

The English Teacher's Handbook

A short guide to
English Language Teaching

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by RV White

This brief guide to English Language Teaching (ELT) is intended as a simple introduction for teachers who are unfamiliar with the field. It is impossible in such a short space to do justice to the numerous topics which fall within the area of ELT. If you are interested and want to learn more, there are many publications on the subject, as well as a number of journals and magazines. References to some of the most useful of these are given in the Further Reading section. In addition, there are various courses which you can take, ranging in duration from a few days to a complete academic year.

The field of ELT is constantly changing, and there have been some very important changes during recent years. To help give you an overall picture, the traditional or conventional approach to ELT is briefly described below, together with more recent developments. Not everyone accepts or agrees with some of these new trends, while others feel that they are not radical enough. ELT is a field full of controversy, and there is no universally-accepted conventional wisdom.

The descriptions of methodology given here are an attempt to summarize some aspects of current practice. You should not regard them as a guide to the only acceptable method of teaching. You may, however, find them useful additions to your existing teaching skills.

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Background

Structuralism in language teaching

The idea that language consists of arrangements of structures is attractive both to language teachers and language learners. After all, the task of learning should be simplified if the students can learn a relatively limited set of structures and if they can substitute a large number of items within the structures. For instance, if they learn a structure such as *a + noun*, the students can make a huge number of substitutions within this structure, or pattern, to produce grammatically correct noun groups like these:

a boy, a pen, a car, a house

The same pattern can be incorporated in a more extensive structure or pattern, thus:

This is a tall boy.

This is a black pen.

This is a new car.

This is a large house.

It is this idea of substitution within a pattern which lies behind the substitution table and the pattern drill, both of which are important components of the structural method. Here is a substitution table based on the above pattern:

This			tall	boy.
That	is	a	black	pen.
			new	car.
			large	house.

Some parts of the table allow more substitutions than others. Some combinations of items from different parts of the table may not be particularly sensible or even polite. For instance, *This is a tall pen* could be used figuratively, but is a statement unlikely to occur in everyday language. To avoid items like this, substitution tables have to be devised so as to prevent meaningless or anomolous choices.

The pattern drill based on the idea of substitution within a structural pattern involves the learners repeating a pattern presented by the teacher, like this:

TEACHER This is a black pen.

CLASS This is a black pen.

TEACHER Car.
 CLASS This is a black car.
 TEACHER Ball.
 CLASS This is a black ball.

Such substitution drills can become more complicated as the teacher selects substitutions at different points in the pattern, like this:

TEACHER Bill has gone to Paris.
 CLASS Bill has gone to Paris.
 TEACHER New York.
 CLASS Bill has gone to New York.
 TEACHER Flown.
 CLASS Bill has flown to New York

In addition to substitution within parts of a given pattern, transformation of a pattern is also possible. For instance, the affirmative pattern *This is a + noun* can be transformed into the interrogative pattern *Is this + a + noun?* The learners' task is then to transform one pattern into another. The cue is the pattern which is to be transformed:

TEACHER This is a pen.
 CLASS Is this a pen?
 TEACHER This is a car.
 CLASS Is this a car?

Such transformation drills become more complicated when the transformation itself is more complex:

TEACHER John works in an office.
 CLASS Does John work in an office?
 TEACHER Mary works in a shop.
 CLASS Does Mary work in a shop?

The idea behind substitution and transformation drills is appealing because the drills are simple to construct and easy to use in the classroom. There are, however, plenty of traps for both teacher and learners:

TEACHER He told me to do it.
 CLASS He told me to do it.
 TEACHER Forced.
 CLASS He forced me to do it.
 TEACHER Made.

What are the learners going to do with *made*? Although it belongs in the same general area of meaning as the other verbs, it occurs in a slightly different pattern:

He made me do it.

Based on the other items they have learned, the students are likely to produce the following:

He made me to do it.

Avoiding such problems is one of the issues involved in grading.

Grading

If you decide to adopt a structural approach you are immediately confronted by questions such as:

- 1 What should I begin with and what should I follow it with? Should I begin with small patterns and build them up into clauses or begin with clauses? Should I begin with the noun group or the verb group? (sequencing)
- 2 What should I teach together? Should I, for example, teach them *tell*, *force* and *require*, or only one of these verbs? Should I teach *make* which has a different structure but a similar meaning to *force*? (grouping)
- 3 How much time should I spend on the various structures? (staging)

In fact many of these decisions are taken for you by the author if you are using a structurally-graded textbook. Usually he presents simple structures before more complex forms. And sometimes, because he has chosen to arrange his work according to structural patterns, you may detect signs that he is in trouble – the sentences don't sound quite English, or his story takes on a ludicrous turn. He may move quickly from structure to structure (steep grading) as if bounding up a hill, or he may make the climb more slowly (gentle grading).

Situational teaching

You can, like many textbook writers, choose to teach a foreign language by taking situations the learners are likely to meet and picking out the vocabulary or structures related to them, for example 'At the post office', 'At the railway station'. The difficulty is that the situations may present the learners with a heavy load of vocabulary and too many structures for them to handle.

On the other hand, you can begin with the structures and seek situations that demonstrate them. But some structures are more likely to occur in some situations than others, and you may end up once again with 'textbook

English', where you know instinctively something is wrong. So situationally based teaching has its limitations, although it can provide the necessary ingredient of reality for the language which you wish to teach.

Current preoccupations

We use our language system not merely to make up sentences but to use sentences for a purpose. We use language to communicate our feelings, ideas, hopes and fears to other people, and they use their knowledge of the language system to understand our messages. We need to know the vocabulary and structural patterns of the language to do this, of course, but we need something else besides.

In order to appreciate what this 'something else' is, it might be useful to begin by stating what we mean by communication. Briefly, person A sends a message to person B; person B receives the message and reacts to it. Messages are meanings expressed in code, and for our purposes that code is the English language. If the communication is a real one, then B will not already know what A wishes to express. He will have to make an effort to decode the message and then use the code to send back some kind of a message in reply.

Meaning

What kind of meanings can the code carry? We will consider three kinds: referential, notional and functional.

Referential meaning

This kind of meaning is concerned with the labelling of known objects. The word *car* refers to the object car. This labelling function of language is often given a lot of attention in the teaching of vocabulary.

Notional meaning

Look at these two sentences:

- (a) Is he going to town?
- (b) Is he going to help you?

Is he going has a different notional meaning in each of the two sentences. In (a) it conveys the abstract idea, or notion, of movement to a place. In (b) it carries the idea of someone's intentions about the future. In other words, it expresses the notion of futurity.

Here are some more sentences:

- Tom is taller than Bill.
- Bill is shorter than Henry.
- Henry is the tallest.

All these sentences express the notion or concept of comparison. Concepts or notions like these are conveyed in everything we say or write, and most things we say express more than one notion.

Functional meaning

We can illustrate the third type of meaning with the following dialogue:

- A Excuse me. How can I get to the car park from here?
B Just go up this corridor, turn left and then go down the stairs.
A Thanks.

Each speaker here has used language for several different purposes. Speaker A begins by attracting attention (*Excuse me*), and continues by requesting direction (*How can I get . . .*). Speaker B responds by directing Speaker A to the place concerned. Finally, Speaker A thanks Speaker B. Attracting attention, requesting, directing and thanking are all examples of language functions. Functional meaning is concerned with expressing our intentions. The names of functions are usually either verbs, such as *ask*, *invite*, *instruct*, *report*, *persuade*, or verb-based nouns, such as *asking*, *inviting*, *instructing*, *reporting*, *persuading*.

The function of a sentence changes with context. This means that the same form of words can have a different function, depending on the situation and the other sentences surrounding it. Here are two examples:

- (a) A I think we've got everything.
B What about the camera?
A It's in the case.
- (b) A I think we've got everything.
B What about the camera?
A We'd better take it with us.

In (a) B's question is understood to be a request for information. In other words, the function of B's utterance is to ask where something is. In (b) the same words have a quite different function. Here they are used to make a suggestion. So one utterance can perform many different functions, depending on the context. Similarly, there are many different ways of expressing one and the same function.

Appropriateness

At the beginning of this section, we said that you need to know more than the vocabulary and structures of the language in order to use language for a purpose. What we need to know is, firstly, how to express our intentions,

and secondly, when to use the various expressions appropriately. In the dialogue above where speaker A asks for directions, we could have begun like this:

A Hi, you. Tell me how to get to the car park from here.

Most people would consider this to be rather rude. On the other hand, the following would be considered excessively polite:

A Excuse me, kind sir. I wonder if you would be so kind as to direct me to the car park from here.

Students have to learn when, and when not, to use expressions like those given above. They also have to learn when to use different levels of politeness or formality. Recognizing and using different ways of expressing language functions are among the concerns of current language teaching.

Information gap

There is another preoccupation which is connected with the communication of messages as described above. Communication takes place when the receiver doesn't already know the information in the sender's message. In other words, there is an information gap, which is filled by the message. In the following classroom exchange, there is no information gap:

TEACHER John went to town. Did John go to town?

CLASS Yes, he did.

In this exchange, both the sender (the teacher) and the receiver (the class) know the information (that John went to town). The question is not a real question. The answer is not a real answer. There is no information gap and there is no real communication.

Improvisation

Another important feature of communication is improvisation. We have to make and interpret messages as we speak and listen, without prior preparation or rehearsal. Even in a simple conversational exchange there is an element of the unexpected and unpredictable. This means that both speakers have to be ready to react in any one of several ways. Both speakers have to be able to improvise.

A fluent speaker is able to improvise with little difficulty. The learner of English finds it more difficult. Yet when he steps out of the classroom and tries to use English in the real world, he will have to improvise all the time.

Unfortunately, students are not always given much practice in improvising. Another current preoccupation in the language classroom is providing

opportunities for improvising. This can be done by setting up communicative tasks in which each student cannot predict what his partner will say. His own response will therefore have to be made up on the spot, and he will have to decide how to react, and what to say. In responding, he will be forced to exploit the language he knows in the most effective way.

Such improvisation can and should involve ingenuity on the part of the student. For instance, if the student either doesn't know or can't remember a needed vocabulary item, he can use known or remembered language instead. For example if the student can't remember the word *square*, then he could substitute a phrase like *a thing with four equal sides*. We improvise in this way in our native language when we don't have the necessary word to hand, and it is one of the improvisatory skills which we now feel should be encouraged when learning to use English as a foreign or second language.

Communication in the classroom

As we have seen, there is currently much interest in setting up communication situations in the classroom so that students can practise and improvise using language to communicate real messages. This usually involves giving pairs of students complementary sets of information. In order to complete the gaps in their information, they have to communicate real messages to each other. For example, you can give student A an incomplete train timetable, while student B has the completed version. Student A then has to ask student B for the train times in order to complete the gaps in his information.

This is a simple example of a communicative activity in the classroom. There are many other communicative activities ranging from simple ones, such as the train timetable exercise, to much more complex ones involving several students, and more complicated tasks and messages. What most of these activities have in common is the principle of information gap as well as the need for students to improvise.

Some communication activities are described in the section on speaking. There are also many published materials containing the basis for communication activities. There are published sets of role- or cue-cards, language games, and simulations. In fact, it is difficult to set up pair-work communicative activities within the pages of a textbook, as it is often important that each student only has access to his own cue or prompt and not to that of his partner as well. Publishers are now producing packs of materials so that the information or the prompts needed for the activities can be separately distributed between pairs or among members of a group.

Using authentic materials

The current interest in using language in realistic ways has led to the increased use of authentic materials in language teaching. Authentic materials are pieces of language, either spoken or written, which were originally messages produced for communication in a non-teaching situation. Such messages are genuine pieces of communication designed for native speakers, so they are not structurally graded. Nor are they organized in order to demonstrate a language teaching point. Traditionally, such authentic materials have been thought of as 'advanced', for use only with students who already know quite a lot of the language.

It is now felt that students at all levels can benefit from being exposed to authentic materials. Such materials are linguistically rich and they give students the opportunity to extend their experience of English. Students who are not exposed to authentic language may have a nasty shock when they meet real English outside the classroom. Experience of authentic language in the classroom can help reduce this shock, and prepare learners to cope with the range, speed and variety of the authentic language they will meet. Authentic material is, moreover, potentially more interesting than texts which have been specially contrived for language teaching purposes. Even cleverly contrived texts are never entirely natural. They distort the language by presenting structures and functions in ways which may not be authentic, thus giving the students a false idea of how the language is used.

There are, however, some problems with using authentic texts. To begin with, once you use an authentic text as a piece of teaching material, it ceases to be authentic. The student is now the receiver of the message, whereas originally the receiver was someone who was a user, not a learner, of English. The relationship of the student to an authentic text is quite different, therefore, from the relationship of an authentic receiver.

Let us take an example. The authentic reader of a newspaper is reading about news which is current. There may be a lot of coverage of one particular event in the media, and this event may be a topic of everyday conversation. The newspaper reader may read the latest news report about this event with a lot of background knowledge. The new report will fit into this existing context. The news is also current – perhaps the event happened the day before. The language learner confronted with an authentic text doesn't have any of this background; nor is the news current. So the student reading a newspaper report is tackling it from a very different viewpoint from that of the original audience. Using authentic texts may thus involve providing a lot of background information – in other words, establishing the context.

Another problem – and one which every teacher will be aware of – is the

level of language difficulty found in authentic texts. Teachers often avoid using authentic material because the language will tend to be well outside the range of their students' English. This need not be a problem, though, because the difficulty for the students will not be so much in the language – it will be in the things you ask them to do with the text. If the language is difficult, then you should ask them to perform very simple tasks with the text. If the language is easy, then ask them to do something more difficult.

Take the example of a newspaper report about an accident. Such reports invariably include details about the victims – names, ages, occupations, the place where the accident took place, the effects of the accident – injuries, damage, and some information on the condition of the victims. Students don't need much English in order to pick out the gist of the report. Names and numbers are easily identified, so the students can find out who was involved and where and when the accident took place. They will also be able to find out whether the accident involved cars, trains, planes or boats, or a combination of these, since all these things should be within the vocabulary presented in the first year of most English courses. So, using a very little language, the students can discover quite a lot from a so-called 'advanced' authentic text. If you used the same text with more advanced students you could demand more detailed comprehension.

Finally, we need to distinguish between authentic texts and authentic tasks. Using authentic materials doesn't make the language activities themselves any more authentic. Nothing that we do in the classroom can be truly authentic if we compare the teaching situation with the real world. Even so, we may wish to reproduce some of the features of the real world in the classroom as an aid to motivation and learning. To do this, we should always think about the reality of the tasks and activities that we set our students to do.

Let us return to our example from a newspaper – the report of an accident. A non-authentic task would be to analyse the text in great detail. Such reports are not usually written to be studied and analysed. For instance, if there was an accident involving half a dozen cars, detailed information about the vehicles would be less important than the fact that so many cars were involved. It would be a non-authentic task to ask the students to identify and recall highly specific details from a report of this kind.

So when you are using authentic materials you need to consider the authenticity of the task as well. Ask yourself such questions as 'Why do I read or listen to such texts?' and 'What do I use such texts for?' and 'What do I do when I read or listen to such material?' If you find that you are getting your students to perform unreal tasks and activities with authentic material, ask yourself if they are really useful. Try to devise more authentic tasks.

Focus on the learner

Another current preoccupation is concerned with the learner and learning. This preoccupation centres on three aspects of the learner: the errors which the learner makes, the correction of those errors and the learner's language learning needs.

Errors

Traditionally, teachers have tended to think of learners' errors as bad. In structurally-based teaching the teacher tried to prevent the learner from producing errors at all. It was felt that if the learner made errors, they would become part of his language habits. More recent theories on language and language learning take a different view. Now it is felt that making errors is a natural part of learning a language. Some researchers have found striking similarities between the errors made by children learning their native language and foreign speakers learning the same language. Such errors are called 'developmental errors' and they show that the student is using his intuitive language learning abilities to learn the new language system. Some people believe that unless the learner is allowed to make such developmental errors, his learning of the foreign language will be less efficient.

Learners also make other errors which can be caused by the way the new language is presented. We noted earlier that a student can make an error by analogy if first given the pattern, *He told me to do it*. When the learner is given the verb *make* he is likely to use it in the same pattern, *He made me to do it*. This is a perfectly natural error and it is caused not by a deficiency in the learner, but by faulty organization of material by the teacher or textbook writer.

There are other errors which can be caused by faulty presentation. Here is a typical example:

TEACHER Did John go to town?

STUDENT Yes, he go to town.

It is obvious that the learner has focused on the simple verb form and the meaning of the verb, rather than on the complicated rules involved in forming the past tense affirmative when replying to a past tense question. It is quite common for teachers to be very critical of students who make such 'basic' mistakes, and when the students are reminded of the grammatical rule, they can often recognize their mistake. What the teacher has to remember is that he has helped the student to make the mistake by using the question pattern in which the base form of the verb occurs straight after the subject. A student who is struggling to remember the correct past tense form of *go* is sure to be confused, and so will make an elementary error.

The emphasis on grammatical accuracy has now given way to greater interest in fluency. It is possible to speak a foreign language with considerable fluency, and yet to make errors of grammar, vocabulary and accent when compared with a native speaker. Teachers are now told to be more tolerant of errors, particularly when they are trying to encourage learners to communicate. The insensitive correction of errors during a communicative activity can inhibit the learner and destroy the whole point of the exercise.

Error correction

Although there is a more tolerant attitude towards student errors now, this does not mean that errors are encouraged. The teacher should still help the students to correct errors. The question is, how should he do this? One answer is that the teacher should correct all errors as they occur. It has been said that teacher correction of errors is often muddled, inconsistent and ineffective, and there is some evidence that this is indeed so. Another answer is that the teacher should encourage the students to notice their own errors and to correct themselves. This argument implies that the only effective form of error correction is that which involves the student rather than the teacher. After all, the student cannot always depend on having a teacher at his side to correct errors.

A third answer would be a compromise between these two views. There is no point in trying to correct any and all errors as they occur in class. There should instead be a focus on particular language items. Decide which errors you are going to deal with and ignore the others for the time being. If you and your students know which errors you are concentrating on, you can work together on the same problem. If you are focusing on a structural error, for example, you shouldn't become sidetracked by pronunciation problems as well. If you do, you may find that you spend a large part of your lesson dealing with the wrong errors. You also need to give more and more responsibility to the students for identifying and correcting their own errors. This is particularly true of written work and this is discussed in the section on the teaching of writing.

You may find that unexpected errors occur, or that a certain type of error proves to be widespread. Make a note of these errors and devote some time to dealing with them in future lessons. In fact, you may well find that you have to spend some time on correcting persistent errors – perhaps ten minutes each lesson for several weeks, if you see your class only two or three times a week. Very few errors can be corrected after only one remedial lesson, so you must expect to keep coming back to the same problems. This is another good reason for concentrating on a few important errors rather than trying to deal with everything at once. A good rule to follow is: Don't dissipate – concentrate!