

Jeremy Harmer

# how to

teach english

new edition

with DVD



PEARSON  
Longman

## Acknowledgements

In the first edition of *How to Teach English*, I acknowledged the contributions made to the development of the book by Richard Rossner, Anita Harmer, Gill Stacey, Sue Jones, Rodney Blakeston and Martin Parrott. I was especially thrilled with the reactions of students being taught by Maggy McNorton (at the University of Glamorgan) and David Ridell (at Kingsway College, London). I paid tribute to Melanie Butler's role in getting the whole project going. I should also, back then, have acknowledged Kate Goldrick's support and help at Pearson Education, especially during one particular phase of development, and it was remiss of me not to cite David Lott's crucial contribution right at the end of the process.

David Lott crops up again – of course – in the thanks I need to offer to him and a whole lot of other people while this new edition has been in development. He was in at the start and in one truly wonderful day of meetings with him and Katy Wright (the inspiring methodology publisher at Pearson Education to whom I owe an increasing debt of gratitude) many issues were confronted, and new directions suggested. And since then the clear head and firm editing of Helena Gomm have made putting thoughts into finished words a real joy.

This new edition has benefited enormously from some stunning reporting by Hilary Rees-Parnell, Katie Head and Jeremy Pearman in the UK, Gabriel Diaz Maggioli in Uruguay, Adriana Gil in Brazil, Mitsuyo Ohta in Japan and Maria Pujak in Poland. I hope they all know how seriously I looked at their suggestions and criticisms, and how tough it was, sometimes, to decide how far to agree or disagree with them. They feel, to me, like real collaborators in this enterprise (and special thanks to Adriana, Gabriel and Jeremy for their input on planning). And it is thanks to Jacqui Hiddleston at Pearson that their thoughts came through so clearly. Jane Reeve has handled the production process with her usual exemplary skill.

But it would be wrong of me to forget to mention countless others – the teachers and trainers I meet and listen to at training sessions and conferences around the world. It is amazing how much you can learn, and how the process of reflection is enhanced by hearing other professionals describe their experiences and expound their beliefs.

Finally, I want to thank Jane Dancaster (principal) and especially Fiona Dunlop (director of studies) at the Wimbledon School of English for letting us invade their school with a film crew, and for helping us to organise two fascinating days of filming. But it is to six teachers that I want to offer thanks from the bottom of my heart for their cheerfulness, cooperation and friendliness. They planned lessons for us, allowed themselves to be filmed delivering those lessons (a nerve-wracking experience!) and were prepared to be interviewed about their teaching on camera. When you watch Chris McDermott, Louise Russell, Mark Smith, Philip Harmer, Pip Stallard and Pip Titley you will only see a fraction of their fabulous teaching, but it is worth every minute of the time they and we invested in it!

Of course, none of the people I have mentioned should be held to account for the final version you have in your hands. In the end that is entirely my responsibility. But I hope that they (and you) will enjoy how it has all turned out.

Jeremy Harmer  
Cambridge, UK

## Introduction

A friend of mine who is an orchestral conductor was asking me (early in our acquaintance) about what I did for a living. When I told him that, apart from other activities, I wrote books about how to teach English he said 'Books in the plural? Surely once you've written one, there's nothing more to say!' I wanted to reply that he had just argued himself out of a job (I mean, how many performances of Beethoven symphonies have there been in the twenty-first century alone?), but someone else laughed at his question, another musician made a different comment, the conversation moved on, and so Martin-the-conductor's flippant enquiry evaporated in the convivial atmosphere of a British pub.

But his question was a good one. Surely we know how to teach languages? After all, people have been doing it successfully for two thousand years or more, and some aspects of teaching in the past have probably not changed that much. But other things have, and continue to change. Which is (I suppose) why every time I re-examine past assumptions about teaching, I find myself questioning and reinterpreting things I thought were fixed. And of course, I am not alone in this. We all do it all the time – or at least we do if we haven't closed our minds off from the possibility of change and renewal.

Language teaching, perhaps more than many other activities, reflects the times it takes place in. Language is about communication, after all, and perhaps that is why philosophies and techniques for learning languages seem to develop and change in tune with the societies which give rise to them. Teaching and learning are very human activities; they are social just as much as they are (in our case) linguistic.

But it's not just society that changes and evolves. The last decades have seen what feels like unprecedented technological change. The Internet has seen to that and other educational technology has not lagged behind. New software and hardware has appeared which we could hardly have imagined possible when the first edition of *How to Teach English* was published as recently as 1998. And it's exciting stuff. There are so many wonderful possibilities open to us now (not least the ability to write and edit books electronically!). I've tried to reflect that excitement and newness in parts of this new edition. But we need to be careful, too. In the words of Baroness Greenfield, speaking in Britain's House of Lords, 'We must choose to adopt appropriate technologies that will ensure the classroom will fit the child, and buck the growing trend for technologies ... to be used to make the twenty-first-century child fit the classroom.'

But finally, there is the sheer joy – and frustration, and disbelief and (in the words of the playwright Dennis Potter) 'tender contempt' – you experience when you look again at what you wrote a few years back; the challenge is to see, in the light of what has happened, what has been said and what has been written, the things that need to be changed, excised or added to.

Readers of the first version of *How to Teach English* will notice a change of chapter order and see a new chapter to introduce the subject of testing. There are new materials and techniques on offer – and quite a few old ones too because they have stood the test of time. There's a more up-to-date set of references at the end of the book, and a glossary to

help new teachers through parts of the mighty jargon swamp that our profession generates just like any other.

And so – I want to say to my conductor friend – thank heavens for new developments, new technologies and new interpretations. They keep us alive; they make us better teachers. We shall not, of course, cease from exploration in T S Eliot's famous words, but even if we do end up back where we started, the journey is all.



# Learners

- ▣ Reasons for learning
- ▣ Different contexts for learning
- ▣ Learner differences
- ▣ The importance of student motivation
- ▣ Responsibility for learning

## Reasons for learning

All around the world, students of all ages are learning to speak English, but their reasons for wanting to study English can differ greatly. Some students, of course, only learn English because it is on the curriculum at primary or secondary level, but for others, studying the language reflects some kind of a choice.

Many people learn English because they have moved into a **target-language community** and they need to be able to operate successfully within that community. A target-language community is a place where English is the national language – e.g. Britain, Canada, New Zealand, etc – or where it is one of the main languages of culture and commerce – e.g. India, Pakistan, Nigeria.

Some students need English for a Specific Purpose (ESP). Such students of ESP (sometimes also called English for Special Purposes) may need to learn legal language, or the language of tourism, banking or nursing, for example. An extremely popular strand of ESP is the teaching of **business English**, where students learn about how to operate in English in the business world. Many students need English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in order to study at an English-speaking university or college, or because they need to access English-language academic texts.

Many people learn English because they think it will be useful in some way for international communication and travel. Such students of **general English** often do not have a particular reason for going to English classes, but simply wish to learn to speak (and read and write) the language effectively for wherever and whenever this might be useful for them.

The purposes students have for learning will have an effect on what it is they want and need to learn – and as a result will influence what they are taught. Business English students, for example, will want to spend a lot of time concentrating on the language needed for specific business transactions and situations. Students living in a target-language community will need to use English to achieve their immediate practical and social needs. A group of nurses will want to study the kind of English that they are likely to have to use while they nurse. Students of general English (including those studying the language as part of their primary and secondary education) will not have such specific needs, of course, and so their lessons (and the materials which the teachers use) will almost certainly look

different from those for students with more clearly identifiable needs.

Consideration of our students' different reasons for learning is just one of many different learner variables, as we shall see below.

## Different contexts for learning

English is learnt and taught in many different contexts, and in many different class arrangements. Such differences will have a considerable effect on how and what it is we teach.

### EFL, ESL and ESOL

For many years we have made a distinction between people who study English as a foreign language and those who study it as a second or other language. It has been suggested that students of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) tend to be learning so that they can use English when travelling or to communicate with other people, from whatever country, who also speak English. ESL (English as a Second Language) students, on the other hand, are usually living in the target-language community. The latter may need to learn the particular language variety of that community (Scottish English, southern English from England, Australian English, Texan English, etc) rather than a more general language variety (see page 79). They may need to combine their learning of English with knowledge of how to do things in the target-language community – such as going to a bank, renting a flat, accessing health services, etc. The English they learn, therefore, may differ from that studied by EFL students, whose needs are not so specific to a particular time and place.

However, this distinction begins to look less satisfactory when we look at the way people use English in a global context. The use of English for international communication, especially with the Internet, means that many 'EFL students' are in effect living in a global target-language community and so might be thought of as 'ESL students' instead! Partly as a result of this we now tend to use the term **ESOL** (English for Speakers of Other Languages) to describe both situations. Nevertheless, the context in which the language is learnt (what community they wish to be part of) is still of considerable relevance to the kind of English they will want and need to study, and the skills they will need to acquire.

### 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 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. This will affect their motivation (see page 20) at the beginning of the process.

### Large classes and one-to-one teaching

Some students prefer to have a private session with just them on their own and a teacher. This is commonly referred to as **one-to-one teaching**. At the other end of the scale, English

is taught in some environments to groups of over 100 students at a time. Government school classes in many countries have up to 30 students, whereas a typical number in a private language school lies somewhere between 8 and 15 learners.

Clearly the size of the class will affect how we teach. **Pairwork** and **groupwork** (see pages 43–44) are often used in large classes to give students more chances for interaction than they would otherwise get with whole-class teaching. In a one-to-one setting the teacher is able to tailor the lesson to an individual's specific needs, whereas with larger groups compromises have to be reached between the group and the individuals within it. In large classes the teacher may well teach from the front more often than with smaller groups, where mingling with students when they work in pairs, etc may be much more feasible and time-efficient.

### 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 page 20) 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 program – 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 classes for a number of reasons. Firstly, students can attend lessons when *they* want for the most part (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. 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. 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.

Although this book will certainly look at uses of the Internet and other IT applications, it is not primarily concerned with the virtual learning environment, preferring instead to concentrate on situations where the teachers and learners are usually in the same place, at the same time.

## Learner differences

Whatever their reasons for learning (or the circumstances in which it takes place), it is sometimes tempting to see all students as being more or less the same. Yet there are marked differences, not only in terms of their age and level, but also in terms of different individual abilities, knowledge and preferences. We will examine some of these differences in this section.

### Age

Learners are often described as children, young learners, adolescents, young adults or adults. Within education, the term *children* is generally used for learners between the ages of about 2 to about 14. Students are generally described as *young learners* between the ages of about 5 to 9, and *very young learners* are usually between 2 and 5. At what ages it is safe to call students *adolescents* is often uncertain, since the onset of adolescence is bound up with physical and emotional changes rather than chronological age. However, this term tends to refer to students from the ages of about 12 to 17, whereas *young adults* are generally thought to be between 16 and 20.

We will look at three ages: children, adolescents and adults. However, we need to remember that there is a large degree of individual variation in the ways in which different children develop. The descriptions that follow, therefore, must be seen as generalisations only.

### Children

We know that children don't just focus on what is being taught, but also learn all sorts of other things at the same time, taking information from whatever is going on around them. We know that seeing, hearing and touching are just as important for understanding as the teacher's explanation. We are conscious, too, that the abstraction of, say, grammar rules, will be less effective the younger the students are. But we also know that children respond well to individual attention from the teacher and are usually pleased to receive teacher approval.

Children usually respond well to activities that focus on their lives and experiences. But a child's attention span – their willingness to stay rooted in one activity – is often fairly short.

A crucial characteristic of young children is their ability to become competent speakers of a new language with remarkable facility, provided they get enough exposure to it. They forget languages, it seems, with equal ease. This language-acquiring ability is steadily compromised as they head towards adolescence.

### Adolescents

One of the greatest differences between adolescents and young children is that these older children have developed a greater capacity for abstract thought as they have grown up. In other words, their intellects are kicking in, and they can talk about more abstract ideas, teasing out concepts in a way that younger children find difficult. Many adolescents readily understand and accept the need for learning of a more intellectual type.

At their best, adolescent students have a great capacity for learning, enormous potential for creative thought and a passionate commitment to things which interest them.

Adolescence is bound up with a search for identity and a need for self-esteem. This is often the result of the students' position within their peer group rather than being the consequence of teacher approval.

### Adults

Older learners often (but not always) have a wider range of life experiences to draw on, both as individuals and as learners, than younger students do. They are often more disciplined than adolescents and apply themselves to the task of learning even when it seems fairly boring. They often have a clear understanding of why they are learning things, and can sustain their motivation (see pages 20–21) by perceiving (and holding on to) long-term learning goals.

On the other hand, adult learners come with a lot of previous learning experience which may hamper their progress. Students who have had negative learning experiences in the past may be nervous of new learning. Students used to failure may be consciously or subconsciously prepared for more failure. Older students who have got out of the habit of study may find classrooms daunting places. They may also have strong views about teaching methods from their past, which the teacher will have to take into account.

Because students at different ages have different characteristics, the way we teach them will differ too. With younger children we may offer a greater variety of games, songs and puzzles than we would do with older students. We may want to ensure that there are more frequent changes of activity. With a group of adolescents we will try to keep in mind the importance of a student's place within his or her peer group and take special care when correcting or assigning roles within an activity, etc. Our choice of topics will reflect their emerging interests.

One of the recurring nightmares for teachers of adolescents, in particular, is that we might lose control of the class. We worry about lessons that slip away from us, and which we can't manage because the students don't like the subject, each other, the teacher or the school – or sometimes just because they feel like misbehaving, or because issues in their life outside the classroom are affecting their behaviour and outlook on life. Yet teenagers are not the only students who sometimes exhibit problem behaviour (that is behaviour which causes a problem for the teacher, the student him- or herself, and, perhaps, the others in the classroom). Younger children can, of course, cause difficulties for the teacher and class, too. Adults can also be disruptive and exhausting. They may not do it in the same way

as younger learners, but teachers of adults can experience a range of behaviours such as students who resist the teacher's attempts to focus their attention on the topic of the lesson and spend the lesson talking to their neighbours, or who disagree vocally with much of what the teacher or their classmates are saying. They may arrive late for class or fail to do any homework. And, whatever the causes of this behaviour, a problem is created.

Teachers need to work both to prevent problem behaviour, and to respond to it appropriately if it occurs. We will discuss how the teacher's behaviour can inspire the students' confidence and cooperation on pages 25–27, and we will discuss what to do if students exhibit problem behaviour on pages 180–182.

### Learning styles

All students respond to various stimuli (such as pictures, sounds, music, movement, etc), but for most of them (and us) some things stimulate them into learning more than other things do. The **Neuro-Linguistic Programming** model (often called **NLP**) takes account of this by showing how some students are especially influenced by *visual* stimuli and are therefore likely to remember things better if they see them. Some students, on the other hand, are especially affected by *auditory* input and, as a result, respond very well to things they hear. *Kinaesthetic* activity is especially effective for other learners, who seem to learn best when they are involved in some kind of physical activity, such as moving around, or rearranging things with their hands. The point is that although we all respond to all of these stimuli, for most of us, one or other of them (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) is more powerful than the others in enabling us to learn and remember what we have learnt.

Another way of looking at student variation is offered by the concept of **Multiple Intelligences**, first articulated by Howard Gardner. In his formulation (and that of people who have followed and expanded his theories), we all have a number of different intelligences (mathematical, musical, interpersonal, spatial, emotional, etc). However, while one person's mathematical intelligence might be highly developed, their interpersonal intelligence (the ability to interact with and relate to other people) might be less advanced, whereas another person might have good spatial awareness and musical intelligence, but might be weak mathematically. Thus it is inappropriate to describe someone as being 'intelligent' or 'unintelligent', because while we may not have much of a knack for, say, music, that does not mean our abilities are similarly limited in other areas.

What these two theories tell us (from their different standpoints) is that in any one classroom we have a number of different individuals with different learning styles and preferences. Experienced teachers know this and try to ensure that different learning styles are catered for as often as is possible. In effect, this means offering a wide range of different activity types in our lessons in order to cater for individual differences and needs.

Nevertheless, we need to find out whether there are any generalisations which will help us to encourage habits in students which will help *all* of them. We might say, for example, that **homework** is good for everyone and so is **reading for pleasure** (see Chapter 7). Certain activities – such as many of the speaking activities in Chapter 9 – are good for all the students in the class, though the way we organise them (and the precise things we ask students to do) may vary for exactly the reasons we have been discussing.

### Levels

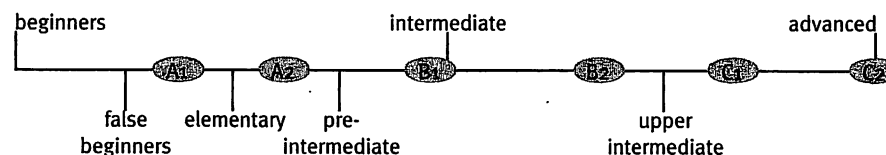
Teachers of English generally make three basic distinctions to categorise the language knowledge of their students: **beginner**, **intermediate** and **advanced**. Broadly speaking,

beginners are those who don't know any English and advanced students are those whose level of English is competent, allowing them to read unsimplified factual and fictional texts and communicate fluently. Between these two extremes, *intermediate* suggests a basic competence in speaking and writing and an ability to comprehend fairly straightforward listening and reading. However, as we shall see, these are rough and ready labels whose exact meaning can vary from institution to institution.

Other descriptive terms are also used in an attempt to be more specific about exactly what kind of beginner, intermediate or advanced students we are talking about. A distinction is made between beginners (students who start a beginners' course having heard virtually no English) and **false beginners** to reflect the fact that the latter can't really use any English but actually know quite a lot which can be quickly activated; they're not real beginners. **Elementary** students are no longer beginners and are able to communicate in a basic way. They can string some sentences together, construct a simple story, or take part in simple spoken interactions.

Pre-intermediate students have not yet achieved intermediate competence, which involves greater fluency and general comprehension of some general authentic English. However, they have come across most of the basic structures and lexis of the language. Upper-intermediate students, on the other hand, have the competence of intermediate students plus an extended knowledge of grammatical construction and skill use. However, they may not have achieved the accuracy or depth of knowledge which their advanced colleagues have acquired, and as a result are less able to operate at different levels of subtlety.

In recent years, the Council of Europe and the Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) have been working to define language competency levels for learners of a number of different languages. The result of this is the Common European Framework (a document setting out in detail what students 'can do' at various levels) and a series of ALTE levels ranging from A1 (roughly equivalent to the elementary level) to C2 (very advanced). The following diagram shows the different levels in sequence:



### Terms for different student levels (and ALTE levels)

What do these levels mean, in practice, for the students? If they are at level B1, for example, how can their abilities be described? ALTE has produced 'can do' statements to try to make this clear, as the example on page 18 for the skill of writing demonstrates (A1 is at the left, C2 at the right).

ALTE levels and 'can do' statements (alongside the more traditional terms we have mentioned) are being used increasingly by coursebook writers and curriculum designers, not only in Europe but across much of the language-learning world.



Can complete basic forms and write notes including times, dates and places.	Can complete forms and write short simple letters or postcards related to personal information.	Can write letters or make notes on familiar or predictable matters.	Can make notes while someone is talking or write a letter including non-standard questions.	Can prepare/organise professional correspondence, take reasonably accurate notes in meetings or write an essay which shows an ability to communicate.	Can write letters on any subject and full notes of meetings or seminars with good expression or accuracy.
---	---	---	---	---	---

### ALTE 'can do' statements for writing

However, two points are worth making: the ALTE standards are just one way of measuring proficiency. ESL standards were developed by the TESOL organisation in the US (see chapter notes), and many exam systems have their own level descriptors. We also need to remember that students' abilities within any particular level may be varied too (i.e. they may be much better at speaking than writing, for example).

If we remind ourselves that terms such as *beginner* and *intermediate* are rough guides only (in other words, unlike the ALTE levels, they do not say exactly what the students can do), then we are in a position to make broad generalisations about the different levels:

#### Beginners

Success is easy to see at this level, and easy for the teacher to arrange. But then so is failure! Some adult beginners find that language learning is more stressful than they expected and reluctantly give up. However, if things are going well, teaching beginners can be incredibly stimulating. The pleasure of being able to see our part in our students' success is invigorating.

#### Intermediate students

Success is less obvious at intermediate level. Intermediate students have already achieved a lot, but they are less likely to be able to recognise an almost daily progress. On the contrary, it may sometimes seem to them that they don't improve that much or that fast anymore. We often call this the **plateau effect**, and the teacher has to make strenuous attempts to show students what they still need to learn without being discouraging. One of the ways of doing this is to make the tasks we give them more challenging, and to get them to analyse language more thoroughly. We need to help them set clear goals for themselves so that they have something to measure their achievement by.

#### Advanced students

Students at this level already know a lot of English. There is still the danger of the plateau effect (even if the plateau itself is higher up!) so we have to create a classroom culture where students understand what still has to be done, and we need to provide good, clear evidence of progress. We can do this through a concentration not so much on grammatical accuracy, but on style and perceptions of, for example, **appropriacy** (using the right language in the right situation), **connotation** (whether words have a negative or positive tinge, for example) and **inference** (how we can read behind the words to get a writer's true meaning). In these areas, we can enable students to use language with more subtlety. It is also at this

level, especially, that we have to encourage students to take more and more responsibility for their own learning.

Although many activities can clearly be used at more than one level (designing newspaper front pages, writing radio commercials, etc), others are not so universally appropriate. With beginners, for example, we will not suggest abstract discussions or the writing of **discursive essays**. For advanced students, a **drill** (where students repeat in chorus and individually – see pages 86–87) focusing on simple past tense questions will almost certainly be inappropriate. Where a simple role-play with ordinary information questions ('What time does the next train to London leave?', 'What's the platform for the London train?', etc) may be a good target for beginners to aim at, the focus for advanced students will have to be richer and more subtle, for example, 'What's the best way to persuade someone of your opinion in an argument?', 'How can we structure writing to hold the reader's attention?', 'What different devices do English speakers use to give emphasis to the bits of information they want you to notice?'

Another obvious difference in the way we teach different levels is language. Beginners need to be exposed to fairly simple grammar and vocabulary which they can understand. In their language work, they may get pleasure (and good learning) from concentrating on straightforward questions like 'What's your name?', 'What's your telephone number?', 'Hello', 'Goodbye', etc. Intermediate students know all this language already and so we will not ask them to concentrate on it.

The level of language also affects the teacher's behaviour. At beginner levels, the need for us to rough-tune our speech (see page 37) is very great: we can exaggerate our voice tone and use gesture to help us to get our meaning across. But at higher levels, such extreme behaviour is not so important. Indeed, it will probably come across to the students as patronising.

At all levels, teachers need to ascertain what students know before deciding what to focus on. At higher levels, we can use what the students already know as the basis for our work; at lower levels we will, for example, always try to **elicit** the language (that is, try to get the language from the students rather than giving it to them) we are going to focus on. That way we know whether to continue with our plan or whether to amend it then and there because students, perhaps, know more than we expected.

### Educational and cultural background

We have already discussed how students at different ages present different characteristics in the classroom. Another aspect of individual variation lies in the students' **cultural** (and **educational**) background.

Some children come from homes where education is highly valued, and where parental help is readily available. Other children, however, may come from less supportive backgrounds where no such backup is on offer. Older students – especially adults – may come from a variety of backgrounds and, as a result, have very different expectations of what teaching and learning involves.

Where students have different cultural backgrounds from the teacher or from each other, they may feel differently from their classmates about topics in the curriculum. They may have different responses to classroom practices from the ones the teacher expected or the ones which the writers of the coursebook they are using had anticipated. In some

educational cultures, for example, students are expected to be articulate and question (or even challenge) their teachers, whereas in others, the students' quietness and modesty are more highly prized. Some educational cultures find **learning by rote** (memorising facts and figures) more attractive than **learning by doing** (where students are involved in project work and experimentation in order to arrive at knowledge). And it is worth remembering that even where students all live in the same town or area, it is often the case that they come from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

In many English-speaking countries such as Britain, the US, Australia, etc, **multilingual classes** (classes where students come from different countries and therefore have different **mother tongues**) are the norm, especially in private language schools. As a result, students are likely to represent a range of educational and cultural backgrounds.

As teachers, we need to be sensitive to these different backgrounds. We need to be able to explain what we are doing and why; we need to use material, offer topics and employ teaching techniques which, even when engaging and challenging, will not offend anyone in the group. Where possible, we need to be able to offer different material, topics and teaching techniques (at different times) to suit the different individual expectations and tastes.

## The importance of student motivation

A variety of factors can create a desire to learn. Perhaps the learners love the subject they have chosen, or maybe they are simply interested in seeing what it is like. Perhaps, as with young children, they just happen to be curious about everything, including learning.

Some students have a practical reason for their study: they want to learn an instrument so they can play in an orchestra, learn English so they can watch American TV or understand manuals written in English, study T'ai Chi so that they can become fitter and more relaxed, or go to cookery classes so that they can prepare better meals.

This desire to achieve some goal is the bedrock of motivation and, if it is strong enough, it provokes a decision to act. For an adult this may involve enrolling in an English class. For a teenager it may be choosing one subject over another for special study. This kind of motivation – which comes from outside the classroom and may be influenced by a number of external factors such as the attitude of society, family and peers to the subject in question – is often referred to as **extrinsic** motivation, the motivation that students bring into the classroom from outside. **Intrinsic** motivation, on the other hand, is the kind of motivation that is generated by what happens inside the classroom; this could be the teacher's methods, the activities that students take part in, or their perception of their success or failure.

While it may be relatively easy to be extrinsically motivated (that is to have a desire to do something), **sustaining** that motivation can be more problematic. As students we can become bored, or we may find the subject more difficult than we thought it was going to be.

One of the teacher's main aims should be to help students to sustain their motivation. We can do this in a number of ways. The activities we ask students to take part in will, if they involve the students or excite their curiosity – and provoke their participation – help them to stay interested in the subject. We need, as well, to select an appropriate **level of challenge** so that things are neither too difficult nor too easy. We need to display appropriate teacher qualities so that students can have confidence in our abilities and professionalism (see Chapter 2). We need to consider the issue of **affect** – that is, how the students feel about the

learning process. Students need to feel that the teacher really cares about them; if students feel supported and valued, they are far more likely to be motivated to learn.

One way of helping students to sustain their motivation is to give them, as far as is feasible, some **agency** (a term borrowed from the social sciences) which means that students should take some responsibility for themselves, and that they should (like the agent of a passive sentence) be the 'doers' in class. This means that they will have some decision-making power, perhaps, over the choice of which activity to do next, or how they want to be corrected, for example (see page 97). If students feel they have some influence over what is happening, rather than always being told exactly what to do, they are often more motivated to take part in the lesson.

But however much we do to foster and sustain student motivation, we can only, in the end, encourage by word and deed, offering our support and guidance. Real motivation comes from within each individual, from the students themselves.

## Responsibility for learning

If giving students agency is seen as a key component in sustaining motivation, then such agency is not just about giving students more decision-making power. It is also about encouraging them to take more responsibility for their own learning. We need to tell them that unless they are prepared to take some of the strain, their learning is likely to be less successful than if they themselves become active learners (rather than passive recipients of teaching).

This message may be difficult for some students from certain educational backgrounds and cultures who have been led to believe that it is the teacher's job to provide learning. In such cases, teachers will not be successful if they merely try to impose a pattern of **learner autonomy**. Instead of imposing autonomy, therefore, we need to gradually extend the students' role in learning. At first we will expect them, for example, to make their own dialogues after they have listened to a model on an audio track. Such standard practice (getting students to try out new language) is one small way of encouraging student involvement in learning. We might go on to try to get individual students to investigate a grammar issue or solve a reading puzzle on their own, rather than having things explained to them by the teacher. We might get them to look for the meanings of words and how they are used in their dictionaries (see below) rather than telling them what the words mean. As students get used to working things out for themselves and/or doing work at home, so they can gradually start to become more autonomous.

Getting students to do various kinds of homework, such as written exercises, compositions or further study is one of the best ways to encourage student autonomy. What is important is that teachers should choose the right kind of task for the students. It should be within their grasp, and not take up too much of their time – or occupy too little of it by being trivial. Even more importantly than this, teachers should follow up homework when they say they are going to, imposing the same deadlines upon themselves as they do on their students. Other ways of promoting student self-reliance include having them read for pleasure in their own time (see pages 99–100) and find their own resources for language practice (in books or on the Internet, for example).

Apart from homework, teachers will help students to become autonomous if they encourage them to use **monolingual learners' dictionaries** (dictionaries written only in



English, but which are designed especially for learners) and then help them to understand how and when to use them. At earlier stages of learning, good bilingual dictionaries serve the same function and allow the students a large measure of independence from the teacher.

We will help students to be responsible for their learning if we show them where (either in books, in self-access centres or online) they can continue studying outside the classroom. For example, we can point them in the direction of suitable websites (if they have computer access), or recommend good CD or DVD resources. If students are lucky, their institution will have a **self-access centre** with a range of resources comprising books (including readers – see page 100), newspapers, magazines, worksheets, listening material, videos and DVDs, and computers with access to the Internet. Students can decide if and when to visit such centres and what they want to do there. Self-access centres should help students to make appropriate choices by having good cataloguing systems and ensuring that people are on hand to help students find their way around. However, the object of a self-access centre is that students should themselves take responsibility for what they do and make their own decisions about what is most appropriate for them.

Of course, many schools do not have self-access centres, and even where they do, many students do not make full use of them. This is because not all students, as we have said, are equally capable of being (or wanting to be) autonomous learners. Despite this fact, we should do our best to encourage them to have agency without forcing it upon them.

### Conclusions | *In this chapter we have:*

- discussed different reasons for learning, including students living in a target-language community, or studying English for specific or academic purposes, or because they want to improve their English generally.
- looked at different learning contexts, including English as a Foreign or Second Language (now both generally called English for Speakers of Other Languages), the world of schools and language schools, different class sizes, in-company teaching and virtual learning (via information technology).
- detailed student differences in age, learning styles, language level and cultural/educational background, and how we should cater for such differences.
- talked about the importance of motivation and how to foster it.
- discussed the students' responsibility for their own learning, and how we can encourage this.

# 2

## Teachers

### ■ Describing good teachers

### ■ Who teachers are in class

### ■ Rapport

### ■ Teacher tasks

### ■ Teacher skills

### ■ Teacher knowledge

### ■ Art or science?

### Describing good teachers

Most people can look back at their own schooldays and identify teachers they thought were good. But generally they find it quite hard to say *why* certain teachers struck them as special. Perhaps it was because of their personality. Possibly it was because they had interesting things to say. Maybe the reason was that they looked as if they loved their job, or perhaps their interest in their students' progress was compelling. Sometimes, it seems, it was just because the teacher was a fascinating person!

One of the reasons that it is difficult to give general descriptions of good teachers is that different teachers are often successful in different ways. Some teachers are more extrovert or introvert than others, for example, and different teachers have different strengths and weaknesses. A lot will depend, too, on how students view individual teachers and here again, not all students will share the same opinions.

It is often said that 'good teachers are born, not made' and it does seem that some people have a natural affinity for the job. But there are also others, perhaps, who do not have what appears to be a natural gift but who are still effective and popular teachers. Such teachers learn their craft through a mixture of personality, intelligence, knowledge and experience (and how they reflect on it). And even some of the teachers who are apparently 'born teachers' weren't like that at the beginning at all, but grew into the role as they learnt their craft.

Teaching is not an easy job, but it is a necessary one, and can be very rewarding when we see our students' progress and know that we have helped to make it happen. It is true that some lessons and students can be difficult and stressful at times, but it is also worth remembering that at its best teaching can also be extremely enjoyable.

In this chapter we will look at what is necessary for effective teaching and how that can help to provoke success – so that for both students and teachers learning English can be rewarding and enjoyable.

### Who teachers are in class

When we walk into a lesson, students get an idea of who we are as a result of what we look like (how we dress, how we present ourselves) and the way we behave and react to what is