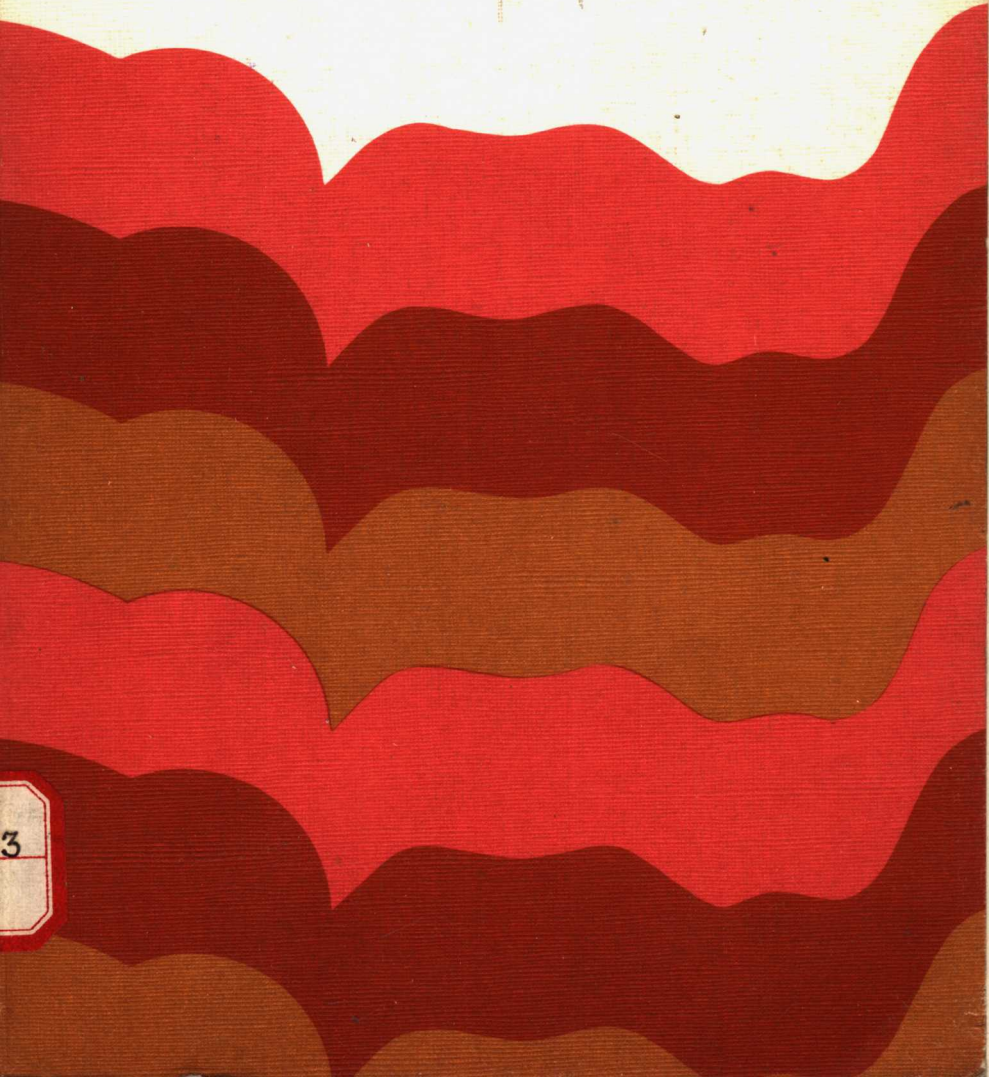


Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers

An Introduction to English Language Teaching

JOHN HAYCRAFT

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General Editor: Donn Byrne

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John Haycraft



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Preface

This book provides a basic outline of many of the practical approaches and techniques which a teacher of English as a foreign (or second) language needs to apply in the classroom. Describing such things is a little like trying to explain how to play tennis or how to sing an aria. When using this book, therefore, try to visualise everything in action. Remember, too, that a summary of this sort can, normally, only suggest one or two ways of dealing with a problem. There are, for instance, many ways of developing a mime story or teaching through picture composition. Everything will also depend on another variable: the kind of students you are teaching.

Everything in this book has been taught in one form or another on International House teachers' courses. This does not mean, however, that all our courses follow precisely what is contained in the following pages. Although basic assumptions probably remain remarkably consistent in the field of English as a foreign language, new ideas may arise continually, and the personality of each teacher trainer also determines the development of the course.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed directly or indirectly to this book through classrooms all over the world: particularly my wife, Brita Haycraft, for much of what is contained in the section on Pronunciation; Jean Stokes for her summary of ideas on vocabulary teaching; Lyn Williams for classifying oral drills; Doug Case for his work on flash cards; Joan Holby and Helen Moorwood for their ideas on mime; Ken Wilson's songs on teaching; Alan Wakeman, Anwi Buckingham and Sheila Sullivan for their work on the language laboratory; John Meredith Parry for his comments on projectors and exams; Brian Nevitt for his work on video, Judy Lugton for her outline of Selected Readers, and Angela Cleverley for her editorial work.

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Introduction – foreigner to foreigner

Teaching and learning a language inevitably involve relationships between different nationalities. A study of the possible intricacies of the relationships would fill a book. However, it is worth trying here to examine some of the underlying factors which can affect both the learner and the teacher of English. English teachers often work abroad and many students of English study in English speaking countries. In addition, language is the unique expression of an historical development, of a special social awareness, and of particular ways of thought. Learning and teaching it will necessarily involve adapting to the culture and attitudes of which it is an essential facet.

One point to be remembered is that we are all in some way nationalistic – ‘provincial’ and chauvinistic at heart, however rational we believe we are. Again, most of us are influenced more by what happens to us personally, than by seemingly objective judgements. People often like or dislike a country because the visit was the occasion of a successful or unsuccessful love affair or business venture, or because they have met a few people from the country who have been good friends or surly enemies.

However, where this goes wrong is when we relate the personal reaction to the ‘objective’ judgment. This is probably at the root of most of the problems of foreigner to foreigner and can lead to various difficulties.

Living abroad

A foreigner has great advantages. He is classless. He is often welcomed simply because he comes from another country. People want to impress him, and he also has the distinction of being exotic and different – except in areas where there are more tourists or immigrants than local inhabitants. The foreigner also has the advantage of being able to find easy subjects for conversation: people question him about his country and tell about theirs, and he will usually find a ready bond with people who have visited his country – whether they are eulogistic or critical.

Apart from this, he usually has the advantage of a stimulating environment because everything is new, and even the most commonplace social habits are interesting because they are different. He is excused if he occasionally ignores everyday conventions because he is not expected to be familiar with them, and in this way he has more latitude than he has at home. Because he is a foreigner, he is expected to be helpless and therefore will receive more kindness. At the same time, he is not committed. Other people’s revolutions, poverty, or wars may interest him, but they rarely threaten him directly. If he gets exasperated, he can escape, as long as he has enough money for a ticket home.

On the other hand, those in the community around him have their own friends, relatives and loves. They know the way the community works. They are familiar with the assumptions and attitudes which guide relations between people. Even if he speaks the language quite well, the foreigner can rarely communicate really adequately, and expressing or understanding humour are usually beyond him. Even if he lives in another country for a time, he is still regarded as someone who is always different *per se*. As he gets to know the community better, he also becomes aware of the barriers which religion, politics, and 'tribal groupings' have erected. As he stays on, he may get bored with standard reactions to his foreign status, realise that there are also people who are prejudiced against him because of his nationality, and become aware that he really is an outsider. This can lead to:

The defensive syndrome

As a result of these feelings of isolation, the foreigner often reacts by creating his own defensive barriers. These make him feel better, but they do in fact isolate him further. To rehabilitate his self-confidence, he compares everything he sees unfavourably with what he imagines his own country to be like. Because he does not speak or understand the language well enough, he feels conversation and humour are not nearly so stimulating as in his own circles at home. Because he cannot understand books or plays, he presumes his own literature is superior. If he feels he has not been welcomed sufficiently, he asserts that people in his own country welcome foreigners much more warmly – largely because he can only remember the times when foreigners were welcomed, and knows nothing of when they were not. He also begins to patronise and criticise the country he is in, and then blames those who object to this. He talks of the need for accepting criticism, while forgetting that he would probably not take very warmly to that kind of criticism from foreigners at home. Whenever an individual does something which displeases him, he brands the action as typical of the whole country. He may end up isolating himself in a little group of his own countrymen who also suffer from the same symptoms of aggressive self-pity, and together they reinforce their own defensive prejudices by establishing their own way of life wherever they go.

Fortunately, there are not many foreigners who suffer all the extreme forms of this disease. Symptoms, however, occur with all of us, and only if we are aware of their origin can we prevent the scratches from developing into blood poisoning. For the tourist, probably, or for the itinerant business man, this whole question does not matter much anyway, as they are not really involved in the country they are visiting. However, for those who really want to teach, or learn a language abroad, the 'defensive syndrome' can be crippling.

The generalisation syndrome

Generalisations are a useful rule of thumb which can help the traveller to clarify his impressions. They can be valid. That Mediterranean peoples entertain less in their homes than English people, that Spanish families are more closely knit than

English ones, or that people have less time to speak to strangers in London than in a Calabrian village, are statements that are generally true.

However, where generalisations go wrong is when they cease to be stages of thought and become immutable rules or prejudices, where exceptions are not allowed, or somehow twisted to conform to the rule. When a student arrives in England with the fixed idea that all Englishmen are cold and reserved, he does himself harm, because, as a result, he does not try to make English friends. Again, a visitor to Africa who believes everything is dirty and unhygienic becomes a 'greenhouse traveller', unable to penetrate beyond the confines of international hotels.

It is of course impossible to find generalisations which apply accurately to millions of people, spread over different counties or provinces, which themselves differ in custom or outlook and often in race. Many generalisations spring from ancient hearsay: to many people who have never been in England, the bowler hat and the pea-soup fog still reign supreme. Again, Spaniards are often regarded as cruel because of the Civil War which ended years ago – or even because of the Inquisition, which was abolished in 1804.

Newspapers and television convey as many false impressions as true ones because they tend to focus on other countries mainly when there is a crisis or some disaster, and most roving reporters do not speak the language of the country.

Many people get their ideas of other countries from an older generation of parents or teachers, or from history books which are usually full of nationalistic distortions.

Many generalisations are part of the 'defensive syndrome' and consist of comparative value judgements which are bound to be invalid. It is possible, for example, to say that there are more cars per head of population in Britain than Algeria, but that does not mean that Britain is 'superior' in any way. The number of cars on the roads is merely one facet of two very different and complex ways of life. Very often, comparing countries in superior or inferior terms is as absurd as stating that a tree is 'better' per se than a stone, or vice-versa. In fact, what is interesting about a tree and a stone, or most national characteristics, is simply that they are different.

Thus generalisations can be of help as stages of thought, clarifying and defining so that they can then be challenged and remoulded by new impressions, new information, and the re-definition of terms. However, generalisations can become like the shell on the back of a slow-moving tortoise. Then the foreigner is as accurate about his view of the outside world as if he thought the earth was flat.

The intolerance syndrome

Intolerance is sometimes regarded as a necessary concomitant of conviction or faith, and tolerance as a form of flabby indifference. Obviously, many things are intolerable and, at the same time, there is no reason why an individual should be tolerant of what he feels is tyranny, mindless exploitations, or any other kind of infamy.

At the same time, intolerance can be the result of prejudice, ignorance of

essential facts, and of a failure to understand why another country has developed as it has.

This is where a knowledge of the history of other countries plays an important role. If one knows the background and life-story of an individual, it is obviously much easier to understand why he is what he is and why he does, or has done, certain things. In the same way, it is difficult to understand much about France if one knows nothing of Louis XIV, or the Revolution, or Napoleon, or 1940. It is difficult to understand Spain without knowing something about the Catholic Church, the expulsion of the Moors, the colonisation of South America, or the causes of the Civil War. Because everything changes so rapidly today, history is often regarded as the study of the remote: the examination of dead things. In fact, though, as Acton said, the causes of the American War of Independence can be found in the forests of Germany – just as many contemporary phenomena of Italy can be traced back to the foreign invasions of the sixteenth century, or elements in present day England can be linked to the Norman Conquest, or Cromwell's Major-Generals. Today, also, we tend to discount religious differences, yet one of the things that makes English ways of thought so different from that of our neighbours is the fact that the 'Establishment' has been affected by Anglican rather than by Catholic or Protestant assumptions.

Apart from this, tolerance is possible only if certain premises are accepted. The first is that all members of religions other than one's own are not damned to perdition. The second is the admission that different political forms may suit different countries at different stages of their development. And the third is that every citizen is not wholly responsible for the wrongs committed by his government. Ironically, teaching languages under reactionary regimes is more necessary because it often represents the students' only real contact with other countries. Again, bias against a student because he belongs to a country whose regime one dislikes, or has religious beliefs one disapproves of, is not only unjustifiable, but is also to teach him less well.

Tolerance as far as foreigners are concerned does not, then, mean adopting an apathetic view of the universe where all personal convictions give way to the feeling that disapproval is taboo. It simply means being less intolerant of things one knows very little about, being wary of propaganda, and trying to find out, not only through language but also through the history and geography of a country, why people think and act differently.

The teacher's opportunity

Shouldn't it be possible to go to another country simply for the sun, for better food, because there are friends of one's own nationality there whom one likes, because living is cheaper, or simply because, assailed by restlessness, one needs a change? Surely it would be intolerable if countries were overrun by earnest foreigners all trying to integrate, and avoid heretical thoughts.

Again, can't one get the most out of a country, simply by being interested in people, without having to delve into their past or politics? And as an English teacher abroad, why learn the language? Some believe they are incapable of it, or

that they can 'pick up' enough, or that they can get around with English anyway, or mime.

Obviously, everyone should work out their own approach abroad, according to their interests and their own personality. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to become an actor if one was not interested in the theatre, a novelist if one was bored with literature, or a concert pianist if one was not fascinated by music. In the same way, it is probably misguided to become a teacher of English as a foreign language if one is not interested in learning languages and exploring the countries from which one's students come.

The English teacher, after all, has a unique opportunity to get to know other countries. A business man abroad is usually limited to narrow circles of colleagues. A tourist gets to know the sights, the beaches, and the night clubs. An English teacher, however, with perhaps half a dozen classes coming for three hours a week, will probably know over a hundred students very well within a few months. These students usually come from every walk of life, talk about themselves in class, encourage their teacher to learn their language, and help him/her to get to know their country. At home, the English teacher will meet students from all over the world. If English is not his mother tongue, he/she will get to know the English and the Anglo-Saxon world much better through teaching. The English teacher then, has unlimited possibilities for becoming 'international'.

1 Some basic principles

Teaching English successfully is not just a question of method. I have observed classes where the teacher's techniques were superb, but where the students were reluctant to learn because the teacher was *not interested in them as people*, and his lesson developed like the workings of a machine, functioning in isolation. Techniques are there to be varied according to who, and what, is being taught.

The world of English teaching is as full of dogmatic sects as seventeenth century England. Prophets arise and new denominations are formed which believe that a 'structural approach' or a 'notional' one, or 'intensive drilling' is the only path to a promised land where all students speak perfect English and pass their exams without difficulty. Many of these ideas may be valid in their own way, but they are not exclusive.

Language would seem to reflect life, and perhaps teaching English should, therefore, be as varied as living, and include as many approaches as possible. However, just as the teaching of English is poorer when informed by a single idea, so it is of doubtful effectiveness if it is anarchic, with amateurs 'doing their thing' and students learning, or not learning, through osmosis.

Every teacher develops his own method over a period of time. He tries out different techniques and refines those that suit him and the subject matter he is dealing with. This book, therefore, attempts to outline various techniques that can form part of the teacher's 'armoury'.

Underlying English teaching, whether to adults or children, whether in Norway or Papua, there are probably a number of obvious, commonsense, practical assumptions.

1.1. The student – involving the student and maintaining interest

Students should look forward to their English lessons and be sorry when they are over. They should work hard because they are interested. Given this, the following considerations can be borne in mind:

1.1.1. The importance of motivation

Motivation can be summed up, briefly, as the student's desire and need to learn – the driving force that makes him work hard, pay attention, and so on. The teacher's own determination that the students should learn is an important contribution to this, as is encouragement and a sense of progress which should also come from the teacher.

1.1.2. The problem of psychological resistance

It is our job to make sure that our students are at ease. If they are learning outside their own country, it is important that they feel welcome, well looked-after, and comfortable. We need to discover the 'blocks' which a student has when learning English: perhaps a teacher once told him he was incapable of learning; perhaps his family dislikes the British or Americans; perhaps he feels overawed by the other students, or thinks the teacher dislikes him. There can be hundreds of other barriers to learning and, ideally, every school needs its language psychiatrist. However, as the profession has yet to be invented, we, as teachers, are responsible for finding out about our students, relaxing them, and convincing them that their fears about learning English are illusory.

1.1.3. The need for personalisation

Students involve themselves when a lesson allows them to talk about themselves or what is closest to them. It is necessary, therefore, to get to know our students' interests and backgrounds. If the class is fascinated by football, it is as well to use it in examples and situations. If an English teacher is employed in Bangkok or Rome, he should get to know these cities, so that he can ask relevant questions and get his students to express their own experiences in English. The ideal teaching situation is achieved when all the students are bursting to say something in English which interests them passionately. The language taught must be seen to be meaningful, useful, and manageable to them.

1.1.4. The need for realism

The nearer language teaching can come to real life, the more interesting it will be. Realistic aids and situations which the students will meet outside the classroom should be used as much as possible. For the same reason, words, structure, and idiom should, preferably, be taught in a context.

Most people react more strongly to feelings than to abstractions. Part of teaching English realistically, therefore, is getting students to express moods and attitudes. It is easy to introduce contradiction or argument in English right at the beginning. Standard statements can be made more interesting by saying them impatiently, persuasively, enthusiastically, sweetly, amazedly, scornfully. You may find yourself using uninteresting questions and answers to practise a particular point, e.g. 'What's the colour of your shirt?' 'It's green'. This is a fairly unreal exchange at the best of times. If, however, the answer is made in a deprecating tone with 'of course' at the end, you automatically make it more acceptable. The expression of attitudes and feelings can be the life-blood of a class.

1.1.5. The need to give confidence – acting out

Performing short sketches and dialogues involves students in a special way, whether as interested listeners or as active participants. The concentration on movement, character and mime makes a student less self-conscious about what he is actually saying. The nervous effort involved, once conquered, also assures the student that he need not be frightened of speaking English. Thus if he can ask

the way in English in a sketch in front of a whole class, he feels more confident about doing it in real life. Acting out can also be used as a prelude to improvisation, which is what students will have to do constantly, once they speak the language.

1.1.6. The need to maintain interest – pace and variety

A class should progress as rapidly as it is able to. You will only know how fast your students can go by experimenting with different tempos. Many classes are dominated by the teacher and, as a result, the students' potential is rarely used to the full, and impatience rather than enthusiasm is generated. At the same time we have to alternate intense work with relaxation, following a concentrated listening comprehension, say, with games or a song.

Monotony produces sleepiness and it is essential, therefore, to use as many different activities as possible, even when teaching the same language item. You could, for instance, concentrate on the same point for three hours on end, as long as you used a new activity every half hour. For instance, if your main aim was to teach some of the differences between *some* and *any*, you could use the following activities: 1. question and answer in a situation; 2. a taped dialogue; 3. a passage read for comprehension; 4. a dictation; 5. acting out a scene in a shop; 6. describing objects. Even after three hours, the students would probably have a sense of variety, and a feeling of satisfaction at having achieved a lot. In addition, a large number of other things would have been practised, along with familiarisation of this point.

1.2. The language

To be able to use language to convey thoughts/intentions/wishes/information etc. a person needs a mastery of various elements.

The individual *sounds*, which are arranged in *words* (the vocabulary, or lexis, of the language), which are related to each other in utterances by *structure* (the grammar of a language). For example, 'He can swim well.' and 'Can he swim well?' use the same words – but from the different relationships of the words to each other, we understand that the first is a statement of fact and the second is a question, seeking to establish a fact of which we are unsure. The different aspects of *pronunciation* – stress and intonation – can also give a different significance to an utterance. In respect of written language, the *written symbols* that represent the spoken word are also involved. There are various *skills* involved in the mastery of a language: *receptive* skills, listening (understanding the spoken language) and reading (understanding the written language); and *productive* skills – speaking and writing. These involve a further element, *selection* of the relevant language for the situation concerned.

Having looked at these various elements of language, we need to examine the implications from the point of view of course content.