

Language, learning and teaching

The nature of language

The nature of language learning

The nature of language teaching

Approaches to learning and teaching

Communicative approaches

Summary

This chapter will look briefly at the nature of language, the nature of language learning, and the relationship between learning and teaching. These are complex areas and there is much that researchers are still uncertain about, but some understanding of what is already known, and what researchers currently think about language and language learning, is an essential first step before looking at classroom teaching techniques.

The nature of language

Language is a vast subject and it is beyond the scope of this book to do anything more than to introduce very briefly some of the most important points.

Units of language

Words – letters and sounds

When written down words are made up of letters, and when spoken they are made up of sounds. In some languages the pronunciation of a word may be fairly easy to predict from the sequence of letters, but in English, for example, there is a relatively weak relationship between the spelling of a word and its pronunciation. For instance, it is difficult to predict the final sound in ‘thorough’ from the ‘ough’ letter combination, as the same combination of letters represents a very different sound in ‘enough’.

Words and morphemes

Look at the words in bold in the following sentences:

- 1 I have a **cat**.
- 2 She likes **cats**.
- 3 I **love** her.
- 4 We **loved** each other very much

We can see that in sentences 2 and 4, the words ‘cats’ and ‘loved’ are made up of two parts. The ‘s’ in cats indicates that the word is plural – we are not talking about just one cat, but all cats. The *-ed* ending of ‘loved’ means that as well as the core meaning encompassed by ‘love’, we also know that the past is referred to. So the word ‘loved’ consists of two meaningful parts. These parts are called **morphemes**. Morphemes may have a grammatical function (just as the *-ed* ending indicates the past), or they may add a lexical, or ‘dictionary’ type meaning. For example, *un* in ‘unhappy’ has a lexical meaning – it has the meaning of ‘not’. ‘Happy’ clearly signifies a completely different message to ‘unhappy’ whereas ‘happy’ and ‘happiness’ share the same basic meaning, although one is an adjective and one is a noun. Morphemes may be ‘bound’ or ‘free’. Free morphemes can stand alone (as words) but ‘bound’ morphemes must be attached to another morpheme. So, ‘unhappy’ has two morphemes, ‘happy’ is a free morpheme and ‘un’ is a bound morpheme. How many morphemes are there in these words?

- 1 teacher

2 postgraduate

3 unselfish

When you are ready, check your answer on page 12.

Sentences

Individual words can be joined together to form chains. These chains are usually called sentences and they traditionally have a subject and a verb. However, in spoken language the chains may not always correspond to what we traditionally expect a sentence to be like. For example:

Ken: Can you give me a hand?

Sue: Just a minute.

'Just a minute' has no verb, but may still be referred to as a sentence. There are 'rules' which only allow certain combinations of words. 'Minute a just' is a very unlikely combination and 'me give you a hand can' makes the original meaning unintelligible. The way in which words combine into sentences is called **syntax**.

Texts

Sentences rarely exist in isolation. Typically they combine with other sentences. In recent years there has been growing interest in the way in which language operates at this 'above sentence' level. Such study gives insights into such things as how sentences are combined and also the ways in which speakers and writers refer backwards and forwards to other parts of the text.

So, part of a teacher's job is to help learners to learn new words, and to help them to combine these words effectively.

Form, function, context and meaning

Look at the following exchange:

James: Do you mind if I open the window?

Sonia: Well, actually I'm really cold.

This exchange can be analysed in several ways. The **form** of the language can be analysed. That is to say, the underlying grammar patterns. Sonia says 'I'm really cold', which is a subject pronoun (*I*), followed by the verb *to be* (*am*), followed by a modifying adverb (*really*), followed by an adjective (*cold*).

The **function** of the language could also be analysed. 'Do you mind if I open the window?' is asking for permission to do something. There are many other ways that James could have asked for permission. 'Would you mind...?', 'Can I...?' and so on would have performed the same function, but the actual choice of words will depend on the **context** of the request – such things as who is being asked, the relationship of the speakers and what permission is being requested for.

The form and function of the language may guide us to a likely range of meanings, but the precise meaning can only be seen in the context in which the language is used. Here, Sonia says 'I'm really cold' and this effectively denies permission. It acts as a polite way of saying 'don't open the window'. However, if she said 'Well, I'm really cold' in the context of speaking to her doctor about symptoms of an illness, the message would be interpreted differently. So we can say that the meaning of a piece of language is context dependent.

Spoken and written language

Look at the following pieces of language. Do you think they were originally written or spoken?

- 1 It is with pleasure that we offer you the post of research assistant.
- 2 Look, I know you mean well, but the thing is we... this isn't what I want.
- 3 Having interviewed over fifty people who live in the region, it seems that we would have to conclude that there is a lack of support for the project.
- 4 Everyone you ask around here will tell you, they'll tell you, we don't want it.

When you are ready, check your answers on page 12.

We will examine the differences between spoken and written language in more detail in Chapter 10. At this point it is sufficient to say that there are marked differences between the two modes of communication and that people tend to speak more than they write. This means that learners often need to develop oral skills more

than writing skills. On the other hand, the written form of language is often accorded a particular prestige and some learners may need to develop these skills, particularly if they need English for business or academic purposes. It should be noted that it cannot be assumed that a learner who is good at speaking will necessarily be good at writing, or vice versa. There is often a significant variation in a learner's abilities in different areas.

The nature of language learning

Most language teachers have, at some point in their careers, probably felt frustrated that some of their learners have failed to learn something which the teacher thinks s/he explained very clearly, or else seems so easy that they expect all learners to remember it immediately. In the teaching of English, for example, the adding of an 's' when the third person singular form of a verb is used in the present – the difference between *I walk, you walk*, but *she walks* – seems straightforward. And yet teachers often find that despite constant correction and reminders, learners continue to say 'she walk' for some considerable time.

A popular metaphor to explain this is to say that learners are not 'empty vessels' ready to be filled with the teacher's knowledge. However clear the teacher's explanations, there is often a delay between something being presented by the teacher and becoming fully assimilated into the learner's existing knowledge, and being available for spontaneous use by the learner when s/he wants to speak. This is not to say that all teaching is a waste of time. It may be that the teaching of some items speeds up the process by which they become assimilated. Some people argue that heightened awareness of a language feature (through overt teaching) may make the learning process more effective in the long run.

Learners are not empty vessels because there is no one to one relationship between what is poured in by the teacher and what is retained by the learner. Learners may pick up bits of language which the teacher does not set out to teach, and they may not always remember bits that the teacher does prioritise. A more accurate metaphor may be to compare language development to a plant. It will grow and develop naturally as long as it is in the right

conditions. Part of the teacher's job is to ensure that as far as possible those conditions are provided, and to help learners to learn as efficiently as possible. There may be a relationship between learning and teaching but it certainly isn't neat and tidy.

Another feature of learning is that it seems to be more effective the more the learners are involved in the process. A teacher can tell learners about a language and its systems. That is to say, that teachers can try to transfer their knowledge to the learners. However, research suggests that the more that learners are involved in working out patterns for themselves, the better those patterns will be learned. So an alternative approach is for teachers to provide examples, ask appropriate questions and try to guide learners to discover things for themselves. We will look at how teachers can promote this depth of processing when we examine specific teaching techniques.

The nature of language teaching

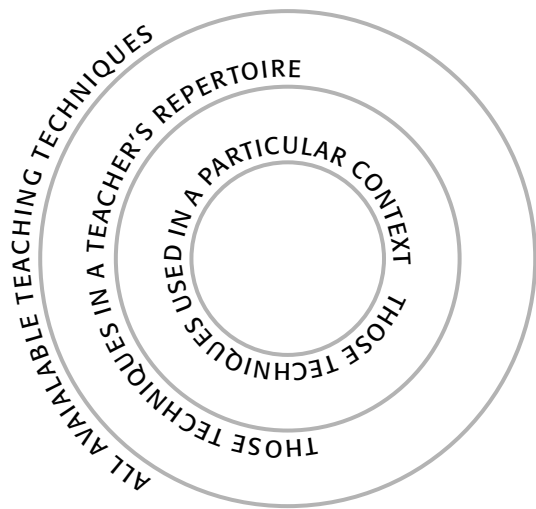
In recent years there has been a shift to seeing language teaching as being most effective when it is subordinated to learning. In other words, the teacher's job is to help learners to learn effectively, or to facilitate learning. For example, and as discussed above, a teacher can make a choice between 'telling' learners what the teacher knows, or setting up ways of helping learners see patterns for themselves. Another way in which learning takes precedence over teaching is in the choices of what is taught and how it is taught, because these decisions should be made with the learners' needs in mind.

The best teachers have a range of techniques available to them, although of course, no teacher can possibly be aware of all the potential alternative methods available. From the range that the teacher has s/he makes a decision on those that are best suited to a particular context, based on such questions as:

Who are the learners? What are their needs? What are their expectations? What material and resources are available?

The list of potential factors that could influence the choice of approach is huge.

This can be summed up by the following diagram:



For new teachers the middle circle is naturally relatively small, and the choice of which techniques to adopt may be limited. Part of developing as a teacher is expanding the middle circle so that more choices are available. With growing experience, so it becomes easier to make appropriate choices for a particular learning/teaching context.

Approaches to learning and teaching

Any book on language teaching methodology should avoid giving the impression that there is only one way to teach a language. The fact is that many people have learned languages extremely successfully over many years while being exposed to a variety of methodologies. Teachers should be wary of following dogmas blindly. Instead they can develop their skills by being prepared to reflect on their teaching and learn from their experiences. It should be remembered that different teaching contexts give rise to different problems, which inevitably call for different solutions.

However, as a starting point for their reflection and development, teachers can learn from what others have done before them and what is often considered to constitute best practice today.

Look at the following brief descriptions of teaching techniques. Have you experienced any of them? If you were learning a language, would you like to experience them? In what ways do you think they would, or would not, be useful?

1 The teacher presents grammar rules by explaining them using the learners' mother tongue. Learners practise these rules by translating sentences both from and into the target language. Learners are expected to learn lists of words in the target language with their mother tongue equivalents. Speaking practice is not considered very important.

2 The teacher provides a spoken model of a short piece of language. Learners repeat it several times and try to memorise it. The teacher corrects any mistakes. Taped material may be used and may include gaps where learners supply the missing words.

3 The teacher does not organise the course around a list of traditional grammar points but instead sets up a series of communicative situations, similar to those that learners may find themselves in in real life. So learners will learn how to order a coffee, how to ask for directions, ways of making suggestions, and so on.

4 At first learners just listen and do not speak until they feel ready. When they do, the teacher responds to meaning, rather than the grammatical form, and the teacher does not draw attention to any grammar points.

When you are ready, read the commentary on page 12.

Communicative approaches

What has developed as the prevailing methodology used in teaching English in many parts of the world today can be loosely termed the 'communicative approach'. However, it is in itself something of an umbrella term, covering a variety of teaching strategies which are bound together by placing an emphasis on developing communicative competence. In other words, 'knowing' a language involves being able to use that language effectively in real life situations. Many people make a broad distinction between what *Thornbury calls a

'shallow end' approach and a 'deep end approach'. In the deep end, or strong form, communication is dominant and language systems (grammar, vocabulary and so on) are focused on in so far as they affect a particular piece of communication. So, learners may talk about television programmes, and the language taught will spring from the discussion and what learners appear to need in order to take part effectively.

In the shallow end, or weak form, a piece of language may be preselected and taught, but the teacher ensures that there will be opportunities to practise that piece of language in communicative contexts as the lesson progresses. So, the teacher may decide that the lesson will focus on the present perfect simple and will then choose practice activities that allow this pattern to be reinforced throughout the lesson. It is this weaker form which dominates the vast majority of EFL text books, and it also informs the majority of teacher training courses, at least at pre-service level. New teachers should be able to select an appropriate piece of new language to teach their learners, and provide a variety of practice activities to reinforce learning. The approach tends to highlight the need for the explicit teaching of vocabulary, grammar and functional language (ways of making suggestions, agreeing, disagreeing and so on) as well as the need to give direct practice in speaking, listening, reading and writing.

In both the strong and weak form of the approach there is a great emphasis on learners working in pairs and groups. Part of the rationale for this is to maximise the amount of speaking practice that can be provided for learners in a single lesson.

These approaches, and particularly the skills needed by a teacher using the dominant weak form of the communicative approach, will be the main focus of the following chapters.

Summary

- Language is made up of morphemes (meaningful bits of words), words, sentences and texts.
- Language can be analysed into form, function and meaning (which is dependent on context).
- Language learning may be helped by learners working things out for themselves.
- Learning and the learner should be prioritised over teaching and the teacher.
- There are various language teaching approaches and methodologies that can be adopted.
- The communicative approach prioritises an ability to communicate over a knowledge of 'rules'.

*Thornbury, S (1999) *How to Teach Grammar* (Longman)

1 Commentary

The nature of language

Words and morphemes

- 1 two – *teach* is the root and the *-er* suffix (ending) indicates that this is the person who does teaching.
- 2 two – *graduate* and the prefix *post*, with the lexical meaning of 'after'.
- 3 three – *un* (meaning 'not'), *self*, and the suffix *-ish* which indicates this is an adjective.

Spoken and written language

- 1 Written
- 2 Spoken
- 3 Written
- 4 Spoken

Approaches to learning and teaching

- 1 This is a very brief description of the 'grammar-translation' method. Up until the 1940s it remained the dominant method of teaching, and is still used, often in modified forms, in some places today. It relies on the teacher having a fairly expert command of both the mother tongue of the students and of the target language. The learners must all share the same mother tongue. The emphasis is on learning grammar rules and it is assumed that these will lead to an ability to communicate. However, this is not necessarily the case because there is a difference in knowing about a language (its rules and so on), and actually being able to use the language. The lack of emphasis on language as a means of communication is a major drawback. Also, most research suggests that bilingual word lists are not the most efficient way of learning vocabulary, partly because most words do not have a direct equivalent in other languages. Learners need to know how words relate to other words in the target language at least as much as knowing how they relate to those in their first language.
- 2 This is a very brief description of the audiolingual approach. It became popular through the 1940s and remained so until the early 70s. The benefits of repetition are still intuitively

recognised by many teachers today, and this element of the approach continues in many classrooms. However, the theoretical principles underpinning the approach, particularly that language is about habit formation, were attacked by linguist Noam Chomsky. He argued that the human mind had an innate ability to process language, allowing people to comprehend and produce utterances they had never heard before – thus destroying the idea that habit formation is responsible for language development.

- 3 This is a very brief description of a functional approach associated with, among others, David Wilkins. It should be noted that the term 'functional' is used in different ways by different people but here refers to the defining of the communicative functions that learners are likely to want to engage in (making requests, agreeing, disagreeing, ordering a coffee and so on). The approach gained popularity through the 1970s and remains an element of many courses.
- 4 This is a very brief description of the natural approach associated with Stephen Krashen. It attempts to recreate as closely as possible the context in which infants learn their first language. Despite the claims that have been made for the successes of this approach, most researchers, and certainly most students, believe that some overt teaching of language 'rules' is useful.

Roles of teachers and learners

Different roles of the teacher

The value of these roles

Different roles of learners

Helping learners to fulfil these roles

Summary

Different roles of the teacher

‘What does a teacher do?’ The obvious and simple response is ‘a teacher teaches’, but what do we mean by this? What does teaching involve? The answer to this is bound up with the idea of how people learn. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is not a one to one relationship between teaching and learning. Although teachers can tell learners about language – tell them what words mean, give grammar rules and so on – this does not seem to lead automatically to learners being able to use the language that they are ‘given’. Learners may learn things from the teacher, or from each other, or from watching a film, or hearing a song, reading something, or perhaps by reflecting on things that they have been ‘taught’ in previous lessons. Sometimes learners will seem to make quite rapid progress, and at other times progress will be slow. Sometimes learners will need a significant amount of time (days, weeks, or months) before something they have been ‘taught’ really makes sense to them and they feel able to use it. Although teachers try to make teaching an orderly and organised business, learning remains apparently chaotic. Teachers of languages have to accept this and set about helping people to learn at their own pace and in their own ways.

We will look at some of the roles teachers adopt to try to facilitate learning. Although teaching strategies may vary according to the subject matter, the group being taught and so on, we can see certain patterns emerging in all

teaching, and quite clear patterns when we look at language teaching.

Try to picture a lesson that you have experienced, if possible as a language learner (or teacher) but if that is not possible, think of any lesson. Think in as much detail as possible. Write down as many actions that the teacher performed as you can. For example, the teacher gave instructions to the class. Are there any other actions you associate with teaching?

When you are ready, compare your list to the one below, which has been based on a language lesson. (Don’t worry about the numbered left hand column for the moment.)

1	The teacher gave instructions to the class.
2	The teacher encouraged students to speak and participate.
3	The teacher listened to what students said.
4	The teacher mimed a series of actions.
5	The teacher spoke in the target language and found material for the class to use.

6	When students spoke their own language the teacher told them to use the target language.
7	The teacher answered the students' questions.
8 <i>language guide</i>	The teacher helped the students to work out grammar patterns for themselves.
9	The teacher checked that all the students were present and ticked a register.
10	The teacher watched the students work in pairs or groups.
11	At the end of the course, the teacher set a test.
12	After each lesson the teacher thought about what was successful and what was less successful and tried to decide why.

Of course, your list will probably be different to this one, and there are more things that could be added to the one above. However, it gives an idea of how teachers spend their working lives. Many of the actions described above will happen on a daily basis and, although some may be more central than others to the general skill of teaching, they all play a part.

Look at the different roles that a teacher has in the box below, and match these 'labels' to the descriptions in the list above. The first one has been done as an example.

language guide	expert resource	performer
reflector	observer	assessor
prompter	provider of input	listener
administrator	organiser	controller

When you are ready, check your answers with those on page 17.

The value of these roles

The importance to teaching of some of the roles introduced in the previous section may seem immediately more obvious than others. In this section we will look in a little more detail at what each role involves and why it is important.

Most institutions will have their own administrative procedures that teachers will be expected to follow. These may include preparing reports on students, keeping records of what has been taught, and preparing a plan of a sequence of lessons to be taught. Teachers may well be expected to assess their students by administering a test or tests at some point either during, or at the end of, a course. However, unlike the other roles, these two functions are removed from day to day contact with students. It is these day to day activities that we will now look at more closely.

Look at the situations described below. For each one say which of the teaching roles needs to be focused on for the lessons to become more successful. For each role try to think about precisely what it involves and why it is important.

Example:

1 The teacher has arranged the class into eight pairs and each pair is talking to each other. One pair finishes the exercise very quickly and then the students say very little to each other. **Observer**

2 The students complain that they don't like the material being used in the lessons because it isn't relevant to them.

3 The teacher's lessons are well planned and the material seems interesting but the students often complain that they feel bored during them.

4 A student asks a grammar question but the teacher is unable to answer it.

5 The teacher asks the students to work in groups to discuss a topic. A few students do but most ignore the teacher and chat to each other in their own language.

6 The teacher usually explains grammar by standing at the front of the class and telling the students about the new language. Students often seem to forget these rules and seldom apply them.

7 The teacher feels that s/he is no longer improving as a teacher.

8 The teacher asks the students what they think about crime. Nobody answers.

9 The students like activities in which they talk in pairs and groups but sometimes feel frustrated because they know they make mistakes but the teacher rarely corrects them. The learners ask for more correction but the teacher answers that they didn't make any mistakes.

10 The teacher gives instructions on how to do the following activity, but when the class starts doing the activity they all do different things.

When you are ready, read the commentary on page 17.

Different roles of learners

The learners' task in the teaching and learning equation is to construct the system of the target language. They have to find out and remember how words are joined together and what they mean, how grammar patterns fit together, as well as how phonological features such as stress and intonation are used. The system the learner constructs can only emerge gradually – parts may come from direct, conscious learning of new bits of language, and other parts may be subconsciously picked up from exposure to the target language.

The ways in which learners undertake this daunting task will vary according to the learning styles each individual prefers, their previous learning experience, their own perceived needs and so on. However, just as we were able to analyse roles of the teacher, so we can analyse certain roles that learners will fulfil. Again as with the roles of the teacher, the list is not exhaustive and there is some overlap between them.

Look at the roles below. How might learners benefit from being effective in each?

Participant
Discoverer
Questioner
Recorder of information

When you are ready, compare your notes with those on page 18.

Helping learners to fulfil those roles

The responsibility of fulfilling these roles is shared between the teacher and student. In this section we will look at what teachers can do to help students fulfil their roles successfully.

To help learners to fulfil the role of **participant** the teacher could

- invite students to respond (see role of prompter)
- provide group and pair work (see role of provider of input)
- value contributions made by praising and responding appropriately (see role of listener)
- respect when students do/do not want to speak and reflect on why this may be the case

We will now look at the roles of questioner, discoverer, and recorder of information. In each case, answer the questions.

When you are ready, read the commentary on page 19.

Discoverer

- 1 Which role of the teacher does this relate most to?
- 2 Which approach, described below, do you prefer, A or B?

A The teacher says...

'The past simple is formed by changing the infinitive of the verb so that it ends with *-ed*. 'Work' becomes 'worked', 'play' becomes 'played' and 'behave' becomes 'behaved.'

B The teacher says...

'Look at these examples: *work – worked, play – played, behave – behaved*. What pattern can you see?'

- 3 Above all, give students the chance to discover rules and patterns for themselves by resisting the temptation to supply all the information too quickly. True or false?

Questioner

To help the students the teacher could teach a phrase such as 'How do you pronounce *sign*?'

- 4 What other similar questions could the teacher teach?
- 5 Above all, create an atmosphere in which students feel able to ask questions. True or false?

Recorder of information

- 6 What common classroom aid would a teacher need to be able to use to help learners with this?
- 7 How can you help students to make **complete** records?
- 8 How can you check that students are keeping records?

Summary

- Teachers have various roles. All are important and need to be understood by the teacher.
- Analysing these roles helps reflection on professional performance and therefore professional development.
- Learners perform various roles.
- By consciously helping learners to fulfil these roles, teachers can help them to learn more efficiently.

Different roles of the teacher

- 1 organiser
- 2 prompter
- 3 listener
- 4 performer
- 5 provider of input
- 6 controller
- 7 expert resource
- 8 language guide
- 9 administrator
- 10 observer
- 11 assessor
- 12 reflector

The value of these roles

1 *Observer*

By observing the class carefully you can ensure that everybody is doing what you want them to do. You can also watch for any sign of students who seem to particularly enjoy or dislike working with each other. You can also see what kind of activities the students enjoy. This role is clearly linked to the role of **listener**. Careful observation will also show when learners have finished – the teacher may want to provide extra extension material and practice for learners who finish particularly quickly. This therefore also links **observer** to the role of **provider of input**.

2 *Provider of input*

Part of a teacher's job is to ensure that learners work with suitable material. It needs to be varied, fit in with the interests of the students and be at an appropriate level. Quite often the teacher will be able to select material from a course book. Even by speaking naturally in English during lessons, teachers provide valuable input for students. For more on the teacher's use of language, see Chapter 3.

3 *Performer*

To be an effective teacher you do not have to be an entertainer. The focus of the lesson should be more on the students than the teacher. However, there are elements of performance in some aspects of teaching. At certain times you need to be able to address relatively large groups, and to

do so confidently. You need to use your voice and also gestures effectively. You also need to sense when students are becoming bored and need a change of focus. Without these very basic performance skills, lessons may be unsuccessful, however well they have been prepared.

4 *Expert resource*

When asked to define a good teacher (of any subject), learners typically respond that they should 'know their subject'. This is no different in language teaching. As well as knowing their subject, teachers must also be able to explain it in a clear way that students can understand. Typically non-native speaker teachers can fulfil this role very well because they have had to learn the language by going through the same processes as their learners. Native speakers, on the other hand, while instinctively knowing if something is right or wrong, can find it difficult to analyse a language which they use so instinctively. This role should be compared to, and not confused with, that of **language guide**, where the focus is on helping learners to work out rules for themselves.

5 *Controller*

Problems with discipline in adult classrooms are relatively rare but even so the teacher must be prepared to act occasionally to ensure that a suitable learning environment is maintained. Teachers should aim to be polite but firm, and ensure that students follow basic rules. Probably the most fundamental rule is that they must respect other people in the class (including the teacher), and this means, amongst other things, listening to what people are saying. For more on issues concerned with discipline, see Chapter 3.

6 *Language guide*

As expert resource we discussed the need for the teacher to know their subject. Language guide deals more with how knowledge is conveyed to the students. Simply explaining language relies on a model of knowledge transfer: I know it – you don't – I'll tell you. There are problems with this model. Learners are not very involved in the process and this can lead to a fairly shallow understanding and lack of retention. Of course, there are times in the language classroom when students ask questions, perhaps not directly related to the

lesson, when it is appropriate to use this model. However, a more powerful model may be when the teacher, as a language guide, helps the students to construct their own system of knowledge, which can be deeper and more meaningful to the learner. Typically this is achieved by asking questions and prompting students to discover patterns and rules for themselves, so that they are thoroughly involved in the learning process. For more on this, see Chapter 4 and following chapters.

7 Reflector

All teachers, regardless of their experience, need to reflect on what they do. We need to think of what went well in a lesson and what didn't, so that we can try to improve. A list of roles, such as this one, can help teachers analyse their strengths and weaknesses and so guide their future development. Having experienced colleagues watch your lessons, reading books and articles about teaching, and taking advantage of any workshops available can also help you to reflect on your own practice and continue to develop as a teacher. For more on professional development, see Chapter 18.

8 Prompter

Part of a teacher's job is to encourage students to speak. Sometimes students need very little prompting but sometimes it can be harder. Amongst other reasons, reluctance to speak can stem from a lack of confidence or from cultural expectations regarding how lessons should be conducted. Sometimes simply nominating a particular student by name may help, because some students are reluctant to volunteer themselves but are happy to speak when invited. In this example the lack of response may indicate that the learners are unsure of what is required. 'Crime' is quite an abstract topic to address and it is difficult to know from the question the type of response expected. The teacher could help the situation by giving a more concrete example. Rather than saying 'What do you think about crime?', a description of a specific example ('This person has broken into 10 houses but never hurt anyone. Should he go to prison?') may be easier for students to relate and respond to. In other activities the role of prompter may be slightly different. At times a student may be speaking but then not be able to think of how to continue. The teacher could step in and prompt by sensitively asking an appropriate question so that the flow of communication can continue.

9 Listener

By listening teachers can detect the individual strengths and weaknesses of a student and respond to them. Teachers can

give appropriate feedback. New teachers can sometimes find it difficult to respond to what students say effectively. This is often because they are very concerned with what they will be doing next and their own performance. When students are talking in pairs or groups it can be useful to take notes, so that you remember what you heard after the activity.

10 Organiser

A teacher needs to plan and carry out the 'mechanics' of the lesson. How many people will work in a group? Which students will work effectively together? What instructions do students need? How can you make instructions clear – will an example and/or a demonstration help? How long should an activity take? Where will students sit? What will you do about late arrivals to the class? The list of questions is almost endless but for a successful lesson these types of issue need to be considered, just as the language input is planned.

Different roles of learners

Participant

By participating fully in the lesson students gain practice. They can 'test out' how they think the language works in a non-threatening environment and may benefit from feedback from the teacher on their efforts. Practice in using language and exposure to it seem to be important elements in the learning process. However, teachers should be aware that some learners may feel uncomfortable about joining in in certain situations, and some people may prefer to remain relatively quiet and observe others. Many people may learn very effectively in this way, and so learners need the opportunity to participate, but not necessarily be forced to.

Discoverer

This is strongly linked to the teacher's role of language guide. By taking the opportunities to work out patterns and rules for themselves, learners can benefit in the ways described in that section.

Questioner

This is linked to the above role. By asking questions learners can take responsibility for their own learning to some extent. They can set the agenda of what gets taught, rather than simply being the passive recipient of what the teacher presents. They can also tap into and benefit from the teacher's expertise.

Recorder of information

When we have to remember something important most of us write it down. This means that we can refer back to the information. Learners need to record new words and phrases, new bits of grammar and so on, to help them remember what they learn. They can also make these records outside the classroom when they study independently.

Helping learners to fulfil these roles

- 1 Language guide.
- 2 Assuming that this is the main focus of the lesson rather than a response to an unrelated question, then B is usually better.
- 3 True
- 4 What does ____ mean?
How do you spell *umbrella*?
When do we use the *present simple*? (or some other verb form).
How do you say...? etc.
- 5 True
- 6 Whiteboard – so that students can copy things down.
- 7 The teacher could give models of good records and give students advice on what to record.
- 8 Occasionally check note books, or simply ask students.