as providing feedback and helping that re-shaping process, rather than telling students off because they are wrong.

B Assessing student performance

Assessing student performance can come from the teacher or from the students themselves.

B1 Teachers assessing students

Assessment of performance can be explicit when we say *That was really good*, or implicit when, during a language drill, for example, we pass on to the next student without making any comment or correction (there is always the danger, however, that the student may misconstrue our silence as something else).

Students are likely to receive teacher assessment in terms of praise or blame. Indeed, one of our roles is to encourage students by praising them for work that is well done. Praise is a vital component in a student's motivation and progress. George Petty sees it as an element of a two-part response to student work. He calls these two parts 'medals' and 'missions'. The medal is what we give students for doing something well, and the mission is the direction we give them to improve. We should 'try to give every student some reinforcement every lesson' (2004: 72) and avoid only rewarding conspicuous success. If, he suggests, we measure every student against what they are capable of doing – and not against the group as a whole – then we are in a position to give medals for small things, including participation in a task or evidence of thought or hard work, rather than reserving praise for big achievements only.

While it is true that students respond well to praise, over-complimenting them on their work – particularly where their own self-evaluation tells them they have not done well – may prove counter-productive. In the first place, over-praise may create 'praise junkies' (Kohn

2001), that is students who are so addicted to praise that they become attention seekers and their need for praise blinds them to what progress they are actually making. Secondly, students learn to discriminate between praise that is properly earned and medals (in Petty's formulation) that are given out carelessly. This is borne out in research by Caffyn (1984, discussed in Williams and Burden 1997: 134–136) in which secondary students demonstrated their need to understand the reasons for the teacher's approval or disapproval. Williams and Burden also point to the ineffectiveness of blame in the learning process.

What this suggests is that assessment has to be handled with subtlety. Indiscriminate praise or blame will have little positive effect – indeed it will be negatively received – but a combination of appropriate praise together with helpful suggestions about how to improve in the future will have a much greater chance of contributing to student improvement.

It is sometimes tempting to concentrate all our feedback on the language which students use, such as incorrect verb tenses, pronunciation or spelling, for example, and to ignore the content of what they are saying or writing. Yet this is a mistake, especially when we involve them in language production activities. Whenever we ask students to give opinions or write creatively, whenever we set up a role-play or involve students in putting together a school newspaper or in the writing of a report, it is important to give feedback on what the students say rather than just on how they say it.

Apart from tests and exams (which we will consider in Chapter 22), there are a number of ways in which we can assess our students' work:

- **Comments:** commenting on student performance happens at various stages both in and outside the class. Thus we may say *Good*, or nod approvingly, and these comments (or actions) are a clear sign of a positive assessment. When we wish to give a negative assessment, we might do so by indicating that something has gone wrong (see C2 below), or by saying things such as *That's not quite right*. But even here we should acknowledge the students' efforts first (the medal) before showing that something is wrong – and then suggesting future action (the mission).

  When responding to students' written work, the same praise–recommendation procedure is also appropriate, though here a lot will depend on what stage the students' writing is at. In other words, our responses to finished pieces of written work will be different from those we give to help students as they work with written drafts (see D1 below).

- **Marks and grades:** when students are graded on their work, they are always keen to know what grades they have achieved. Awarding a mark of 9/10 for a piece of writing or giving a B+ assessment for a speaking activity are clear indicators that students have done well.

  When students get good grades, their motivation is often positively affected – provided that the level of challenge for the task was appropriate (see page 101). Bad grades can be extremely disheartening. Nor is grading always easy and clear cut. If we want to give grades, therefore, we need to decide on what basis we are going to do this and we need to be able to describe this to the students (see Chapter 22, C2 on marking tests).

  When we grade a homework exercise (or a test item) which depends on multiple choice, sentence fill-ins or other controlled exercise types, it will be relatively easy for students to understand how and why they achieved the marks or grades which we have given them. But it is more difficult with more creative activities where we ask students to produce spoken or written language to perform a task. In such cases our awarding of grades will necessarily be somewhat more subjective (see Chapter 22C). It is possible that despite this our students will have enough confidence in us to accept our judgement, especially where it coincides with their own assessment of their work. But where this is not the case – or where they compare their mark or grade with other students and do not agree with what they find – it will be helpful if we can demonstrate clear criteria for the grading we have given, either offering some kind of marking scale (see page 381), or some other written or spoken explanation of the basis on which we have made our judgement.

Awarding letter grades is potentially awkward if people misunderstand what the letters mean. In some cultures success is only achieved if the grade is 'A', whereas for people in other education systems a 'B' indicates a good result. If, therefore, we wish to rely on grades like this, our students need to be absolutely clear about what such grades mean – especially if we wish to add plus and minus signs to them (e.g. C++ or A–).

Though grades are popular with students and teachers, some practitioners prefer not to award them because they find the difference between an A and a B difficult to quantify, or because they can't see the dividing line between a 'pass' and a 'distinction' clearly. Such teachers prefer to rely on comments to give feedback. They can give clear responses to the students in this way without running the risk of grading them erroneously or demotivating them unnecessarily.

If we do use marks and grades, however, we can give them after an oral activity, for a piece of homework or at the end of a period of time (a week or a semester).

- **Reports:** at the end of a term or year some teachers write reports on their students' performance, either for the student, the school or the parents of that student. Such reports should give a clear indication of how well the student has done in the recent past and a reasonable assessment of their future prospects.

  It is important when writing reports to achieve a judicious balance between positive and negative feedback, where this is possible. As with all feedback, students have a right (and a desire) to know not only what their weaknesses may be, but also what strengths they have been able to demonstrate.

  Reports of this kind may lead to future improvement and progress. The chances for this are greatly increased if they are taken together with the students' own assessment of their performance.

B2 Students assessing themselves

Although, as teachers, we are ideally placed to provide accurate assessments of student performance, students can also be extremely effective at monitoring and judging their own language production. They frequently have a very clear idea of how well they are doing or have done, and if we help them to develop this awareness, we may greatly enhance learning.

Student self-assessment is bound up with the whole matter of learner autonomy since if we can encourage them to reflect upon their own learning through learner training (Chapter 23, B1) or when on their own away from any classroom (see Chapter 23D), we are equipping them with a powerful tool for future development.

Involving students in assessment of themselves and their peers occurs when we ask a class *Do you think that's right?* after writing something we heard someone say up on the board, or asking the class the same question when one of their number gives a response. We can also ask them at the end of an activity how well they think they have got on – or tell them to add a written comment to a piece of written work they have completed, giving their own assessment of that work. We might ask them to give themselves marks or a grade and then see how this tallies with our own.

Self-assessment can be made more formal in a number of ways. For example, at the end of a coursebook unit we might ask students to check what they can now do, e.g. 'Now I know how to get my meaning across in conversation/use the past passive/interrupt politely in conversation', etc.

This kind of self evaluation is at the heart of the 'can do' statements from ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) and the Common European Framework (CEF). Students – in many different languages – can measure themselves by saying what they can do in various skill areas. The ALTE statements for general overall ability (giving six levels from A1–C2), give students clear statements of ability against which to measure themselves:

LEVELS	Listening/Speaking	Reading	Writing
C2 Level 5	CAN advise on or talk about complex or sensitive issues, understanding colloquial references and dealing confidently with hostile questions.	CAN understand documents, correspondence and reports, including the finer points of complex texts.	CAN write letters on any subject and full notes of meetings or seminars with good expression and accuracy.
C1 Level 4	CAN contribute effectively to meetings and seminars within own area of work or keep up a casual conversation with a good degree of fluency, coping with abstract expressions.	CAN read quickly enough to cope with an academic course, to read the media for information or to understand non-standard correspondence.	CAN prepare/draft professional correspondence, take reasonably accurate notes in meetings or write an essay which shows an ability to communicate.
B2 Level 3	CAN follow or give a talk on a familiar topic or keep up a conversation on a fairly wide range of topics.	CAN scan texts for relevant information, and understand detailed instructions or advice.	CAN make notes while someone is talking or write a letter including non-standard requests.
B1 Level 2	CAN express opinions on abstract/cultural matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known area, and understand instructions or public announcements.	CAN understand routine information and articles, and the general meaning of non-routine information within a familiar area.	CAN write letters or make notes on familiar or predictable matters.
A2 Level 1	CAN express simple opinions or requirements in a familiar context.	CAN understand straightforward information within a known area, such as on products and signs and simple textbooks or reports on familiar matters.	CAN complete forms and write short simple letters or postcards related to personal information.
A1 ALTE break-through level	CAN understand basic instructions or take part in a basic factual conversation on a predictable topic.	CAN understand basic notices, instructions or information.	CAN complete basic forms, and write notes including times, dates and places.

FIGURE 1: Overall general ability ALTE levels at http://www.alte.org/can_do/general.php

A final way of formalising an assessment dialogue between teacher and student is through a record of achievement (ROA). Here, students are asked to write their own assessment of their successes and difficulties and say how they think they can proceed. The teacher then adds their own assessment of the students' progress (including grades), and replies to the points the student has made. A typical ROA form can be seen in Figure 2.

Student name: ____________	Subject: ____________
Student comment	
Signed: ____________	Date: ____________
Teacher comment	
Signed: ____________	Date: ____________
Grade(s)	

FIGURE 2: An ROA form

Such ROAs, unlike the more informal journal and letter writing which students and teachers can engage in, force both parties to think carefully about strengths and weaknesses and can help them decide on future courses of action. They are especially revealing for other people, such as parents, who might be interested in a student's progress.

Where students are involved in their own assessment, there is a good chance that their understanding of the feedback which their teacher gives them will be greatly enhanced as their own awareness of the learning process increases.

C Feedback during oral work

Though feedback – both assessment and correction – can be very helpful during oral work, teachers should not necessarily deal with all oral production in the same way. Decisions about how to react to performance will depend upon the stage of the lesson, the activity, the type of mistake made and the particular student who is making that mistake.

C1 Accuracy and fluency

A distinction is often made between *accuracy* and *fluency*. We need to decide whether a particular activity in the classroom is designed to expect the students' complete accuracy – as in the study of a piece of grammar, a pronunciation exercise or some vocabulary work, for example – or whether we are asking the students to use the language as fluently as possible. We need to make a clear difference between 'non-communicative' and 'communicative' activities (see page 70); whereas the former are generally intended to ensure correctness, the latter are designed to improve language fluency.

Most students want and expect us to give them feedback on their performance. For example, in one celebrated correspondence many years ago, a non-native-speaker teacher was upset when, on a teacher training course in the UK, her English trainers refused to correct any of her English because they thought it was inappropriate in a training situation. 'We find that there is practically no correcting at all,' the teacher wrote, 'and this comes to us as a big disappointment' (Lavezzo and Dunford 1993: 62). Her trainers were not guilty of neglect, however. There was a principle at stake: 'The immediate and constant correction of all errors is not necessarily an effective way of helping course participants improve their English,' the trainer replied on the same page of the journal.

This exchange of views exemplifies current attitudes to correction and some of the uncertainties around it. The received view has been that when students are involved in accuracy work, it is part of the teacher's function to point out and correct the mistakes the students are making. We might call this 'teacher intervention' – a stage where the teacher stops the activity to make the correction.

During communicative activities, however, it is generally felt that teachers should not interrupt students in mid-flow to point out a grammatical, lexical or pronunciation error, since to do so interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form or precise meaning. Traditionally, according to one view of teaching and learning, speaking activities in the classroom, especially activities at the extreme communicative end of our continuum (see page 70), were thought to act as a 'switch' to help learners transfer 'learnt' language to the 'acquired' store (Ellis 1982) or a 'trigger', forcing students to think carefully about how best to express the meanings they wish to convey (Swain 1985: 249). This view remains at the heart of the 'focus on forms' view of language learning (see Chapter 3). Part of the value of such activities lies in the various attempts that students have to make to get their meanings across; processing language for communication is, in this view, the best way of processing language for acquisition. Teacher intervention in such circumstances can raise stress levels and stop the acquisition process in its tracks.

If that is the case, the methodologist Tony Lynch argues, then students have a lot to gain from coming up against communication problems. Provided that they have some of the words and phrases necessary to help them negotiate a way out of their communicative impasses, they will learn a lot from so doing. When teachers intervene, not only to correct but also to supply alternative modes of expression to help students, they remove that need to negotiate meaning, and thus they may deny students a learning opportunity. In such situations teacher intervention may sometimes be necessary, but it is nevertheless unfortunate – even when we are using 'gentle correction' (see page 145). In Tony Lynch's words, '... the best answer to the question of when to intervene in learner talk is: as late as possible' (Lynch 1997: 324).

Nothing in language teaching is quite that simple, of course. There are times during communicative activities when teachers may want to offer correction or suggest alternatives because the students' communication is at risk, or because this might be just the right moment to draw the students' attention to a problem. Furthermore, when students are asked for their opinions on this matter, they often have conflicting views. In a survey of all the students at a language school in south London, Philip Harmer found that whereas 38 per cent of the students liked the teacher to do correction work at the front of the class after the task had finished, 62 per cent liked being corrected at the moment of speaking (2005: 74). It is worth pointing out, too, that intensive correction can be just as inappropriately handled during accuracy work as during fluency work. It often depends on how it is done, and, just as importantly, who it is done to. Correction is a highly personal business and draws, more than many other classroom interactions, on the rapport between teacher and students. And as Philip Harmer's study suggests, different students have different preferences.

For all these reasons, we need to be extremely sensitive about the way we give feedback and the way we correct. This means, for example, not reacting to absolutely every mistake that a student makes if this will demotivate that particular student. It means judging just the right moment to correct, taking into account the preferences of the group and of individual students. In communicative or fluency activities, it means deciding if and when to intervene at all, and if we do, what is the best way to do it. Perhaps, too, if we have time, we should talk to our students about feedback and correction and explain to them what we intend to do, and when and why, and then invite their own comments so that we can make a bargain with them (see page 77) about this aspect of classroom experience.

C2 Feedback during accuracy work

As suggested above, correction is usually made up of two distinct stages. In the first, teachers show students that a mistake has been made, and in the second, if necessary, they help the students to do something about it. The first set of techniques we need to be aware of, then, is devoted to showing incorrectness. These techniques are only really beneficial for what we are assuming to be language 'slips' rather than embedded or systematic errors (due to the interlanguage stage the students has reached). When we show incorrectness, we are hoping that the students will be able to correct themselves once the problem has been pointed out. If they can't do this, however, we will need to move on to alternative techniques.

- **Showing incorrectness:** this can be done in a number of different ways:
  1. *Repeating*: here we can ask the student to repeat what they have said, perhaps by saying *Again?* which, coupled with intonation and expression, will indicate that something isn't clear.
  2. *Echoing*: this can be a precise way of pin-pointing an error. We repeat what the student has said, emphasising the part of the utterance that was wrong, e.g. *Flight* 309 *GO to Paris?* (said with a questioning intonation) or *She SAID me?* It is an extremely efficient way of showing incorrectness during accuracy work.
  3. *Statement and question*: we can, of course, simply say *Good try, but that's not quite right* or *Do people think that's correct?* to indicate that something hasn't quite worked.
  4. *Expression*: when we know our classes well, a simple facial expression or a gesture (for example, a wobbling hand) may be enough to indicate that something doesn't quite work. This needs to be done with care as the wrong expression or gesture can, in certain circumstances, appear to be mocking or cruel.
  5. *Hinting*: a quick way of helping students to activate rules they already know (but which they have temporarily 'mislaid') is to give a quiet hint. We might just say the word *tense* to make them think that perhaps they should have used the past simple rather than the present perfect. We could say *countable* to make them think about a concord mistake they have made, or *tell* to indicate they have chosen the wrong word. This kind of hinting depends upon the students and the teacher sharing *metalanguage* (linguistic terms) which, when whispered to students, will help them to correct themselves.

6 *Reformulation*: a correction technique which is widely used both for accuracy and fluency work is for the teacher to repeat back a corrected version of what the student has said, reformulating the sentence, but without making a big issue of it. For example:

STUDENT: *She said me I was late.*
TEACHER: *Oh, so she told you you were late, did she?*
STUDENT: *Oh yes, I mean she told me. So I was very unhappy and ...*

Such reformulation is just a quick reminder of how the language should sound. It does not put the student under pressure, but clearly points the way to future correctness. Its chief attribute – in contrast to the other techniques mentioned above – is its unobtrusiveness.

In all the procedures above, teachers hope that students are able to correct themselves once it has been indicated that something is wrong. However, where students do not know or understand what the problem is (and so cannot be expected to resolve it), the teacher will want to help the students to get it right.

- **Getting it right:** if students are unable to correct themselves or respond to reformulation, we need to focus on the correct version in more detail. We can say the correct version, emphasising the part where there is a problem (e.g. *Flight 309 GOES to Paris*) before saying the sentence normally (e.g. *Flight 309 goes to Paris*), or we can say the incorrect part correctly (e.g. *Not 'go'. Listen, 'goes'*). If necessary, we can explain the grammar (e.g. *We say I go, you go, we go, but for he, she or it, we say 'goes'. For example, 'He goes to Paris' or 'Flight 309 goes to Paris'*), or the lexical issue, (e.g. *We use 'juvenile crime' when we talk about crime committed by children; a 'childish crime' is an act that is silly because it's like the sort of thing a child would do*). We will then ask the student to repeat the utterance correctly.

  We can also ask students to help or correct each other. This works well where there is a genuinely cooperative atmosphere; the idea of the group helping all of its members is a powerful concept. Nevertheless, it can go horribly wrong where the error-making individual feels belittled by the process, thinking that they are the only one who doesn't know the grammar or vocabulary. We need to be exceptionally sensitive here, only encouraging the technique where it does not undermine such students. As we have said above, it is worth asking students for their opinions about which techniques they personally feel comfortable with.

C3 Feedback during fluency work

The way in which we respond to students when they speak in a fluency activity will have a significant bearing not only on how well they perform at the time but also on how they behave in fluency activities in the future. We need to respond to the content, and not just to the language form; we need to be able to untangle problems which our students have encountered or are encountering, but we may well decide to do this after the event, not during it. Our tolerance of error in fluency sessions will be much greater than it is during more controlled sessions. Nevertheless, there are times when we may wish to intervene during fluency activities (especially in the light of students' preferences – see above), just as there are ways we can respond to our students once such activities are over.

- **Gentle correction:** if communication breaks down completely during a fluency activity, we may well have to intervene. If our students can't think of what to say, we may want to prompt them forwards. If this is just the right moment to point out a language feature, we may offer a form of correction. Provided we offer this help with tact and discretion, there is no reason why such interventions should not be helpful. But however we do it, our correction will be more 'gentle': in other words, we will not stop the whole activity and insist on everyone saying the item correctly before being allowed to continue with their discussion.

Gentle correction can be offered in a number of ways. We might simply reformulate what the student has said in the expectation that they will pick up our reformulation (see page 145), even though it hardly interrupts their speech, e.g.

STUDENT 1: *And when I go on holiday, I enjoy to ski in the winter and I like to surf in the summer. Yes, they are my favourites.*
TEACHER: *Yes, I enjoy skiing, too.*
STUDENT 1: *Ah, yes, I enjoy skiing.*
STUDENT 2: *I don't enjoy skiing. It's too cold. What I like is ...*

It is even possible that when students are making an attempt to say something they are not sure of, such reformulation or suggestion may help them to learn something new.

We can use a number of other techniques for showing incorrectness, too, such as echoing and expression, or even saying *I shouldn't say X, say Y*, etc. But because we do it gently, and because we do not move on to a 'getting it right' stage, our intervention is less disruptive than a more accuracy-based procedure would be.

However, we need to be careful of over-correction during a fluency stage. By constantly interrupting the flow of the activity, we may bring it to a standstill. What we have to judge, therefore, is whether a quick reformulation or a quick prompt may help the conversation move along without intruding too much or whether, on the contrary, it is not especially necessary and has the potential to get in the way of the conversation.

- **Recording mistakes:** we frequently act as observers, watching and listening to students so that we can give feedback afterwards. Such observation allows us to give good feedback to our students on how well they have performed, always remembering that we want to give positive as well as negative feedback.

  One of the problems of giving feedback after the event is that it is easy to forget what students have said. Most teachers, therefore, write down points they want to refer to later, and some like to use charts or other forms of categorisation to help them do this, as in Figure 3.

Grammar	Words and phrases	Pronunciation	Appropriacy

FIGURE 3: A chart for recording student mistakes

  In each column we can note down things we heard, whether they were particularly good or incorrect or inappropriate. We might write down errors such as **according to my opinion* in the words and phrases column, or **I haven't been yesterday* in the grammar column; we might record phoneme problems or stress issues in the pronunciation column and make a note of places where students disagreed too tentatively or bluntly in the appropriacy column.

  We can also record students' language performance with audio or video recorders. In this situation the students might be asked to design their own charts like the one above so that when they listen or watch, they, too, will be writing down more and less successful language performance in categories which make remembering what they heard easier. Another alternative is to divide students into groups and have each group listen or watch for something different. For example, one group might focus on pronunciation, one group could listen for the use of appropriate or inappropriate phrases, while a third looks at the effect of the physical paralinguistic features that are used. If teachers want to involve students more – especially if they have been listening to an audiotape or watching a video – they can ask them to write up any mistakes they think they heard on the board. This can lead to a discussion in which the class votes on whether they think the mistakes really are mistakes.

Another possibility is for the teacher to transcribe parts of the recording for future study. However, this takes a lot of time!

- **After the event:** when we have recorded student performance, we will want to give feedback to the class. We can do this in a number of ways. We might want to give an assessment of an activity, saying how well we thought the students did in it, and getting the students to tell us what they found easiest or most difficult. We can put some of the mistakes we have recorded up on the board and ask students first if they can recognise the problem, and then whether they can put it right.

  Alternatively, we can write both correct and incorrect words, phrases or sentences on the board and have the students decide which is which.

  When we write examples of what we heard on the board, it is not generally a good idea to say who made the mistakes since this may expose students in front of their classmates. Indeed, we will probably want to concentrate most on those mistakes which were made by more than one person. These can then lead on to quick teaching and re-teaching sequences.

  Another possibility is for teachers to write individual notes to students, recording mistakes they heard from those particular students with suggestions about where they might look for information about the language – in dictionaries, grammar books or on the Internet.

D Feedback on written work

The way we give feedback on writing will depend on the kind of writing task the students have undertaken, and the effect we wish to create. When students do workbook exercises based on controlled testing activities, we will mark their efforts right or wrong, possibly pencilling in the correct answer for them to study. However, when we give feedback on more creative or communicative writing (whether letters, reports, stories or poems), we will approach the task with circumspection and clearly demonstrate our interest in the content of the students' work. A lot will depend on whether we are intervening in the writing process (where students are composing various written drafts before producing a final version – see Chapter 19, B1), or whether we are marking a finished product. During the writing process we will be responding rather than correcting.

D1 Responding

When we respond, we say how the text appears to us and how successful we think it has been (we give a medal, in other words) before suggesting how it could be improved (the mission). Such responses are vital at various stages of the writing process cycle (see page 326). The comments we offer students need to appear helpful and not censorious. Sometimes they will be in the margin of the students' work or, on a computer, they can be written as viewable comments either by using an editing program or by writing in comments in a different colour. If we want to offer more extensive comments, we may need a separate piece of paper – or separate computer document. Consider this example in which the teacher is responding in the form of a letter to a student's first draft of a composition about New Year's Eve:

Dear Gabrielle,

I really enjoyed reading your draft. You have some good expressions, e.g.

... you look to the dark sky and it seems like a special party

Why don't you begin with that sentence? e.g.

I looked up at the dark sky and it seemed a special party. It was like an explosion everywhere. People were throwing fireworks into the sky, and everywhere there were lights.

Now at this point you can tell the reader what night it is:

It was New Year's Eve and everyone was celebrating.

Then you can explain what New Year's Eve means in Uruguay, how families and friends come together and how everyone has hopes for the future. You can end by coming back to the idea of fireworks.

You can organise your essay to have two times:

Past	*I looked up ...* *it seemed*	Introduction
General present	*Family celebrations in Uruguay are very important.* *People usually send greetings to each other...*	
Past	????	Conclusion

FIGURE 4: From *Process Writing* by R White and V Arndt (Pearson Education Ltd)

This type of feedback takes time, of course, but it can be more useful to the student than a draft covered in correction marks. It is designed specifically for situations in which the student will go back and review the draft before producing a new version.

When we respond to a final written product (an essay or a finished project), we can say what we liked, how we felt about the text and what we think the students might do next time if they are going to write something similar.

Another constructive way of responding to students' written work is to show alternative ways of writing through reformulation (see C2 above). Instead of providing the kind of comments in the example above, we might say, *I would express this paragraph slightly differently from you*, and then re-write it, keeping the original intention as far as possible, but avoiding any of the language or construction problems which the student's original contained. Such reformulation is extremely useful for students since by comparing their version with yours they discover a lot about the language. However, it has to be done sympathetically, since we might end up 'steamrollering' our own view of things, forcing the student to adopt a different voice from the one they wanted to use.

D2 Correcting

Many teachers use correction codes to indicate that students have made mistakes in their written work. These codes can be written into the body of the text itself or in the margin. This makes correction much neater and less threatening than random marks and comments. Different teachers use different symbols, but Figure 5 shows some of the more common ones.

Symbol	Meaning	Example error
S	A spelling error	*The asnwer is obvious*
WO	A mistake in word order	*I like very much it.*
G	A grammar mistake	*I am going to buy some furnitures.*
T	Wrong verb tense	*I have seen him yesterday.*
C	Concord mistake (e.g. the subject and verb agreement)	*People is angry.*
ʎ	Something has been left out.	*He told ʎ that he was sorry.*
WW	Wrong word	*I am interested on jazz music.*
{ }	Something is not necessary.	*He was not {too} strong enough.*
?M	The meaning is unclear.	*That is a very excited photograph.*
P	A punctuation mistake.	*Do you like london.*
F/I	Too formal or informal.	*Hi Mr Franklin, Thank you for your letter …*

FIGURE 5: Correction symbols

In order for students to benefit from the use of symbols such as these, they need to be trained in their use (see D3 below).

We can also correct by putting ticks against good points (or another appropriate symbol, such as, for example, a circle if the lessons are taking place in Japan) and underlining problems. We can write summarising comments at the end of a student's work saying what was appropriate and what needs correcting.

D3 Training students

If students are to benefit from our feedback on their writing, they need to know what we mean and what to do about it. This involves training them to understand the process.

We might start by writing incorrect sentences on the board, such as **I don't enjoy to watch TV*. Students come up to the board and underline the mistake in the sentence (e.g. *I don't enjoy to watch TV*). Activities like this get them used both to the idea of error-spotting and also to the convention of underlining. Later we can give them several sentences, some of which are correct and some of which are not. They have to decide which is which.

We can now introduce students to correction symbols. We can go through them one by one, showing examples of each category. Once we think students have grasped their meaning, we might get them to try using the symbols themselves. In the following example (Figure 6), the teacher has typed up some student work exactly as it was written by different members of a group. The story is on an overhead transparency. Students from a different group tried to use the correction symbols (see Figure 5) they had recently learnt about to correct the piece, with partial success:

Once upon a time, a beautif Sp princess lived in a castle by a river.

She was very clever.

She always read and studied.

However, she hasn't seen T/ww the gergous Sp nature around her, where she was living,

she had a stemother Sp that hate T her very much.

She had a lovely dog.

It was a very loyalty. Gr

One day, her stepmother bought a basket of red apples from the local market.

The stepmother putted ww poison in ⁁ apples.

Her dog saw what the ww stepmother do, T so, when the stepmother gave the

apple to her, her dog jumped and ate the apple. Then, the P ⁁ dog died.

FIGURE 6: Students use correction symbols

The teacher then discussed the students' efforts with the class.

Once students have had a good chance to get to know how to use correction symbols, we can start to use them when looking at students' work.

D4 Involving students

So far we have discussed the teacher's feedback to students. But we can also encourage students to give feedback to each other. Such peer review has an extremely positive effect on group cohesion. It encourages students to monitor each other and, as a result, helps them to become better at self monitoring. James Muncie suggests a further advantage, namely that whereas students see teacher comment as coming from an expert, as a result of which they feel obliged to do what is suggested, even when we are only making suggestions, they are much more likely to be provoked into thinking about what they are writing if the feedback comes from one of their peers (Muncie 2000). Thus when responding to work during the drafting stage, peer feedback is potentially extremely beneficial. However, in order to make sure that the comment is focused, we might want to design a form such as the one suggested by Victoria Chan (2001) where students are given sentences to complete such as *My immediate reactions to your piece of writing are ..., I like the part ..., I'm not sure about ..., The specific language errors I have noticed are ...*, etc.

In her book on writing, Tricia Hedge suggests letting the students decide (with teacher guidance) what they think the most important things to look out for in a piece of writing are (Hedge 1988: 54). They can give their opinions about whether spelling is more important than handwriting, or whether originality of ideas should interest the feedback giver more than, say, grammatical correctness. They can be asked for their opinions on the best grading system, too. In consultation with the teacher, therefore, they can come up with their own feedback kit.

We can also encourage students to self monitor by getting them to write a checklist of things to look out for when they evaluate their own work during the drafting process (Harmer 2004: 121). The more we encourage them to be involved in giving feedback to each other, or to evaluate their own work successfully, the better they will be able to develop as successful writers.

D5 Finishing the feedback process

Except where students are taking achievement tests (see Chapter 22, A1), written feedback is designed not just to give an assessment of the students' work, but also to help and teach. We give feedback because we want to affect our students' language use in the future as well as comment upon its use in the past. This is the formative assessment we mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter. When we respond to first and second written drafts of a written assignment, therefore, we expect a new version to be produced which will show how the students have responded to our comments. In this way feedback is part of a learning process, and we will not have wasted our time. Our reason for using codes and symbols is the same: if students can identify the mistakes they have made, they are then in a position to correct them. The feedback process is only really finished once they have made these changes. And if students consult grammar books or dictionaries as a way of resolving some of the mistakes we have signalled for them, the feedback we have given has had a positive outcome.

If, on the contrary, when we return corrected work, the students put it straight into a file or lose it, then the time we spent responding or correcting has been completely wasted.

D6 Burning the midnight oil

'Why burn the midnight oil?' asks Icy Lee (2005b) in an article which discusses the stress of written feedback for students and teachers. For students, the sight of their work covered in corrections can cause great anxiety. For teachers, marking and correcting take up an enormous amount of time (Lee found that the 200 Hong Kong teachers she interviewed spent an average of 20–30 hours a week marking). Both teachers and students deserve a break from this drudgery.

Along with other commentators, Lee has a number of ways of varying the amount of marking and the way teachers do it. These include:

- **Selective marking:** we do not need to mark everything all the time. If we do, it takes a great deal of time and can be extremely demotivating. It is often far more effective to tell students that for their next piece of work we will be focusing specifically on spelling, or specifically on paragraph organisation, or on verb tenses, for example. We will have less to correct, the students will have fewer red marks to contend with, and while they preparing their work, students will give extra special attention to the area we have identified.

- **Different error codes:** there is no reason why students and teachers should always use the same error codes (see D2 above). At different levels and for different tasks we may want to make shorter lists of possible errors, or tailor what we are looking at for the class in question.

- **Don't mark all the papers:** teachers may decide only to mark some of the scripts they are given – as a sample of what the class has done as a whole. They can then use what they find there for post-task teaching with the whole class.

- **Involve the students:** teachers can correct some of the scripts and students can look at some of the others. As we saw in D4 above, peer correction has extremely beneficial results.

We are not, of course, suggesting abandoning teacher feedback. But we need to be able to think creatively about how it can best be done in the interests of both students and teachers.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Analysing errors**
  On interlanguage and analysing errors, see H D Brown (2007: Chapter 9).
- **Teachers' attitudes to feedback and correction**
  In a fascinating teacher training activity, R Tanner (1992) shows how teachers do not necessarily enjoy the feedback methods which they use in class when they themselves are being corrected.
- **Using transcripts for self evaluation**
  Paul Mennim (2003) reports on a speaking 'process' approach to student presentations; students recorded their presentations, transcribed and corrected them, then gave a new transcription to the teacher who suggested changes. Only then did they give the presentation.
- **Correcting written work**
  See J Harmer (2004: Chapter 7). For alternative feedback ideas, see K Hyland (1990).
- **Written teacher feedback**
  In a small-scale study, Yoshihito Sugita (2006) found that imperative comments from teachers were far more effective on revisions than questions or statements, which suggests that students need training to understand what to do when teachers respond by asking questions and making suggestions.
- **Peer correction**
  K Hyland (2002: Chapter 6.2) reports on the beneficial results of peer-response training.
- **Online feedback**
  J Kannan and P Towndrow (2002) suggest that giving feedback online is somewhat problematical. Students make strong demands and teachers have to be careful not to spend more time than is reasonable.

9 Managing for success

Classroom teachers do everything they can to make sure that their lessons are a success. However, sometimes things don't work as well as they had planned. There may be many reasons for this, but the one that many teachers find most difficult to deal with is when students fail to cooperate. This can disrupt the learning which should be taking place and sometimes, when individuals get significantly out of control, lessons have to stop while the teacher re-establishes order. Such moments of disruption can be unsettling, not just for teachers but also for students, especially since our aim, as classroom managers, is to promote student success, rather than to become involved in damage-limitation.

Problem behaviour from students can take many forms; Paul Wadden and Sean McGovern list disruptive talking, inaudible responses, sleeping in class, tardiness and poor attendance, failure to do homework, cheating in tests and unwillingness to speak in the target language (Wadden and McGovern 1991). Of course, their list may reflect the educational culture where they were teaching, rather than being universal. In other contexts we might add behaviours such as insolence to the teacher, insulting or bullying other students, damaging school property and refusing to accept sanctions or punishment. However, what is characterised as indiscipline '... depends on what counts as a well-ordered or disciplined classroom for the individual teacher' (Brown and McIntyre 1993: 44). Some teachers are more tolerant than others.

But whatever our own view of problem behaviour is, if we are to manage for success, we need to know why it occurs, how to prevent it and, in the last resort, what to do if it happens.

A Why problems occur

Rose Senior (2006: Chapter 5) points out that when students come to class they bring with them their own personalities and their learning expectations. Their behaviour will also be influenced by their current circumstances and by what happens in the lessons. There is always, as well, the possibility of interpersonal tensions between students and between students and their teacher.

Students' personalities are closely bound up with their levels of self-esteem – how they feel about themselves and what level of comfort and self-confidence they are experiencing. Self-esteem is influenced by a large number of factors. At the most basic level, it is very difficult to feel good about ourselves if we are not safe, or do not have food to eat or warmth or shelter. But once we have all those, we can still be both positively and negatively influenced by the people around us.

- **The family:** students' experiences in their families have a profound influence on their attitudes to learning and to authority. Sometimes indiscipline can be traced back to a difficult home situation. Sometimes home attitudes to English, to learning in general, or even to teachers themselves can pre-dispose students to behave problematically.

- **Learning expectations:** previous learning experiences of all kinds affect students' behaviour. Even at the level of 'the last teacher let me ...', students are influenced by what went before. Their expectations of the learning experience can be coloured by unpleasant memories of unhappy classroom experiences, and their behaviour can sometimes be the result of what they were previously allowed to get away with.

  Students' learning expectations are also powerfully affected by the learning culture they are operating in, where norms of thinking and behaviour may have become ingrained without anyone even questioning them. Zoltan Dörnyei and Tim Murphey discuss the 'norm of mediocrity' (2003: 36) in this context. This is the norm which says that being too good in lessons is not desirable or appropriate. And there are other norms, too, about how students should behave in lessons and about what they should think of teachers, etc. If these norms are not confronted (see page 155), problem behaviour is likely to be an ongoing reality.

- **Approval:** a student's self-esteem may result partly from the way the teacher behaves. Children seem to thrive on teacher approval (see page 82) and they are not alone. Most people who enjoy good rapport with their teacher are happy to get that teacher's approval. Where that approval is lacking, their incentive to behave well – that is to comply with the norms of the group – is often compromised.

  Students also look for approval from their peers. This is generally the case but is often most noticeable in teenagers, who may not be very impressed by learning success but are often amused or amazed by the humour or anarchic behaviour of their peers. Problem behaviour then becomes desirable rather than being a problem. Teachers will have to reverse that concept and try to find other ways that students can meet with approval.

  Despite the fact that students are often interested in their peers' antics, however, we need to remind ourselves constantly that if a class gets out of control, the people who lose out most – and who are most resentful of that loss of control – are the students.

- **What the teacher does:** a lot will depend on how we, as teachers, behave in class. In the first place, students are far more likely to be engaged with what is going on (and are therefore unlikely to be disruptive) if they have something interesting to do. If they do not – or if they see the teacher as unprepared and uncertain about what to do in their lessons – they are far more likely to lose interest. If they lose interest, their incentive to maintain their level of concentration is lessened, and if that happens, they are more likely to become disconnected with what is going on. That is when problem behaviour often manifests itself. As George Petty points out, 'Most of the discipline difficulties experienced by teachers in the classroom were created before the lesson started' (2004: 101). In other words, if teachers arrive at the classroom door without a clear idea of what they are going to do, the chances of things going wrong are greatly increased.

  The way that we react to inappropriate behaviour will have a profound influence on our students' subsequent behaviour. If they see us as decisive, effective and fair, they will be far less likely to be disruptive in the future, and the chances of their learning successfully are enhanced.

- **Success and failure:** as we saw in Chapter 5, success is a powerful agent for the sustaining of a student's motivation. If they achieve identifiable goals, our students are likely to remain engaged with what is going on. Part of a teacher's job is to make sure that students recognise their achievements, however small those achievements actually are (as we saw on page 138).

If students do not see any evidence of their own success but are presented constantly with failure (in tests, in classroom language use or in their teacher's attitude to their classroom behaviour), then their incentive to behave within the limits set by the teacher and the group is greatly reduced. Failure is a powerful engine for problem behaviour. Teachers need, therefore, to manage for student success.

- **External factors:** some external factors may affect students' behaviour, too. If they are tired, they will not be able to concentrate. If the classroom is too hot or too cold, this may result in students being too relaxed or too nervy. Discomfort then leads to disengagement. Noise from outside the classroom can impact badly upon students' concentration. Teachers at primary level, especially, notice significant behaviour changes in different weathers: a high wind, in particular, tends to make their children 'go wild'.

B Creating successful classrooms

Problem behaviour rarely occurs in successful language classrooms. When students are engaged, have a reasonable level of self-esteem and are experiencing success, there is no incentive for them to behave badly, disrupt lessons or create barriers between themselves and their teacher or their peers. We need, then, to examine how we can try to ensure that the classroom is a success-oriented environment.

B1 Behaviour norms

All groups – whether in education or anywhere else – have ways of behaving and quickly establish norms for this behaviour which delineate the ways things are done in the group. Eventually, of course, the norms of behaviour – if the group is big enough – can become full-blooded cultural norms that a whole society adheres to.

School and classroom groups have their own norms of behaviour, too. Some of these are stated explicitly by a school (e.g. the wearing of school uniforms in some countries, no running in the corridor, etc.). Some are laid down by the school and the teacher (students have to put their hands up if they want to ask a question; they must stand up when the teacher comes into the room; at the end of the lesson students must not pack their things away until the teacher tells them they may); some seem to spring up from within the group itself (or are the result of years of norms adhered to by previous groups which have been picked up by current groups – e.g. the norm of mediocrity).

If groups behave according to norms which have been laid down or picked up – or informally arrived at – then it makes sense for teachers to become personally involved in the creation of norms which the group will adhere to. One way of doing this, of course, is for the teacher to say what behaviour is or is not permissible (for example, turn off all mobile phones in class, no speaking while I am speaking, no eating or drinking in lessons). Whether or not the students agree with these rules, they are obliged to obey them. However, these rules (or norms of behaviour) will always be the teacher's rules rather than the students'. None of the members of the group (except for the teacher) have had any agency in their creation. They have no ownership of these norms, but are expected to acquiesce to them.

Schools, just like any other group-based entities, need norms of behaviour if they are to function efficiently. It is worth thinking, therefore, about how we can get the students' active agreement with such norms; for if we do so, they are far more likely to adhere to them rather than feel they have been coerced into obedience. There are three things we need to bear in mind in order to achieve this.

- **Norms need to be explicitly discussed:** it is not effective just to tell students to read a set of rules about what is considered to be normal and acceptable behaviour. We need to discuss the rules with a group, explaining what they mean and why they are there. We might give students a handout describing the kind of behaviour we expect from them. Perhaps we can have a poster or wall chart which lists the rules so that we can refer to it whenever necessary.

  If students understand what is expected of them and why it is expected of them, they are far more likely to conform to these behavioural norms than if they just seem arbitrary and capricious.

- **Norms can be jointly negotiated:** if we really want students to 'buy into' a set of rules or norms of behaviour, we will go further than just explaining them. We will actively negotiate what should go into our list with our students by creating a jointly agreed code of conduct. The code (a kind of contract between teacher and students) could include details about classroom behaviour (e.g. when someone is talking, they will be allowed to finish before they are interrupted), discuss how often homework is expected, or establish norms of learner autonomy.

  When a teacher and students have divergent views about what is acceptable and what is not, we should take the students' opinions into account and try to work with them. However, ultimately we will have to be firm about what we are prepared to accept.

  With low-level classes, teachers may need to hold the discussion in the students' first language. Where this is not possible – as in a multilingual class – we will need to show quickly and calmly, through example, what is expected and what is not acceptable.

  Some teachers adopt a formula where teacher and students produce a chart which says 'As your teacher/a learner I expect ...', 'As your teacher/a learner, I will ...'. These bind both teacher and learners to behaviours which will be mutually beneficial.

  When a code of conduct has been democratically arrived at (even when based on teacher direction) – with everyone having a say and coming to an agreement – it has considerable power. We can say to students that since they agreed to the code, they themselves have responsibility for maintaining it.

- **Norms need to be reviewed and revisited:** just because we have discussed a code of conduct at the beginning of a term or semester, it does not mean that our job is done. When students step outside the norms of behaviour, we need to be able to remind them of what we agreed on. This will be made much easier if there is a copy of the code (say on a poster or wallchart) which we can refer to.

  When the group starts behaving in ways that are not especially appropriate, we will discuss the situation with the group and get their agreement to come up with new norms to cover this new situation.

B2 How teachers can ensure successful behaviour

The way we work in lessons and the interaction we have with our students make a significant contribution to a group's success and, when things are going well, to successful learning.

We have already seen that the rapport we establish with our students is crucial to effective teaching and learning (see pages 113–115). Without good rapport, creating an appropriate group atmosphere and identity is extremely difficult. But there are other things, too, which we can do to ensure a positive class atmosphere.

- **Start as we mean to go on:** students will find it extremely difficult if we only begin to insist on certain behaviour when things go wrong. If, for example, we wish to start our lessons in a calm atmosphere, then we need to do that from the very first lesson by waiting for silence before we start the activities we have planned. If we have decided that we are in charge of who sits where, then we should exercise that decision-making from the very beginning rather than asking students to accept this halfway through the term.

- **Know what we are going to do:** students are far less likely to cause problems if we give them interesting things to do. They are far less likely to feel the urge to be disruptive if they understand that we have come to the lesson with clear ideas about what these things are, rather than making it up as we go along. This does not mean that we will always slavishly follow a plan (we will discuss planning in detail in Chapter 21), but it does suggest that a well-organised period of study and activity which has been thought about before the lesson has a far greater chance of success than a chaotic ill-thought-out (and ultimately frustrating) one.

- **Plan for engagement:** students who are interested and enthusiastic do not generally exhibit problem behaviour. When we plan our classes, therefore, we need to think how we can engage students in a reading or listening text before starting detailed work on it; we need to do our best to introduce topics that are relevant to our students' experience.

  Interest can be also be generated by a teacher's performance. There is no doubt that students can be engaged by the energy and enthusiasm of their teachers.

- **Prioritise success:** one of our most important tasks is to try to make our students successful. This does not mean making things easy all the time since that can provoke boredom or, at the very least, disengagement. But at the other end of the spectrum, if things are too difficult, students become demoralised. What we will try to aim for, instead, are tasks, activities and goals which challenge individual students but for which they can have a better-than-average chance of success. Getting the level of challenge right is a major factor in effective classrooms. Our use of praise (the medals and missions that we discussed on page 138) is also a way for us to show students how successful they are being.

- **Equality rules:** in any dealings with members of the group, the group has to see that we treat everyone in exactly the same way, irrespective of who they are. We should not show obvious favouritism or appear to hold a grudge against particular students. We need to treat events in the same way each time they occur, too, so that students know exactly what is likely to happen in certain circumstances. What this means is that any student who behaves in a certain way is treated exactly the same as another student who behaves similarly in the same circumstances.

- **Praise is better than blame:** a piece of research carried out four decades ago (and often cited) suggested that when students were told off for inappropriate behaviour, it had little effect. However, even 'difficult' students responded extremely positively when they were praised for appropriate behaviour (Madsen *et al* 1968). Praise works, in other words. Students are far more likely to avoid inappropriate behaviour if there is an obvious advantage (the teacher and the group's approval) in appropriate behaviour. However, as we saw on page 138, praise has to be offered in the right way and for good reasons if it is to be effective.

C Modifying problem behaviour

Despite all our best efforts to create successful learning environments, things sometimes get out of hand and students start behaving in inappropriate ways. The way we react in such situations will determine not only how serious the event becomes, but will also influence the attitude of the whole group in terms of their future adherence to the group norms which they have agreed. Punishing problem behaviour is not in itself an attractive action, but turning it into future success is.

When students behave disruptively or uncooperatively, our first task is to find out what the problem is. We can then see if we can agree a solution with the student who is exhibiting the offending behaviour so that we can set a target for them to aim at – one which will ensure the success we are striving for. There are many things to bear in mind if we wish to achieve these goals.

- **Act immediately:** it is vital to act immediately when there is a problem since the longer a type of behaviour is left unchecked, the more difficult it is to deal with. Indeed, unchecked behaviour may get steadily worse so that where it could have been deflected if it had been dealt with immediately, now it is almost impossible to deal with. Immediate action sometimes means no more than stopping talking, pausing and looking at the student in question (Brown and McIntyre 1993: 42). Sometimes, however, it may demand stronger action.

- **Keep calm:** in many students' eyes, teachers who have to shout to assert their authority appear to be losing control. Shouting by the teacher raises the overall level of noise in the classroom, too. We need to find some other way.

  The first thing to remember is that whatever we feel like, we should never appear to be flustered. Despite the fact that students sometimes appear to be attacking our personality and threatening everything we hold dear, we need to remember, in the words of a participant at a conference in Montreal Canada in 2005, that 'it's just a job'. Somehow we have to stand back from what is happening and rather than taking it personally, we need to act calmly and carefully.

  When we are trying to modify student behaviour, we need to look disruptive students in the eye, approach them, keep looking at them and speak in a measured tone. We can start by asking them questions to find out why they are behaving in the way they are. This will often be enough to defuse the situation. If more serious action is required, however, we will adopt some of the methods described below.

- **Focus on the behaviour not the student:** we should take care not to humiliate an uncooperative student. It's the behaviour that matters, not the student's character. Though it may sometimes be tempting to make aggressive or deprecatory remarks, or to compare the student adversely to other people, such reactions are almost certainly counter-productive: not only are they likely to foster hostility on the part of the student and/or damage their self-esteem, they may also be ineffective in managing the situation. Students can easily dismiss sarcasm as mere unpleasantness, but it is much more difficult to keep behaving in ways which the teacher is criticising sensibly and fairly.

- **Take things forward:** where a simple look or brief comment is not sufficient, we need to think carefully about how we respond. It is always better to be positive rather than negative. It is usually more effective for a teacher to say *Let's do this*, rather than *Don't do that*. Taking things forward is better than stopping them, in other words. Our objective will be to move on to the next stage of an activity or to get a new response rather than focusing on the old one. In extreme cases, we may decide to change the activity in order to take the steam out of the situation and allow students to re-focus. However, we should be careful not to base such decisions only on the inappropriate behaviour of one or two students.

  Other ways of going forward are to re-seat students, especially where two or more of them have encouraged one another. Once separated in an effective (but not humiliating) way, students often calm down and the problem behaviour dies away.

- **Talk in private:** it is appropriate to discuss a student's behaviour in private and talk about how to improve it. This is not always possible, of course, but disciplining a student in front of his or her classmates will not help that student's self-esteem at all. Ideally, we will try to deal with problem behaviour with the student after the class, or at least privately in a one-to-one situation, perhaps at the teacher's desk. If, however, we have to deal with the situation in front of the whole group, the more private we can keep it – by speaking quietly and approaching the student – the better.

  George Petty suggests a three-stage approach to such conversations when dealing with teenagers. He calls the stages a 'chat', a 'word' and a 'telling off' (Petty 2004: 117). In a 'chat', the teacher shows that he or she thinks the student is quite able and willing to solve the problem and that the student has the teacher's respect. When offering a 'word', the teacher is being firmer and is exerting pressure so that the students can solve their problem. But in a 'telling off', the teacher is quite clear that the behaviour is unacceptable and that it needs to change right now. And whether or not we agree with Petty's threefold division, we will all agree that we should try to deal with a problem – in the first instance – as lightly as possible before gradually becoming more serious or, finally, imposing some kind of sanction.

  One way in which we can attempt to change students' behaviour is by writing to them – a general letter to each member of the class expressing a problem and asking students to reply in confidence. In this way students have a chance to make contact with us without other people listening or having to face us directly. However, this kind of correspondence takes up a lot of time, and there are dangers of over-intimacy, too. Nevertheless, the use of letters may help to break the ice where teachers have found other ways of controlling misbehaviour to be unsuccessful.

  Dealing with indiscipline is often a matter of 'pastoral' care, helping students to recognise the problem behaviour and start to find a way towards changing it. This is far less likely to happen in class with everybody listening, than in private ongoing communication with the student outside the class.

- **Use clearly agreed sanctions:** we have already suggested that 'equality rules'. Quite apart from the need for fairness to all students, this means that students need to know what the penalties are for bad behaviour. They need to be aware that if X happens, Y will follow. There needs to be a gradual scale of action from a gentle reprimand (Petty's 'chat' – see above) to removal from a lesson and, finally, to exclusion from a school – though we will do everything we can to modify the student's behaviour so that this does not happen. Now, when X happens, the students know what to expect and they see it happening. This provides a sense of justice and a feeling of confidence in the system. What is less effective is either the teacher failing to impose a sanction that he or she has warned the group about (in which case it immediately loses its power for future occasions), or imposing a sanction far more serious than the one which the students expect (in which case they may lose respect at this arbitrary behaviour).

- **Use colleagues and the institution:** it is no shame to have disruptive students in our classroom. It happens to everyone. So when there's a problem, we should consult our colleagues, asking them for guidance. When the problem is threatening to get beyond our control (for example, a pattern of disruption which continues for a series of lessons), we would be well advised to talk to coordinators, directors of studies and/or principals. They should all have considerable experience of the kind of problems being faced and will be in a position to offer the benefit of their experience.

Whatever sector we work in (primary, secondary, tertiary, adult, state school or the private sector), we will all experience problem groups and encounter problem behaviour at some time in our teaching careers. More often than not, the problem is minor and can be easily dealt with, especially if we can refer to a previously established code of conduct, and if our responses to indiscipline are based on the principles and strategies we have outlined above. However, as we have suggested, it is far more attractive to try to avoid such problems occurring by managing for success.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Code of conduct**
  C Kyriacou (1998: Chapter 8) calls the establishing a code of conduct 'pre-empting misbehaviour'. This pre-emption involves establishing 'clear rules and expectations regarding classroom behaviour'.

- **Self-esteem**
  Teacher approval is not just important for children. T Lowe (1987) quoted diaries from English teachers who became students of Chinese. In their Chinese classes they were very keen for approval from their teacher of Chinese.

- **Teacher authority**
  R Senior (2006: Chapter 4) discusses how teachers establish their authority through purposeful action and establishment of good teacher–student rapport (see pages 113–115 of this book).

- **Writing to students**
  On letter communication with students, see M Rinvolucri (1983, 1995). N Burbidge *et al* (1996) have a range of letter-writing activities for students, many of which involve letters to and from the teacher.

10 Grouping students

A Different groups

There is no real limit to the way in which teachers can group students in a classroom, though certain factors, such as over-crowding, fixed furniture and entrenched student attitudes, may make things problematic. Nevertheless, teaching a class as a whole, getting students to work on their own, or having them perform tasks in pairs or groups all have their own advantages and disadvantages; each is more or less appropriate for different activities.

A1 Whole-class teaching

When people think of teaching and learning, they frequently conjure up a picture of students sitting in rows listening to a teacher who stands in front of them. For many, this is what teaching means, and it is still the most common teacher–student interaction in many cultures. Though it has many limitations, whole-class grouping like this has both practical advantages and disadvantages.

- **Advantages of whole-class grouping:**
  - It reinforces a sense of belonging among the group members, something which we as teachers need to foster (Williams and Burden 1997: 79). If everyone is involved in the same activity, then we are all 'in it together', and such experiences give us points of common reference to talk about and use as reasons to bond with each other. It is much easier for students to share an emotion such as happiness or amusement in a whole-class setting. Twenty people laughing is often more enjoyable than just two; 40 people holding their breath in anticipation create a much more engaging atmosphere than just the person sitting next to you. In other words, if language learning is a collective endeavour, then 'learning takes place most effectively when language classes pull together as unified groups' (Senior 2002: 402).
  - It is suitable for activities where the teacher is acting as a *controller* (see Chapter 6, B1). It is especially good for giving explanations and instructions, where smaller groups would mean having to do these things more than once. It is ideal for presenting material, whether in pictures, texts or on audio or video tape. It is also more cost-efficient, both in terms of material production and organisation, than other groupings can be.
  - It allows teachers to 'gauge the mood' of the class in general (rather than on an individual basis); it is a good way for us to get a general understanding of student progress.
  - It is the preferred class style in many educational settings where students and teachers feel secure when the whole class is working in lockstep and under the direct authority of the teacher.

- **Disadvantages of whole-class grouping:**
  - It favours the group rather than the individual. Everyone is forced to do the same thing at the same time and at the same pace.
  - Individual students do not have much of a chance to say anything on their own.
  - Many students are disinclined to participate in front of the whole class since to do so brings with it the risk of public failure.
  - It may not encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning (see Chapter 23). Whole-class teaching favours the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student rather than having students discover things or research things for themselves.
  - It is not the best way to organise communicative language teaching (see Chapter 4, A5) or specifically task-based sequences (see Chapter 4, A6). Communication between individuals is more difficult in a group of 20 or 30 than it is in groups of four or five. In smaller groups it is easier to share material, speak quietly and less formally, and make good eye contact. All of these contribute to successful task resolution.

A2 Seating whole-group classes

There are many different ways of seating classes when they are working as a whole group. One of the most common is to have students seated in *orderly rows* (see Figure 1).

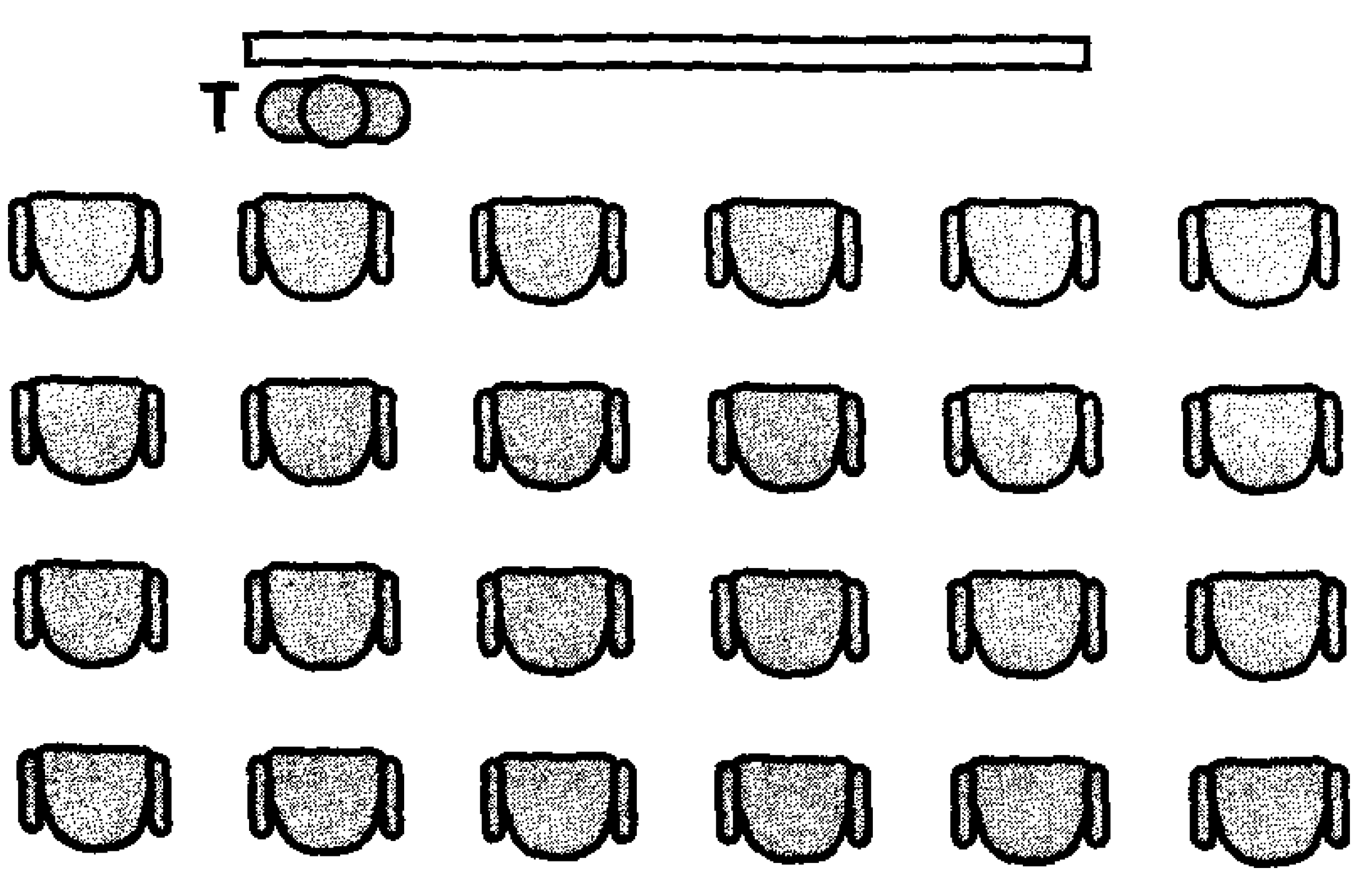

FIGURE 1: Orderly rows

There are considerable advantages to orderly row seating. The teacher has a clear view of all the students and the students can all see the teacher. Lecturing is easier with such a seating arrangement since it enables the teacher to maintain eye contact with the people he or she is talking to.

Orderly rows allow the teacher to work with the whole class. Some activities are especially suited to this kind of organisation, such as explaining a grammar point, watching a video/DVD or a PowerPoint (or other computer-based) presentation, or using the board or an overhead projector. It is also useful when students are involved in certain kinds of language practice. If all the students are focused on a task at the same time, the whole class gets the same messages. It is often easier to create a good whole-class dynamic when students are sitting as one group – rather than many – in orderly rows.

Two other common seating arrangements are *circle* and *horseshoe* (see Figure 2). These are especially appropriate for smaller groups (i.e. fewer than 20 students). In a horseshoe, the teacher will probably be at the open end of the arrangement since that may well be where the board, overhead projector and/or computer are situated. In a circle, the teacher's position – where the board is situated – is less dominating.

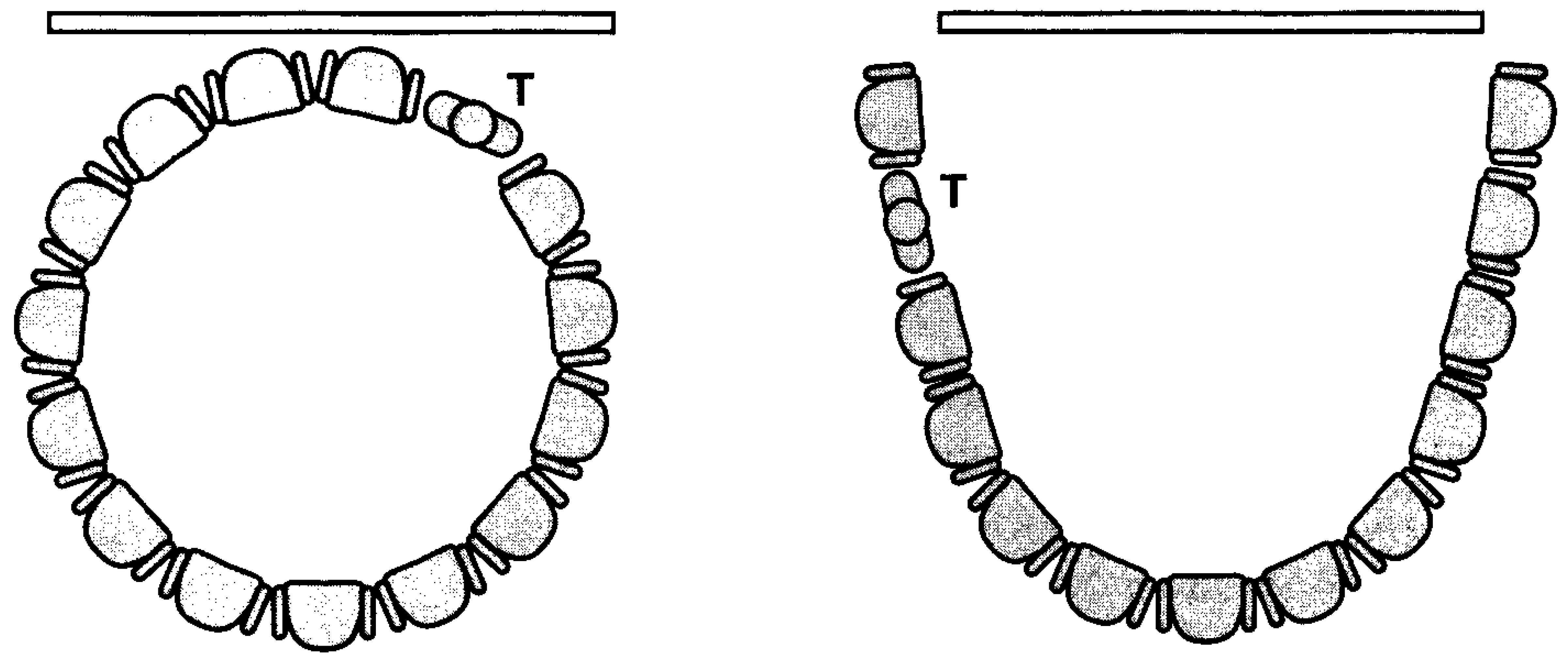

FIGURE 2: Circle and horseshoe

Classes which are arranged in a circle make quite a strong statement about what the teacher and the students believe in. With all the people in the room sitting in a circle, there is a far greater feeling of equality than when the teacher stays out at the front. This may not be quite so true of the horseshoe shape, where the teacher is often located in a commanding position, but, even here, the rigidity that comes with orderly rows, for example, is lessened.

With horseshoe and circle seating, the classroom is a more intimate place and the potential for students to share feelings and information through talking, eye contact or expressive body movements (eyebrow-raising, shoulder-shrugging, etc.) is far greater than when they are sitting in rows, one behind the other.

In some classrooms students sit in groups at *separate tables* (see Figure 3), whether they are working as a whole class, in groups or in pairs. In such classrooms, you might see the teacher walking around checking the students' work and helping out if they are having difficulties – prompting the students at this table, or explaining something to the students at that table in the corner.

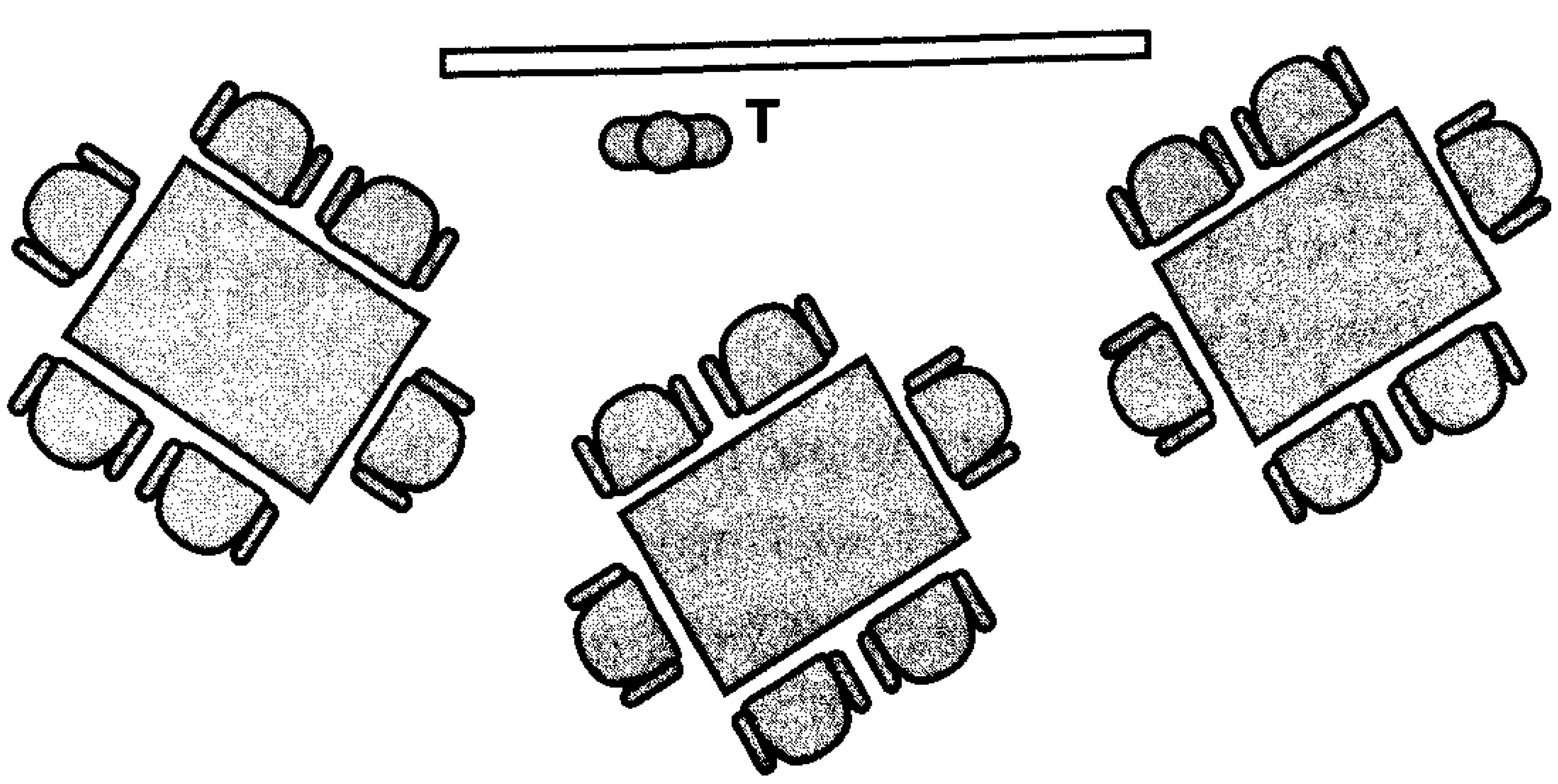

FIGURE 3: Separate tables

A huge advantage of separate tables is that groupwork is easy to arrange. Indeed, such an arrangement means that groupwork is likely to be far more common than with other kinds of seating. Separate table seating is especially useful in mixed-ability classes (see Chapter 7C), where different groups of students can benefit from concentrating on different tasks (designed for different ability levels).

Separate tables are more difficult to 'teach to' in whole-group activities, depending, of course, on the size of the room and the group. It is also important to bear in mind that students may not want to be stuck with the same three or four students for ever. Nevertheless, when students are working together, such a seating arrangement is ideal.

There are other ways of seating students, of course. Jim Scrivener, for example, suggests groupings such as 'enemy corners' (where two groups get into opposite corners of the room), opposing teams, and face-to-face (or back-to-back), where students sit in rows to make pairs (Scrivener 2005: 89).

The point of all these different sitting (and standing) arangements is that we should choose the best one for the students and, especially, the task. Insofar as we can make a general statement about it, it is worth pointing out that, where possible, varying the seating arrangements will make our lessons more dynamic and enjoyable.

A3 Students on their own

At the opposite end of the spectrum from whole-class grouping is the idea of students on their own, working in a pattern of *individualised learning*. This can range from students doing exercises on their own in class, to situations in which teachers are able to spend time working with individual students, or when students take charge of their own learning in self-access centres or other out-of-class environments (see Chapter 23C). Such individualised learning is a vital step in the development of learner autonomy.

If we wish students to work on their own in class, we can, for example, allow them to read privately and then answer questions individually; we can ask them to complete worksheets or writing tasks by themselves. We can give them worksheets with several different tasks and allow individuals to make their own decisions about which tasks to do. We can hand out different worksheets to different individuals, depending upon their tastes and abilities. We can allow students to research on their own or even choose what they want to read or listen to – especially where this concerns extensive reading (or 'learner literature' – see Chapter 17, A1).

- **Advantages of individualised learning:**
  - It allows teachers to respond to individual student differences in terms of pace of learning, learning styles and preferences (see Chapter 5B).
  - It is likely to be less stressful for students than performing in a whole-class setting or talking in pairs or groups.
  - It can develop learner autonomy and promote skills of self-reliance and investigation over teacher-dependence.
  - It can be a way of restoring peace and tranquillity to a noisy and chaotic classroom.
- **Disadvantages of individualised learning:**
  - It does not help a class develop a sense of belonging. It does not encourage cooperation in which students may be able to help and motivate each other.
  - When combined with giving individual students different tasks, it means a great deal more thought and materials preparation than whole-class teaching involves. When we work with individual students as a tutor or resource (see Chapter 6, B1), it takes much more time than interacting with the whole class.

A4 Pairwork

In pairwork, students can practise language together, study a text, research language or take part in information-gap activities (see Example 7 in Chapter 17, B1). They can write dialogues, predict the content of reading texts or compare notes on what they have listened to or seen.

- **Advantages of pairwork:**
  - It dramatically increases the amount of speaking time any one student gets in the class.
  - It allows students to work and interact independently without the necessary guidance of the teacher, thus promoting learner independence.
  - It allows teachers time to work with one or two pairs while the other students continue working.
  - It recognises the old maxim that 'two heads are better than one', and in promoting cooperation, helps the classroom to become a more relaxed and friendly place. If we get students to make decisions in pairs (such as deciding on the correct answers to questions about a reading text), we allow them to share responsibility, rather than having to bear the whole weight themselves.
  - It is relatively quick and easy to organise.
- **Disadvantages of pairwork:**
  - Pairwork is frequently very noisy and some teachers and students dislike this. Teachers in particular worry that they will lose control of their class.
  - Students in pairs can often veer away from the point of an exercise, talking about something else completely, often in their first language (see Chapter 7D). The chances of misbehaviour are greater with pairwork than in a whole-class setting.
  - It is not always popular with students, many of whom feel they would rather relate to the teacher as individuals than interact with another learner who may be just as linguistically weak as they are.
  - the actual choice of paired partner can be problematic (see B2 below), especially if students frequently find themselves working with someone they are not keen on.

A5 Groupwork

We can put students in larger groups, too, since this will allow them to do a range of tasks for which pairwork is not sufficient or appropriate. Thus students can write a group story (see Chapter 19C, Example 7) or role-play a situation which involves five people. They can prepare a presentation or discuss an issue and come to a group decision. They can watch, write or perform a video sequence (see Chapter 20E); we can give individual students in a group different lines from a poem which the group has to reassemble (see page 297).

In general, it is possible to say that small groups of around five students provoke greater involvement and participation than larger groups. They are small enough for real interpersonal interaction, yet not so small that members are over-reliant upon each individual. Because five is an odd number it means that a majority view can usually prevail. However, there are occasions when larger groups are necessary. The activity may demand it (see the poem activity mentioned above, where the number of students in a group depends on the number of lines in the poem), or we may want to divide the class into teams for some game or preparation phase.

- **Advantages of groupwork:**
  - Like pairwork, it dramatically increases the number of talking opportunities for individual students.
  - Unlike pairwork, because there are more than two people in the group, personal relationships are usually less problematic; there is also a greater chance of different opinions and varied contributions than in pairwork.
  - It encourages broader skills of cooperation and negotiation than pairwork, and yet is more private than work in front of the whole class. Lynne Flowerdew (1998) found that it was especially appropriate in Hong Kong, where its use accorded with the Confucian principles which her Cantonese-speaking students were comfortable with. Furthermore, her students were prepared to evaluate each other's performance both positively and negatively where in a bigger group a natural tendency for self-effacement made this less likely.
  - It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group without being told what to do by the teacher.
  - Although we do not wish any individuals in groups to be completely passive, nevertheless some students can choose their level of participation more readily than in a whole-class or pairwork situation.
- **Disadvantages of groupwork:**
  - It is likely to be noisy (though not necessarily as loud as pairwork can be). Some teachers feel that they lose control, and the whole-class feeling which has been painstakingly built up may dissipate when the class is split into smaller entities.
  - Not all students enjoy it since they would prefer to be the focus of the teacher's attention rather than working with their peers. Sometimes students find themselves in uncongenial groups and wish they could be somewhere else.
  - Individuals may fall into group roles that become fossilised, so that some are passive whereas others may dominate.
  - Groups can take longer to organise than pairs; beginning and ending groupwork activities, especially where people move around the class, can take time and be chaotic.

A6 Ringing the changes

Deciding when to put students in groups or pairs, when to teach the whole class or when to let individuals get on with it on their own will depend upon a number of factors:

- **The task:** if we want to give students a quick chance to think about an issue which we will be focusing on later, we may put them in buzz groups where they have a chance to discuss or 'buzz' the topic among themselves before working with it in a whole-class grouping. However, small groups will be inappropriate for many explanations and demonstrations, where working with the class as one group will be more suitable.

When students have listened to a recording to complete a task or answer questions, we may let them compare their answers in quickly-organised pairs. If we want our students to practise an oral dialogue quickly, pairwork may be the best grouping, too.

If the task we wish our students to be involved in necessitates oral interaction, we will probably put students in groups, especially in a large class, so that they all have a chance to make a contribution. If we want students to write sentences which demonstrate their understanding of new vocabulary, on the other hand, we may choose to have them do it individually.

Although many tasks suggest obvious student groupings, we can usually adapt them for use with other groupings. Dialogue practice can be done in pairs, but it can also be organised with two halves of the whole class. Similarly, answering questions about a listening extract can be an individual activity or we can get students to discuss the answers in pairs. We can also have a 'jigsaw listening', where different students listen to different parts of a text so that they can then reassemble the whole text in groups.

- **Variety in a sequence:** a lot depends on how the activity fits into the lesson sequences we have been following and are likely to follow next (see Chapter 21). If much of our recent teaching has involved whole-class grouping, there may be a pressing need for pairwork or groupwork. If much of our recent work has been boisterous and active, based on interaction between various pairs and groups, we may think it sensible to allow students time to work individually to give them some breathing space. The advantage of having different student groupings is that they help to provide variety, thus sustaining motivation.

- **The mood:** crucial to our decision about what groupings to use is the mood of our students. Changing the grouping of a class can be a good way to change its mood when required. If students are becoming restless with a whole-class activity – and if they appear to have little to say or contribute in such a setting – we can put them in groups to give them a chance to re-engage with the lesson. If, on the other hand, groups appear to be losing their way or not working constructively, we can call the whole class back together and re-define the task, discuss problems that different groups have encountered or change the activity.

B Organising pairwork and groupwork

Sometimes we may have to persuade reluctant students that pairwork and groupwork are worth doing. They are more likely to believe this if pair and group activities are seen to be a success. Ensuring that pair and group activities work well will be easier if we have a clear idea about how to resolve any problems that might occur.

B1 Making it work

Because some students are unused to working in pairs and groups, or because they may have mixed feelings about working with a partner or about not having the teacher's attention at all times, it may be necessary to invest some time in discussion of learning routines. Just as we may want to create a joint code of conduct (see Chapter 9, B1), so we can come to an agreement about when and how to use different student groupings.

One way to discuss pairwork or groupwork is to do a group activity with students and then, when it is over, ask them to write or say how they felt about it (either in English or their own language). Alternatively, we can initiate a discussion about different groupings as a prelude to the use of groupwork and pairwork. This could be done by having students complete sentences such as:

I like/don't like working on my own because ....

....

I like/don't like working in pairs because..

....

I like/don't like speaking in front of the whole class because ....

....

They can then compare their sentences with other students to see if everyone agrees. We can also ask them to list their favourite activities and compare these lists with their classmates.

When we know how our students feel about pairwork and groupwork, we can then decide, as with all action research (see Chapter 24B), what changes of method, if any, we need to make.

We might decide that we need to spend more time explaining what we are doing; we might concentrate on choosing better tasks, or we might even, in extreme cases, decide to use pairwork and groupwork less often if our students object strongly to them. However, even where students show a marked initial reluctance to working in groups, we might hope, through organising a successful demonstration activity and/or discussion, to strike the kind of bargain we discussed in Chapter 4, B2.

B2 Creating pairs and groups

Once we have decided to have students working in pairs or groups, we need to consider how we are going to put them into those pairs and groups – that is, who is going to work with whom. We can base such decisions on any one of the following principles:

- **Friendship:** a key consideration when putting students in pairs or groups is to make sure that we put friends with friends, rather than risking the possibility of people working with others whom they find difficult or unpleasant. Through observation, therefore, we can see which students get on with which of their classmates and make use of this observation later. The problem, of course, is that our observations may not always be accurate, and friendships can change over time.

  Perhaps, then, we should leave it to the students, and ask them to get into pairs or groups with whoever they want to work with. In such a situation we can be sure that members of our class will gravitate towards people they like, admire or want to be liked by. Such a procedure is likely to be just as reliable as one based on our own observation. However, letting students choose in this way can be very chaotic and may exclude less popular students altogether so that they find themselves standing on their own when the pairs or groups are formed.

  A more informed way of grouping students is to use a sociogram, but in order for this to be effective (and safe), students need to know that what they write in private will never be seen by anyone except the teacher. In this procedure, students are asked to write their name on a piece of paper and then write, in order of preference, the students they like best in the class. On the other side of the piece of paper, they list the people they do not like. It is important that they know that only the teacher will look at what they have written and that they cannot be overlooked while they do this. We can now use the information they have written to make sociograms like the imaginary one in Figure 4 (→ = likes, ------> = doesn't like):

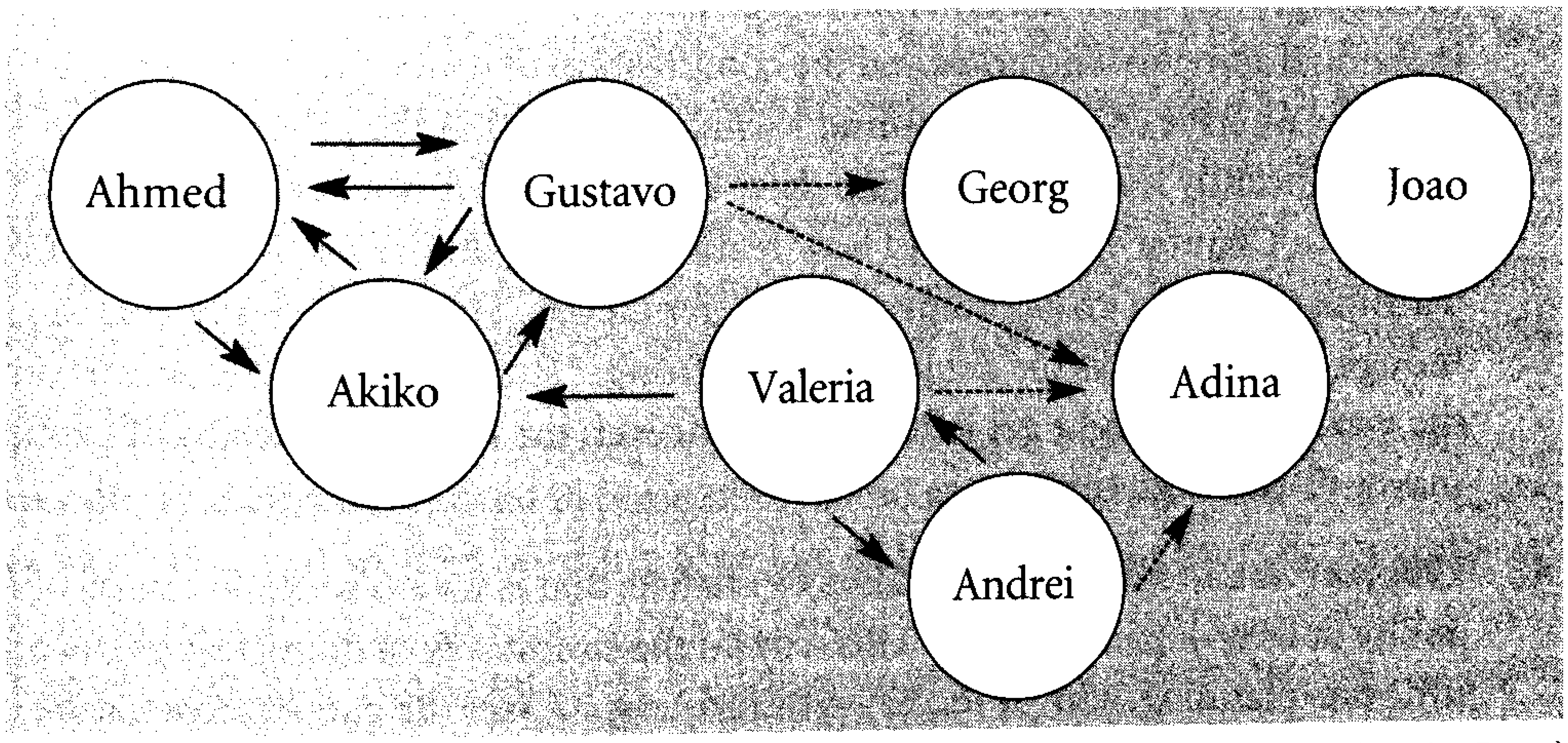

FIGURE 4: Sociogram based on *Roles of Teachers and Learners* by T Wright (Oxford University Press)

This will then allow us to make informed choices about how we should pair and group individuals. However, not everyone agrees with the idea of grouping and pairing students in this way. In the first place, sociograms are time-consuming and fail to answer the problem of what to do with unpopular students. Secondly, some people think that instead of letting the students' likes and dislikes predominate, 'the initial likes and dislikes should be replaced by acceptance among the students' (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003: 171). In other words, teachers should work to make all students accepting of each other, whoever they are paired or grouped with.

Sociograms may be useful, though, when a class doesn't seem to be cohering correctly or when pairwork and groupwork don't seem to be going well. The information they give us might help us to make decisions about grouping in order to improve matters.

- **Streaming:** much discussion centres round whether students should be streamed according to their ability. One suggestion is that pairs and groups should have a mixture of weaker and stronger students. In such groups the more able students can help their less fluent or knowledgeable colleagues. The process of helping will result in the strong students themselves being able to understand more about the language; the weaker students will benefit from the help they get.

  An alternative view is that if we are going to get students at different levels within a class to do different tasks, we should create groups in which all the students are at the same level (a level that will be different from some of the other groups). This gives us the opportunity to go to a group of weaker students and give them the special help which they need, but which stronger students might find irksome. It also allows us to give groups of stronger students more challenging tasks to perform. However, some of the value of cooperative work – all students helping each other regardless of level – may be lost.

  When we discussed *differentiation* in Chapter 7C, we saw how it was possible to help individual students with different abilities even though they were all in the same class. Streaming, therefore, seems to fit into this philosophy. However, there is the danger that students in the weaker groups might become demoralised. Furthermore, once we start grouping weaker students together, we may somehow predispose them to stay in this category rather than having the motivation to improve out of it. Successful differentiation through grouping, on the other hand, occurs when we put individual students together for individual activities and tasks, and the composition of those groups changes, depending on the tasks we have chosen. Streaming – which implies that the grouping is semi-permanent – is significantly less attractive than these rather more ad-hoc arrangements.

But in Chapter 7, C4 we said how realistic mixed-ability teaching often involves us in teaching the whole group despite the different levels. This can be replicated in groups, too, though there is always the danger that the stronger students might become frustrated while the weaker ones might get left behind. However, the benefits in terms of group cohesion may well outweigh this.

- **Chance:** we can also group students by chance, that is for no special reasons of friendship, ability or level of participation. This is by far the easiest way of doing things since it demands little pre-planning, and, by its very arbitrariness, stresses the cooperative nature of working together.

  One way of grouping people is to have students who are sitting next or near to each other work in pairs or groups. A problem can occur, though, with students who always sit in the same place since it means that they will always be in the same pairs or groups. This could give rise to boredom over a prolonged period.

  Another way of organising pairwork is the 'wheels' scenario (Scrivener 2005: 89). Here half of the class stand in a circle facing outwards, and the other half of the class stand in an outer circle facing inwards. The outer circle revolves in a clockwise direction and the inner circle revolves in an anti-clockwise direction. When they are told to stop, students work with the person facing them.

  We can organise groups by giving each student in the class (in the order they are sitting) a letter from A to E. We now ask all the As to form a group together, all the Bs to be a group, all the Cs to be a group and so on. Depending upon the size of the class, we might end up with groups of more than five, but this may not be a problem if the task is appropriate. We can also arrange random groups by asking people to get out of their chairs and stand in the order of their birthdays (with January at one end of the line and December at the other). We can then group the first five, the second five and so on. We can make groups of people wearing black or green, of people with or without glasses, or of people in different occupations (if we are in an adult class).

  It is interesting to note that modern computer language laboratories often have a random pairing and grouping program so that the teacher does not have to decide who should work with whom.

- **The task:** sometimes the task may determine who works with whom. For example, if we want students from different countries (in a multilingual group) to compare cultural practices, we will try to ensure that students from the same country do not work together (since that would defeat the object of the exercise). If the task is about people who are interested in particular leisure activities (sport, music, etc.), that might determine the make-up of the pairs or groups.

- **Changing groups:** just because we put students in groups at the beginning of an activity does not mean that they have to stay in these groups until the end. The group may change while an activity continues. For example, students may start by listing vocabulary and then discuss it first in pairs, then in groups of four, then in groups of eight – or even 16. In an interview activity, students can start working in two main groups and then break into smaller groups for a role-play. If groups are planning something or discussing, members from other groups can come and visit them to share information and take different information back to their original group. A longer sequence may start with the teacher and the whole class before moving between pairwork, individual work and groupwork until it returns back to the whole-class grouping.

- **Gender and status:** we need to remember that in some contexts it may not be appropriate to have men and women working together. Similarly, when grouping students we may want to bear in mind the status of the individuals in their lives outside the classroom. This is especially true in business English groups where different tiers of management, for example, are represented in the group. We will need, in both these scenarios, to make ourselves aware of what is the norm so that we can then make informed decisions about how to proceed.

We make our pairing and grouping decisions based on a variety of factors. If we are concerned about the atmosphere of the whole class and some of the tensions in it, we may try to make friendship groups – always bearing in mind the need to foster an acceptance for working with all students in the group eventually (see above). If our activity is based on fun (such as Example 7, *Julia's story*, on page 337), we may leave our grouping to chance. If, on the other hand, we are dealing with a non-homogeneous class (in terms of level) or if we have some students who are falling behind, we may stream groups so that we can help the weaker students while keeping the more advanced ones engaged in a different activity. We might, for example, stream pairs to do research tasks so that students with differing needs can work on different aspects of language.

One final point that needs stressing is that we should not always have students working with the same partners or group members. This creates what Sue Murray humorously refers to as ESP-PWOFP (English for the Sole Purpose of doing Pair Work with One Fixed Partner) (Murray 2000: 49). She argues persuasively that mixing and moving students around as a course progresses is good for classroom atmosphere and for individual engagement.

B3 Procedures for pairwork and groupwork

Our role in pairwork and groupwork does not end when we have decided which students should work together, of course. We have other matters to address, too, not only before the activity starts, but also during and after it.

- **Before:** when we want students to work together in pairs or groups, we will want to follow an 'engage–instruct–initiate' sequence (see page 68). This is because students need to feel enthusiastic about what they are going to do, they need to know what they are going to do, and they need to be given an idea of when they will have finished the task.

Sometimes our instructions will involve a demonstration – when, for example, students are going to use a new information-gap activity or when we want them to use cards (see Chapter 11, C3). On other occasions, where an activity is familiar, we may simply give them an instruction to practise language they are studying in pairs, or to use their dictionaries to find specific bits of information.

The success of a pairwork or groupwork task is often helped by giving students a time when the activity should finish – and then sticking to it. This helps to give them a clear framework to work within. Alternatively in lighter-hearted activities such as a poem dictation (see Example 5 on page 335), we can encourage groups to see who finishes first. Though language learning is not a contest (except, perhaps, a personal one), in game-like activities '... a slight sense of competition between groups does no harm' (Nuttall 1996: 164).

The important thing about instructions is that the students should understand and agree on what the task is. To check that they do, we may ask them to repeat the instructions, or, in monolingual classes, to translate them into their first language.

- **During:** while students are working in pairs or groups we have a number of options. We could, for instance, stand at the front or the side of the class (or at the back or anywhere else) and keep an eye on what is happening, noting who appears to be stuck, disengaged or about to finish. In this position we can tune in to a particular pair or group from some distance away. We can then decide whether to go over and help them.

  An alternative procedure is often referred to as *monitoring*. This is where we go round the class, watching and listening to specific pairs and groups either to help them with the task or to collect examples of what they are doing for later comment and work. For example, we can stay with a group for a period of time and then intervene if and when we think it is appropriate or necessary, always bearing in mind what we have said about the difference between accuracy and fluency work (see Chapter 8, C1). If students are involved in a discussion, for example, we might correct gently (see Chapter 8, C3); if we are helping students with suggestions about something they are planning, or trying to move a discussion forwards, we can act as prompter, resource or tutor (see Chapter 6, B1). In such situations we will often be responding to what they are doing rather than giving correction feedback. We will be helping them forwards with the task they are involved in. Where students fall back on their first language, we will do our best to encourage or persuade them back into English.

  When students are working in pairs or groups we have an ideal opportunity to work with individual students whom we feel would benefit from our attention. We also have a great chance to act as observer, picking up information about student progress, and seeing if we will have to 'troubleshoot' (see below). But however we monitor, intervene or take part in the work of a pair or group, it is vital that we do so in a way that is appropriate to the students involved and to the tasks they are involved in.

- **After:** when pairs and groups stop working together, we need to organise feedback (see Chapter 8). We want to let them discuss what occurred during the groupwork session and, where necessary, add our own assessments and make corrections.

  Where pairwork or groupwork has formed part of a practice session, our feedback may take the form of having a few pairs or groups quickly demonstrate the language they have been using. We can then correct it, if and when necessary, and this procedure will give both those students and the rest of the class good information for future learning and action.

Where pairs or groups have been working on a task with definite right or wrong answers, we need to ensure that they have completed it successfully. Where they have been discussing an issue or predicting the content of a reading text, we will encourage them to talk about their conclusions with us and the rest of the class. By comparing different solutions, ideas and problems, everyone gets a greater understanding of the topic.

Where students have produced a piece of work, we can give them a chance to demonstrate this to other students in the class. They can stick written material on noticeboards; they can read out dialogues they have written or play audio or video tapes they have made.

Finally, it is vital to remember that constructive feedback on the content of student work can greatly enhance students' future motivation. The feedback we give on language mistakes (see Chapter 8C and D) is only one part of that process.

B4 Troubleshooting

When we monitor pairs and groups during a groupwork activity, we are seeing how well they are doing and deciding whether or not to go over and intervene. But we are also keeping our eyes open for problems which we can resolve either on the spot or in future.

- **Finishing first:** a problem that frequently occurs when students are working in pairs or groups is that some of them finish earlier than others and/or show clearly that they have had enough of the activity and want to do something else. We need to be ready for this and have some way of dealing with the situation. Saying to them *OK, you can relax for a bit while the others finish* may be appropriate for tired students, but can make other students feel that they are being ignored.

  When we see the first pairs or groups finish the task, we might stop the activity for the whole class. That removes the problem of boredom, but it may be very demotivating for the students who haven't yet finished, especially when they are nearly there and have invested some considerable effort in the procedure.

  One way of avoiding the problems we have mentioned here is to have a series of challenging task-related extensions for early finishers so that when a group has finished early, we can give them an activity to complete while they are waiting. This will show the students that they are not just being left to do nothing. When planning groupwork it is a good idea for teachers to make a list of task-related extensions and other spare activities that first-finishing groups and pairs can be involved in (though see page 129).

  Even where we have set a time limit on pair- and groupwork, we need to keep an eye open to see how the students are progressing. We can then make the decision about when to stop the activity based on the observable (dis)engagement of the students and how near they all are to completing the task.

- **Awkward groups:** when students are working in pairs or groups we need to observe how well they interact together. Even where we have made our best judgements – based on friendship or streaming, for example – it is possible that apparently satisfactory combinations of students are not ideal. Some pairs may find it impossible to concentrate on the task in hand and instead encourage each other to talk about something else, usually in their first language. In some groups (in some educational cultures) members may defer to the oldest person there, or to the man in an otherwise female group. People with loud voices can dominate proceedings; less extrovert people may not participate fully enough. Some weak students may be lost when paired or grouped with stronger classmates.

In such situations we may need to change the pairs or groups. We can separate best friends for pairwork; we can put all the high-status figures in one group so that students in other groups do not have to defer to them. We can stream groups or reorganise them in other ways so that all group members gain the most from the activity.

One way of finding out about groups, in particular, is simply to observe, noting down how often each student speaks. If two or three observations of this kind reveal a continuing pattern, we can take the kind of action suggested above.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Whole-class teaching**

  On the advantages of whole-class learning, see R Senior (2002). On the management of the whole class as a group, two excellent books on group dynamics are J Hadfield (1992) and Z Dörnyei and T Murphey (2003).

- **Pairwork and groupwork**

  On the advantages and disadvantages of pairwork, see S Haines (1995).

  M Courtney (1996) looks at both pairwork and groupwork for oral tasks. J Reid (1987) found that students have definite views about class grouping, and T Woodward (1995) worries about issues related to pair- and groupwork.

  M Hebden and J Mason (2003) suggest a number of different seatings and groupings for different activities with younger learners.