

Student-centred language teaching

# Practical Techniques for Language Teaching

**L T P**  
LANGUAGE TEACHING PUBLICATIONS  
IN TOUCH WITH TEACHERS

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**Language Teaching Publications**  
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# Introduction

This book is not theoretical. It is a collection of practical ideas and techniques which you can use immediately to make your own teaching more effective, and more enjoyable for yourself and your students. The book is not based on *a* method or *an* approach. We do not believe that there is *one* way of teaching well. All the suggestions are based on our experience of teachers teaching. Ideas are included because we have seen that they work for a wide range of teachers in many different situations.

Teaching situations are different. You may, for example, have to prepare students for a particular examination so that some time must be spent on examination techniques. All teachers complain that they do not have enough time to do all the things they would like to do. Some compromises between what you would like to do, what your students need, and the requirements of the situation, are inevitable.

In these circumstances there are two guiding principles which should influence your decisions: that language *teaching* is only an aid to language *learning*, and that it is those things which help the students to improve which are of particular importance; and secondly that language is first and foremost communication. Those activities which mean students can *use* the language, and communicate better, are to be encouraged at the expense of activities which will only mean that students “know” the language.

The first two chapters of the book do provide a more general framework for the specific tips which follow. Even these general principles, however, are practical rather than theoretical.

You are encouraged not only to read the tips, but to *try* the ideas they suggest. We hope most will work for you, but some may not, and some will need to be modified for you and your situation. We hope *all* of them, however, will help you to be more aware of *what*, and *how*, you are teaching, and, most importantly of all, *why* you are doing the things you are in the way you are.

Few teachers, however long they have been teaching, are doing things as well as they could. Everyone needs to sit back occasionally and take stock. We hope this book will help you to do just that.

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# Chapter 1

## Basic Principles 1 — Student and Teacher

Before you read this chapter think about each of the following statements.

Mark each statement

- ✓ if you *agree*.
- X if you *disagree*.
- ? if you are *undecided*.

1. Lessons should be planned and timed carefully.	
2. Sometimes the textbook stops you teaching well.	
3. Language teaching is partly about teaching students how to learn a language.	
4. If students have difficulty it's usually best for the teacher to explain and move on.	
5. The teacher should not be talking for more than 20% of the lesson time.	
6. English is a difficult, illogical language.	
7. I teach each unit of the book in the same way.	
8. I never sit down during my lessons.	
9. I always explain what I'm going to do before I do it.	
10. I don't worry if I don't follow my lesson plan, providing the students enjoy it.	

After you have read the chapter do the same thing. Has reading the chapter clarified your ideas?  
Have you changed your ideas?



# Basic Principles 1

## Student and Teacher

### 1. Learning is more important than teaching

The conscientious teacher is concerned to teach well. You would not be reading this book unless your intention was to improve your own teaching and a knowledge of theory and technique can help to make you more effective and more efficient. The single most important factor to remember, however, is that teaching is not the terminal objective of what happens in the classroom. In the end, it is changes in the students' behaviour upon which success and failure depend.

The ultimate test of "a good lesson" is not how the teacher performed but whether the students learned. Teachers who are constantly pre-occupied by their own role — what they should be doing, and what their students think of them — are making a serious mistake. The most important role of the teacher is that of catalyst — they help to make things happen, but the purpose is activating the students.

Some teachers have taught the same lessons in the same way for years out of laziness or inflexibility; other teachers make a more subtle mistake — they constantly look for "the method". Such teachers believe that there is 'a best' way of doing something and, having found the method they consider best, they follow it strictly and carefully. We do not believe that such a method exists. Language is complex, and language teaching is correspondingly complex. It is difficult to make *any* statement which is *always* true about language teaching. Different situations call for different materials, different methods, different activities, and different strategies. The main principle for teachers to remember, however, in deciding on the suitability of an approach or method is whether it will be helpful to their particular students in that class. Will it help the students to achieve their objectives? If it does that, the teacher will also have succeeded.

Although it is not always possible for teachers working within the state system to follow this principle completely, it is clear that if the syllabus, book, or teacher are more important than the students, something serious is wrong.

### 2. Teach the students, not the book

Few teachers have the time or opportunity to design their own courses. In the majority of cases a basic textbook is chosen and it is this which provides the practical classroom syllabus. Inevitably, teachers tend to follow the book, deciding in advance how long they can spend on each unit so that they will

finish the book in a certain time. But the object of the course is to teach the students, not finish the book!

It may be necessary to prepare additional practices on particular points; it may be necessary to go back and study again a unit which has caused particular difficulties and, most important of all, it may be necessary to abandon the day's lesson plan because students raise difficulties which neither the teacher nor the book has foreseen. The principle is that if, at any point during the lesson, the teacher's pre-arranged plan and the students' needs are in conflict, it is the students' needs which should have priority.

### 3. Involve students in the learning process

Some foreign language students, particularly adults, are learning the language for very specific reasons; others, particularly those learning in a State school system, are doing English because it is part of the system. In all cases, however, students are more likely to enjoy the subject, and to succeed at it, if they are involved in the learning process and, as far as possible, have a chance to influence what happens, and how it happens.

It is almost invariably a good idea to begin a new course by discussing with students why they are studying English, what uses they see for the English they learn, and something of their expectations of what they expect to happen in the classroom. It also helps to discuss what students expect to enjoy, and not enjoy.

The discussion should be as practical as possible. Teachers can, for example, distribute a list such as the following and ask students:

To tick uses of English which they think are relevant to them personally.

To arrange the items in order of importance (from 1 to 10).

#### **English is useful because:**

- A. You can talk to lots of new people.
- B. You can use English when you are travelling.
- C. You can understand films and TV programmes.
- D. You can understand pop songs.
- E. It helps you to get a good job.
- F. You need it if you want to study at university.
- G. People do business in English all over the world.
- H. You can understand more about the world if you can read English and American magazines and newspapers.
- I. It's the international language for most people.
- J. You can read English literature in the original language.

During the course it can help to present students with a questionnaire such as the following.

Mark each of these ✓ if you *can* do it in English.

Mark it X if you *can't* do it in English.

Tell somebody a bit about myself.

Talk about my hobbies.

Make a phone call.

Write a short letter to a friend.

Explain to someone that they have made a mistake.

Tell someone politely that I don't believe them.

Explain what kind of food I like, and don't like.

Talk about my favourite sport.

Say five ways life in my country is different from life in Britain.

Talk about politics.

Read a newspaper article.

Disagree strongly but politely with someone else.

Usually such a questionnaire will work better if the teacher has prepared it specially for the class so that it fits well to what the students have studied, and to what they are going to study in the near future.

After the initial discussion it helps if, from time to time during the course, questions as to *why* students are learning, *what* they are learning, and *how* they are learning, are raised again. The last of these is, perhaps, particularly sensitive and worth further discussion.

Teachers are constantly assessing students, while students have little chance to assess teachers. But why should this be so? Teachers would rather give good, effective, and enjoyable lessons than otherwise. Why not allow their 'customers' to help them to do this? It is self-evident that some lessons are more successful than others, and some lesson activities more popular than others. Ten minutes spent occasionally at the end of a lesson asking students if they have enjoyed that particular lesson or not and, more importantly, *why* they have, or have not, can be very rewarding. First, it demonstrates to the students that they are important in the learning process, and that the teacher is interested in them both as language learners and as people. Secondly, the students can tell the teacher what they enjoy and why. In some cases this information may surprise the teacher, but it should help to make the teaching more effective and more enjoyable. There is no need for the teacher to fear the students' assessment. If their comments are taken seriously, students soon realise that they can usefully influence their own lessons. A simple comment such as students asking to work with a different partner on different days in pair work, or to be given a little longer time to complete group work activities, can help. In the same way a general comment — that the course is going too quickly or they don't get enough chance to speak — is, if seen constructively, invaluable in helping the students, which is the teacher's main objective.

Students' motivation will almost always be better if they see the purpose of what they are doing. Although the objective of a particular practice may be clear to the teacher, it is not necessarily clear to the students. Teachers should be prepared to explain to the students what they are doing, and why they are doing it. Some examples may help:

**a.** Sometimes you will play a tape which the students are to mimic — it will help the students to *speak* English; on other occasions a tape containing language which the students will not know may be used to help students to *listen* better. Unless you have introduced the second tape and made clear that it is a different kind of practice, students will be confused and you can expect howls of protest.

**b.** Most modern language courses are cyclical — the same language points recur throughout the course. It can easily appear to students that 'we've already done this'. Teachers must be prepared to explain that they are not doing the same thing again, but learning more about how a particular structure is used.

**c.** Frequently it is helpful to do the same practice more than once in quick succession. This is true, for example, of articulation practices intended only to develop motor skills (see page 69). It is also true of communicative pair work practices where first attempts at the practice are largely diagnostic and the practice is repeated after the teacher has provided some linguistic input. While the usefulness of such repetitions is clear to the teacher, for school students they contrast strongly with what they are used to in other lessons — there is little point in asking students to do the same maths problem twice.

Long explanations of classroom activity should be avoided, but teachers should constantly be alert to the fact that students will work more happily and more effectively if the purpose of the activity is clear to them.

This principle relates not only to whole lessons but to individual activities. If students are going to listen to a tape, or read a text, it helps to tell them in advance what it is about and perhaps some of the important language they will need to understand it. (See page 62 and page 108). If the emphasis lies on language *learning* and not language *teaching*, it is clear that a methodology which is based on teacher knowing everything and 'revealing' things to students, will be inappropriate. Secrets do not help. On the contrary, the teacher's task is to signpost the course, the lesson, and the individual activities, as clearly as possible for the students.

In the same way that preparation helps orientate students, teachers can make the course seem more immediately useful and relevant by helping students to see what they have achieved, and understand what they can do with what they know.

There are only about 200 verbs in English which have irregular past tense forms and about half of those are extremely rare or archaic. There is no short cut to learning them, but you can make it easier for students by telling them explicitly that there are only a certain number and that if, for example, they learn 10 a day for three weeks they will know *all* the English irregular verbs. The information does not make learning the verbs any easier, but it makes the task seem manageable and less inhibiting.

In a similar way it is unexciting but necessary to practise manipulation of the auxiliary:

- A I've just bought a new car.      A I'm going to Tenerife.  
 B Oh, have you.                      B Oh, are you.

Most modern courses re-cycle structures through different functional uses. In this case it helps to remind students that when they can manipulate the auxiliary in this way, they can make interested responses so that they can take part *actively* in a conversation even if their own English means they cannot say very much.

The principle is simple — the more the students feel involved in the process of learning, the more successful and enjoyable they will find it.

#### 4. Don't tell students what they can tell you

Most language teachers talk too much. Again, it is important to remember that the primary objective of the course is to improve the students' language, and to present *them* with opportunities for productive practice (or *carefully controlled* listening practice).

There are many opportunities in a typical lesson for eliciting knowledge and information from the students rather than simply telling them it:

- a. If the work of one day is an extension of something from a previous lesson, students should be reminded of the previous lesson, but by the teacher *questioning* the students, not telling. Examples of this are if a continuous story is being read, students should be asked to summarise the story so far, or, if a language point is being re-studied, it should be introduced with questions rather than teacher presentation.
- b. After studying a text, instead of explaining words, ask definition questions (see page 111).
- c. Make a habit of asking students to contribute alternative language of their own — for example, another phrase which is functionally equivalent, synonyms, or associated vocabulary items. Word roses and word ladders (see page 108) can be helpful in ensuring that the students provide some of the linguistic input for a lesson.
- d. Students can also be encouraged to provide some of the content of a lesson using, for example, the positive/negative technique (see page 59).

The student's language may be limited but this does not mean the student is unintelligent. Too often teachers, particularly native teachers, treat students whose linguistic level is low as if they were generally less able. This mistaken assumption can be particularly unfortunate in the case of a well-qualified middle-aged businessman. Such students not unreasonably expect to be treated as intelligent and capable adults and resent materials or teachers that patronise them.

On a more general level it is not unusual for teachers to explain at length only for a member of the class to say *We've already done that*, or, in the case

of a native speaker the explanation is greeted by *We've got the same word in (Spanish)*. Annoying as this may be, teachers bring such difficulties on themselves.

Allowing students to contribute in this way is not just a gimmick. Firstly, it provides students with more opportunities to say something (and keeps the teacher correspondingly quiet!). It also constantly provides the teacher with an idea of the students' previous knowledge and understanding, and reveals misunderstandings which may need to be cleared up before new work is introduced.

The principle is to base your teaching on eliciting rather than instructing. Such an approach reflects accurately the roles of teacher and student in a classroom which emphasises that learning is more important than teaching.

## 5. Show your reactions to what students say

Part of exploiting real events involves reacting naturally to what students say, both in exercises and in free conversation. Look at this example:

**T** So, have you seen "The Sound of Music"?

**S1** Yes, but only on television.

**T** And what about you?

**S2** No, I don't like musicals.

**T** Oh, don't you? Have you seen it, S3?

**S3** Yes I have — 18 times.

**T** Yes, and what about you, S4?

The teacher's response to S2 is good — it is natural and gives the students a chance to notice a typical feature of active listening (*Oh, don't you?*). The teacher's reaction to S3, however, is a disaster for two important reasons:

- a. A teacher could only react so automatically if he or she was not listening. Realising that you are not listening has a strong demotivating effect on students.
- b. The teacher missed a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate in a natural context the intonation appropriate to expressing surprise (*18 times! What on earth for?*).

If you are surprised, shocked, curious, doubtful, etc. make sure you *show* it in your general reaction, in what you say, and in *how* you say it. Encourage other students to show their reactions too. Such reacting develops an important language skill — the active role of the listener in a conversation — and makes both the language and your lessons more alive for students.

## 6. Students need practice, not you

There are many ways in which it is possible for the teacher to dominate the classroom linguistically in ways which are quite unnecessary. The more the teacher talks, the less opportunity the students have to speak, but it is the students who need the practice!

Teachers should beware of all of the following:

- a. Explaining when they don't need to.

- b. Repeating themselves unnecessarily (for example, when asking a question).
- c. Answering for students, without waiting long enough.
- d. Correcting too much and too quickly.
- e. Talking about something which interests them, but not necessarily their students.
- f. Talking unnecessarily about the process of the lesson (see page 44).

It is not, however, sufficient for the teacher to avoid unnecessary talk. If the main classroom activity consists of the teacher asking questions which are then answered by individual students, it still means that half of all classroom language is coming from the teacher. Teachers working in state school systems, for example, need to remind themselves frequently of a calculation such as the following — if the students have four 45 minute lessons a week, in a class of 30, there are only 180 minutes available each week to be divided among those students. Even if the class consisted of no reading, pauses for thought, or other activities, but entirely of the teacher asking individual students questions which were answered immediately, the teacher would do 90 minutes talking and each individual student only three minutes. As soon as the practical difficulties are taken into account, this time is greatly reduced and a more realistic estimate of the time spent talking by each individual pupil would be perhaps a minute a week. In those circumstances it is hardly surprising if students' spoken English improves slowly! However much the teacher may be anxious about it, it is essential that techniques are introduced into the classroom to increase the amount of student talking time. Oral work, pair work, and group work are not optional extras — for the students' spoken language to improve, they are essential.

One word of warning is, perhaps, necessary. There is more and more evidence that good *listening* practices have a more important part to play in good language teaching than has sometimes been recognised. A practice, for example, in which students are given two or three questions and then listen to the teacher talking about something can undoubtedly be very useful. It is not necessary that every practice involves lots of "student talking time." The teacher talking as a planned part of the lesson has an important role to play, *providing* the students are listening actively. Teachers should, nonetheless, be conscious of the amount of *unnecessary* talking they do. The general principle is that if the teacher is talking, the students are not getting the practice they need.

## 7. Don't emphasise difficulties

Learning a foreign language well is difficult. Many students find it difficult to understand conceptual distinctions which do not occur in their own language, and the memory load is high. There is no point in pretending that these difficulties do not exist. As all teachers know, students, particularly in school, do need to be reminded from time to time that there is no short cut to success. Being realistic about difficulties is an important part of the teacher's job.

Unfortunately, teachers too often make the subject seem more difficult than it is through a series of casual remarks, the main effect of which must be to undermine the students' confidence.



Here are some examples:

*English is a very difficult language.*  
*English is full of irregularities — there are no real rules.*  
*Well, there's the rule, now let's look at the exceptions.*  
*Prepositions are completely illogical.*

Most teachers will admit to having made these, or similar, remarks. They are obviously unhelpful. It is difficult to think of an occasion when it could be helpful to tell students that what they are struggling to understand is in fact really incomprehensible! Teachers need to be realistic about difficulties — it can be helpful, for example, to tell students before they listen to a tape that the voice has a strong accent. If students are doing a listening-for-gist exercise with a lot of language they may not understand, they need to be told of this difficulty in advance. The principle, however, is for the teacher to be *realistic* about difficulties, and to avoid undermining the students' confidence by casual ill-considered remarks.

## 8. Vary what you do, and how you do it

While there are many helpful ways of approaching language teaching, it is a mistake to believe that 'a method' exists which can guarantee success. Every teacher knows that what works one day with one class, does not necessarily work with a different class, or even on a different day with the same class. A textbook which is appropriate to one situation, is often not suitable for another. One statement which is generally true can, however, be made — if the teacher always does the same things in the same way, the students will be bored!

Each unit of most basic course books is laid out in a similar way. The introduction to the course book, however, usually points out that this is to provide a convenient framework for the teacher, not so that each unit is taught in the same order, using the same method, day after day.

There are many opportunities for variety:

- a. Teach the unit in a different order — in one case use the dialogue for listening comprehension before the students see the text, on another occasion use the taped dialogue as a summary after studying the printed text and doing the exercises.
- b. Use different ways of reading texts: prepared, dramatic reading, silent reading, the teacher reading, listening to the recorded text, etc. (see page 110).
- c. Vary *who* performs the task — you or the students. It is not, for example, necessary for you always to ask the comprehension questions about a text — the students can ask each other questions.
- d. Introduce alternative activities from time to time — games, pair work, group work, problem solving, project work, etc.
- e. Change the seating plan for different activities and, for example, vary where individual students are sitting for pair work so that on different days they are working with different partners.

A word of warning is necessary. Students like to feel secure in the classroom and they want to know what is going on. Students will be disconcerted if you chop and change in a random fashion. The principle is to have a *constant framework* within which there is a *variety of pace* and a *variety of activity*.

## 9. Select!

Teachers never complain that they have too much time on a course. The complaint is always in the other direction — *If I had more time I could do...* Within the limits of any course — whether it is a two-week intensive course or a course lasting the whole of the student's school career — the target cannot realistically be a complete knowledge of English. In every case selections have to be made of the language to be presented, the skills to be learned, etc. Certain selections, such as general syllabus design and choice of textbook may, on many occasions, be outside the teacher's control. Even so, the individual teacher is constantly faced with selections. The most dangerous "selection" of all is an indiscriminate attempt to "do everything".

On a day-to-day basis teachers need to keep selection in mind. The main criterion is *Will what I am going to say help these particular students?* Because *you* know it, it does not mean the students need to know it. There are two different problems — firstly the students may not need to know at *that time*, secondly they may not need to know *at all*. The textbook may, for example, present *on the left/right*; the teacher knows it is also possible to say *on your left/right*. To introduce this in a first presentation of "finding the way" would almost certainly confuse.

A more serious problem is that much of what language teachers have themselves learned is not relevant in the state school classroom. There are, as mentioned above, about 200 verbs in English with irregular past tense forms. Probably about 100 of these are in common use. It is helpful for students to learn these words in groups which are phonetically similar: *bring — brought — brought, catch — caught — caught*. Unfortunately it is then tempting for the teacher to present *complete* groups but while the student may need to know *speak — spoke — spoken*, there is less need for *weave — wove — woven*. The majority of school students, who will not go to university to study English, will *never* need about half of the verbs with irregular past forms (*cleave — clove — cloven*). Here is a clear case where teachers must select.

All teachers need to be careful of presenting too many alternative ways of saying something, of putting too much vocabulary on the board at the same time, of going too quickly and, finally, of telling students or giving them information which is not relevant to them. Stories of the teacher's recent visit to London may have a motivating effect on the class. They can also be very dull and boring.

The principle, as with each of the sections of this chapter, is that good teaching is not about showing students what you know, but about helping them to improve *their* knowledge, skills and performance.

## 10. Activities and relationships in the classroom change

Techniques for teaching specific language skills and handling particular lesson activities will be dealt with later in the book. Before looking at these