

# Chapter 1 Working with people

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## Introduction

This chapter is an introduction to some of the values and assumptions underlying the methodology in this book. A distinction is drawn between 'teaching' and 'learning' and we start to investigate ways of maximizing learning for both students and teacher.

## 1 Teaching and learning

### Task 1

What does a teacher do? What is your personal image of 'good teaching'? List a number of brief answers.

I'd like to return to these questions and to your own answers later on in this section.

### Task 2

Decide what assumptions about the roles of teacher and learners underlie the teaching approach in the classroom picture below.



Fig. 1.1

### Commentary ■ ■ ■

For many people this is the conventional image of a schoolroom – the teacher standing at the front of the class 'teaching' and the students sitting in rows listening.

This teaching style is often based on the assumption that the teacher is the 'knower' and has the task of passing over this knowledge to the students. It is sometimes characterized as 'jug and mug' – the knowledge being poured from one receptacle into another empty one. This is probably done mainly by teacher explanations with occasional questions to or from the learners. There seems to be an assumption that having something explained or demonstrated to you will lead to learning. After these explanations, the students will often do some practice exercises to test whether they have understood what they have been told. Throughout the lesson the teacher keeps

control of the subject matter, makes decisions about what work is needed and orchestrates what the students do. In this classroom the teacher probably does most of the talking and is by far the most active person.

Many of us are familiar with this kind of situation, having seen it from the student's point of view over many years when we were schoolchildren in school classrooms. We have all been through hundreds of hours of observation of teachers at work and this has probably left a strong image of what teaching is and how it should be done.

In many circumstances teacher lecture or explanation may be an efficient method of informing a large number of people about a topic. However, if our own educational experience has mainly been of this approach then it is worth pausing for a minute and questioning whether this is indeed the most effective or efficient teaching method. Whereas most teachers will need to be good 'explainers' at various points in their lessons, a teaching approach based solely or mainly on this technique can be problematic.

In Fig. 1.1, the teacher is 'teaching', but it is unclear how much 'learning' is taking place. It is tempting to imagine that if one happens then the other must also happen – but in fact 'teaching' and 'learning' need to be clearly distinguished. It is quite possible for a teacher to be putting great effort into his or her teaching and for no learning to be taking place; similarly a teacher could apparently be doing nothing, but the students be learning a great deal.

In the above class of sixteen students one lesson is being 'taught'. But we could equally think of it as sixteen lessons being received.

*I'm not involved at all.*

*I'm tired of sitting on this chair.*

*I haven't said anything for hours.*

*Long explanations are so dull – I just turn off.*

*I didn't understand – and now he's talking about something else.*

*I'd rather do something different.*

*He's going too fast.*

*He's going too slow.*

*It's not an interesting subject.*

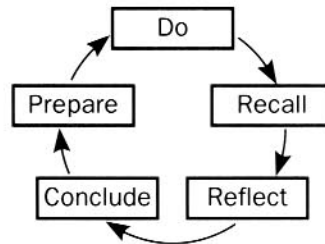
*I'm not doing anything myself.*

Five students are listening and trying to follow the explanations; three others are making detailed notes but not really thinking about the subject; one person is listening and not really understanding anything; one (having missed the previous lesson) thinks that the teacher is talking about something completely different; three students are daydreaming; one is writing a letter; etc.

Here, the teaching is only one factor in what is learned. Indeed teaching is actually rather less important than one might suppose. As a teacher I cannot learn for my students. Only they can do that. What I can do is help create the conditions in which they might be able to learn. This could be by responding to some of the student complaints above – perhaps by involving them, by enabling them to work at their own speed, by not giving long explanations, by encouraging them to participate, talk, interact, do things, etc. ■

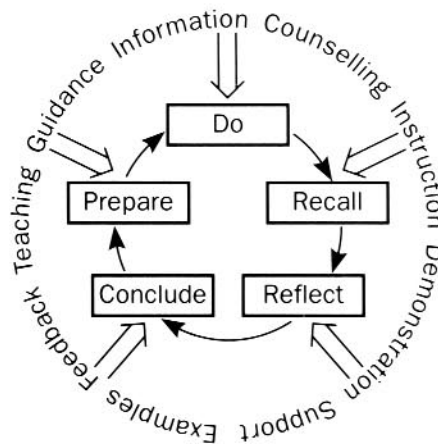
Let's look outside the classroom for a moment. How do people learn things in everyday life? Maybe by trial and error. Maybe by reading a DIY manual and following the instructions. Maybe by sitting next to someone who can tell you what to do and give feedback on whether you're doing OK.

The process of learning often involves five steps: (1) doing something; (2) recalling what happened; (3) reflecting on that; (4) drawing conclusions; (5) using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience. (See Fig. 1.2.)



**Fig. 1.2:** An experiential learning cycle

It is important to distinguish between learning and teaching. Information, guidance and support from other people may come in at any of the five steps of the cycle, as is shown in Fig. 1.3, but the essential learning experience is in doing the thing yourself.



**Fig. 1.3:** Teaching and the experiential learning cycle

This cycle, known as an *experiential learning cycle*, suggests a number of conclusions for English language teaching in the classroom. For example:

- If this cycle does represent how people learn, then the ‘jug and mug’ approach may be largely inappropriate if it dominates classroom time. Giving people opportunities to do things themselves may be much more important.
- I may become a better teacher if I worry less about teaching techniques and try to make the enabling of learning my main concern – ie the inner circle of the diagram rather than the outer one.
- I need to ensure that I allow my students practical experience in doing things (eg in *using* language rather than simply listening to lectures *about* language).
- It may be that being ‘over-helpful’ as a teacher could get in the way of learning. I cannot learn for my students. The more I do myself, the less space there will be for the learners to do things.
- It may be useful to help students become more aware about *how* they are learning, to reflect on this and to explore what procedures, materials, techniques or approaches would help them learn more effectively.
- It’s OK for students to make mistakes, to try things out and get things wrong and learn from that.
- ... and that’s true for me as a ‘learning teacher’ as well.

## **Two assumptions**

One fundamental assumption behind this book and the teaching approaches suggested in it is that *people learn more by doing things themselves* rather than by being told about them. This is true both for the students in your classes and for you, as you learn to be a better teacher.

A second assumption is that *learners are intelligent, fully-functioning humans*, not simply receptacles for passed-on knowledge. Learning is not simply a one-dimensional intellectual activity, but involves the whole person.

Recent approaches in EFL have increasingly acknowledged the importance of the ‘whole person’ in the learner (as opposed to only their mental processes such as thinking, remembering, analyzing, etc). We can no longer be content with the image of the student as a blank slate. Students may bring pen and paper to the lesson. But they also bring a whole range of other, less visible things to class: their needs, their wishes, their life experience, their home background, their memories, their worries, their day so far, their dreams, their anger, their toothache, their fears, their moods, etc. Given the opportunities, they will be able to make important decisions for themselves, to take responsibility for their learning and to move forward (although their previous educational experience may initially predispose them to expecting that you, the teacher, need to do all that for them).

New learning is constructed over the foundations of our own earlier learning. We make use of whatever knowledge and experience we already have in order to help us learn and understand new things. Thus the message taken away from any one lesson is quite different for different people. The new learning has been planted in quite different seed beds. This is true both for your learners meeting a new tense in class and for you reading this paragraph and reviewing it in the light of your own previous experience and knowledge.

## **Task 3**

You are working with this book now – but consider what else is a part of your life at the moment. How many other things are going through your head while you are reading these words? Make a note of a few of these things – previous experiences, knowledge, thoughts, feelings, pains, pleasures, worries, etc. When you’ve done that, select just one item from your list and consider its involvement with the learning process you are currently going through. Is it helping, or is it distracting you?

The two assumptions listed above inform my teaching. They remind me that my ‘performance’ as a teacher is only one, possibly minor, factor in the learning that might occur. They remind me that some of the teaching I do might actually prevent learning. They remind me that teaching is, fundamentally, about working with people – and about remaining alive to the many different things that go on when people hack their own path through the jungle towards new learning.

Although this book concentrates mainly on teaching techniques, it is important to bear in mind that knowledge of subject matter and methodology are, on their own, insufficient. A great deal of teaching can be done with those two, but I would suspect that the total learning would not be as great as it could be. However, an aware and sensitive teacher, who respects and listens to her students, and who concentrates on finding ways of enabling learning rather than on performing as a teacher, goes a long way to creating conditions in which a great deal of learning is likely to take place.

Perhaps, then, the first message of this book on methodology is that methodology and knowledge of subject matter are important, but may not necessarily be the most important things.

#### Task 4

In the classroom pictures below decide what assumptions about the roles of teacher and learners underlie the teaching approaches.



Fig. 1.4



Fig. 1.5

#### Commentary ■ ■ ■

Compared with the picture at the beginning of this section, it is much harder here to guess which person is the teacher. This may suggest a somewhat different relationship between teacher and students and, possibly, different assumptions about what learning is and how it can be helped. The teacher is no longer the central focus of the class. The activities and the speaking are being done by everyone, rather than only by the person at the front of the room. Without more evidence, it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions, but my initial impression is that in these pictures the learners are not simply receiving passed-on wisdom, but are actively involved in their own learning. It seems possible, therefore, that more learning is actually taking place. ■

#### Task 5

Look back through the pages you have just been reading. Look back at your own answers to Task 1 on p 1. What was your personal image of a teacher before you started reading? Has that changed at all in response to ideas in the text, or not? How have any new concepts been slotted in with the old? Which ideas have you rejected or postponed consideration of?

## 2 Three kinds of teacher

This section continues the discussion of different teaching styles begun in the previous section. It starts with a description of three broadly different categories of teacher.

### Teacher A: the explainer

Many teachers know their subject matter very well, but have limited knowledge of teaching methodology. This kind of teacher relies mainly on ‘explaining’ or ‘lecturing’ as a way of conveying information to the students. Done with style or enthusiasm or wit or imagination this teacher’s lessons can be very entertaining, interesting and informative. The students are listening, perhaps occasionally answering questions and perhaps making notes, but are mostly not being personally involved or challenged. The learners often get practice by doing individual exercises after one phase of the lecture has finished.

### Teacher B: the involver

This teacher also knows the subject matter that is being dealt with. (In our case this is essentially the English language and how it works.) However, she is also familiar with teaching methodology; she is able to use appropriate teaching and organizational procedures and techniques to help her students learn about the subject matter. ‘Teacher explanations’ may be one of these techniques, but in her case it is only one option among many that she has at her disposal. This teacher is trying to involve the students actively and puts a great deal of effort into finding appropriate and interesting activities that will do this, while still retaining clear control over the classroom and what happens in it.

### Teacher C: the enabler

Essentially teaching is about working with other human beings. This teacher knows about the subject matter and about methodology, but also has an awareness of how individuals and groups are thinking and feeling within her class. She actively responds to this in her planning and working methods and in building effective working relationships and a good classroom atmosphere. Her own personality and attitude are an active encouragement to learning.

This kind of teacher is confident enough to share control with the learners, or to hand it over entirely to them. Decisions made in her classroom may often be shared or negotiated. In many cases she takes her lead *from the students*; seeing herself as someone whose job is to create the conditions that enable the students to learn for themselves. Sometimes this will involve her in less traditional ‘teaching’; she may become a ‘guide’ or a ‘counsellor’ or a ‘resource of information when needed’. Sometimes, when the class is working well under its own steam, when a lot of autonomous learning is going on, she may be hardly visible.

	Subject matter	Methodology	People
Explainer	✓		
Involver	✓	✓	
Enabler	✓	✓	✓

**Fig. 1.6:** Three kinds of teacher

These three descriptions of teachers are, of course, very broadly painted. There is no way to categorize all teaching under three headings; many teachers will find elements of each category that are true for them, or that they move between categories depending on the day and the class and the aims of a lesson. However, this simple categorization may help you to reflect on what kind of teaching you have mostly experienced in your life so far and may also help you to clarify what kind of teacher you see yourself as being now or in the future.

On teacher training courses I have come across many participants whose initial internal image of a teacher is based on the ‘explainer’ but who are keen to move to becoming an ‘involver’. Such a move may be your aim in reading this book – and the book is mainly geared towards giving you information, ideas, options and starting points that may help you reach that goal. Essentially, therefore, this is a book about methodology. Throughout the book I have also tried to keep in mind the important skills, qualities, values and techniques associated with the ‘enabling’ teacher and to give guidance and information that may influence your role and relationships in the classroom.

### Task 1

Write down the names of some people you have been taught by in the past. When you have a list, go through it and decide which of the three descriptions above (explainer, involver, enabler) best suits each one. This may give you some idea about which images of teaching you have been exposed to and influenced by.

### Commentary ■ ■ ■

When I think back on my own experiences of being taught, it is the teaching techniques that I remember least. I certainly remember teachers who made subject matter come alive, through their great knowledge and enthusiasm. But the teacher I recall with most pleasure and respect was the one who listened to me, who encouraged me, who respected my own views and decisions. Curiously this teacher who helped me most was the one who actually did least ‘teaching’ of the subject matter and was, seemingly, technique-free, being basically ‘himself’ in class. My memories of his lessons are of what I did, rather than what he did, of my learning rather than his teaching.

Teachers and trainers often comment on the importance of ‘rapport’ between teachers and students. The problem with rapport is that, whereas it clearly is important, it is also notoriously difficult to define or quantify. It often seems to be the magical ingredient that makes a teacher a teacher – or not. I think rapport is to do with the personal atmosphere a teacher creates in the classroom; the difference, say, between a room where people are defensive and anxious or a room where people feel able to be honest and take risks. In the following list I’ve noted a number of factors in a teacher that might positively affect the learning atmosphere in a classroom.

The effective teacher ...

- *really* listens to his students;
- shows respect;
- gives clear, positive feedback;
- has a good sense of humour;
- is patient;
- knows his subject;
- inspires confidence;
- trusts people;

- empathizes with students' problems;
- is well-organized;
- paces lessons well;
- does not complicate things unnecessarily;
- is enthusiastic and inspires enthusiasm;
- can be authoritative without being distant;
- is honest;
- is approachable.

Carl Rogers, an American psychologist, suggested that there are three core teacher characteristics that help to create an effective learning environment. These are **respect** (a positive and non-judgmental regard for another person), **empathy** (being able to see things from the other person's perspective, as if looking through their eyes) and **authenticity** (being oneself without hiding behind job titles, roles or masks).

When a teacher has these three qualities, the relationships within the classroom are likely to be stronger and deeper and communication between people much more open and honest. The educational climate becomes positive, forward-looking and supportive. The learners are able to work with less fear of taking risks or facing challenges. In doing this they increase their own self-esteem and self-understanding, gradually taking more and more of the responsibility for their own learning themselves rather than assuming that it is someone else's job.

Carl Rogers considered that, out of these three teacher characteristics, authenticity was the most important. To be yourself. Not to play the role of a teacher – but to take the risk of being vulnerable and human and honest. Gaie Houston (1990) has written that 'The foundation of rapport is to learn yourself enough that you know what style you have and when you are being truthful to yourself.'

Rapport is not a skill or a technique that you can mimic. It is not something you do to other people. It is you and your moment-by-moment relationship with other human beings. Similarly, 'respect' or 'empathy' or 'authenticity' are not clothes to put on as you walk into the classroom, not temporary characteristics that you take on for the duration of your lesson. You cannot roleplay 'respect' – or any of the other qualities. On the contrary, they are rooted at the level of your genuine intentions.

In order to improve the quality of our own relationship in the classroom we do not need to learn new techniques; we need to look closely at what we *really* want for our students, how we really feel about them. It is our attitude and intentions rather than our methodology that we may need to work on. ■

## **Task 2**

Write a brief statement outlining your own assessment of yourself as a teacher (or future teacher). Which kind of teacher do you feel you most resemble? Which would you most like to be? Which of the factors that help effective learning do you think are already present in you? Which are not? Which would you like to work on?