1 What is taught may not be what is learnt: Some preliminary questions

Whenever we do anything in the classroom we are acting on our beliefs about language and language learning. If we ask learners to listen and repeat a particular sentence, we are acting on the belief that such repetition is useful enough to justify the valuable classroom time it takes up, perhaps the belief that it helps rote learning which in turn promotes general language learning. If we give learners grammatical rules or encourage them to discover rules for themselves, we are acting on the belief that rules make a valuable contribution to language description and that this kind of understanding helps promote learning.

Our beliefs about language learning and teaching are shaped by our training, but also by our classroom experience. Unfortunately, learning from experience is not always easy. Teaching is such an absorbing business that it is difficult to stand back and ask appropriate questions about what is happening in the classroom.

My own experience as a language teacher – and also as a learner – suggests to me that learning a language is a much more complex and difficult process than we would like to think. We need to look very carefully at some of the assumptions we make about language learning and about language itself. A first step is to look at what happens in classrooms, and to identify some of the questions that need to be asked.

In the classroom teachers often act on the assumption that language learning is a matter of learning a series of patterns or structures. Learners gradually add to their stock of structures until they have a usable model of the language. They often start with the present tense of *be*, and soon they are exposed to the definite and indefinite articles. At a later stage we add the passive voice and reported speech, and continue until we reach the dizzy heights of the third conditional. The syllabus is presented to learners in a 'logical' order and the language is built up piece by piece until learners have achieved a usable competence, a form of the language which meets their needs.

As teachers, however, we observe that learning proceeds in a much less predictable manner. What is 'taught' is often not learnt, and learners often 'learn' things which have not been taught at all. Learners often produce sentences such as: *I am student* or *My father is engineer* even

though they have never been taught this, and even though their conscientious teacher is at pains to point out that the definite article is required here: *You are **a** student; Your father is **an** engineer.* Often learners persist in these errors for a long time, in spite of repeated correction.

This is frustrating for both learners and teachers, but the full picture is even more complicated than this. Learners soon reach a stage at which they produce accurately: *I am **a** student* when they are thinking carefully about the language; but when they are producing language spontaneously, or when their attention is drawn to another feature of the language, they continue to produce: *I am student*. There are, it seems, two kinds of learning. One of them has to do with learning to make sentences. Learners think hard about what they are doing and produce thoughtful, accurate samples of the language. The second kind of learning has to do with learning to produce language spontaneously, without conscious attention to detail. What learners produce spontaneously is often very different from what they produce when they are concentrating on making sentences.

We come up against this phenomenon time and time again in our classroom practice. We constantly observe instances where learners make errors which they are easily able to correct once they are pointed out. And we also observe, time and time again, that the same errors are repeated, even after they have been pointed out. This is one of the central puzzles in language teaching: how is it that learners can know something, in the sense that they are well aware of it when they are making sentences carefully and attentively, but at the same time not know it when they are producing language spontaneously?

In this chapter I will look first at my own experience in a class on question tags: why is it that these tags, which are relatively easy to explain, are so difficult for learners to master? I will then look at question forms in general: why do learners go on getting these wrong for so long even after they have understood the rules for question formation? The way learners go about learning question forms raises questions about learning in general – I will highlight some of these questions and speculate on possible explanations.

1.1 Some questions about tags

My first teaching job was at a secondary school in Ghana, West Africa. My Ghanaian students, who did not share a common first language, were learning English as a second language. They had not acquired

English as their first language at their mothers' knees. Most of them had their first contact with English in primary school, and by the time they reached secondary school nearly all of their lessons were taught through the medium of English. Their spoken English, however, was a dialect form which was very different from standard British English. They used this dialect not only in the classroom, but also when speaking to fellow students who came from another language group.

'Sensible' languages have a single form for question tags. French has *n'est-ce pas?*; Greek has δεν ειναι? (*dhen eeneh?*); Spanish uses *verdad?* or *no?* Unlike these sensible languages English has a wide range of question tags:

We've met before, ***haven't we?***
You'll be there on time, ***won't you?***
They can do it, ***can't they?***

But in the dialect of English used by my Ghanaian students there was only one tag, as in French and Greek:

We've met before, ***isn't it?***
You'll be there on time, ***isn't it?***
They can do it, ***isn't it?***

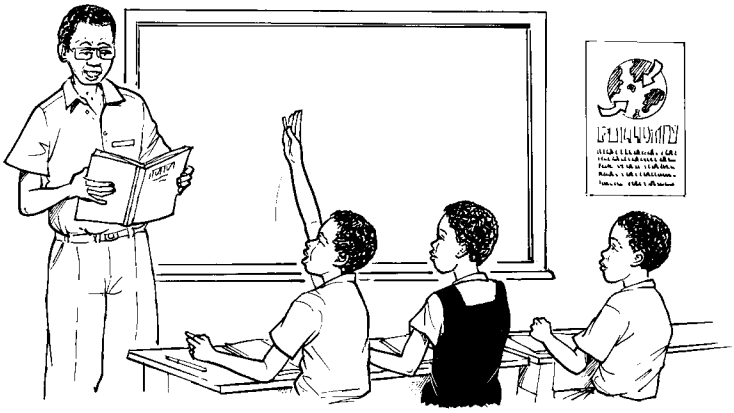
This tag is a form which is also often used by learners of English as a foreign language. It is even used by some native speakers of English – *We'll see you tomorrow, innit?*

Unfortunately my Ghanaian students were supposed to be learning standard British English. In their examinations they would be tested on standard British English – including the entire range of question tags. And, for some reason best known to themselves, examiners love to test question tags. I knew that my students would be tested in public examinations and that in those examinations, which in those days were in multiple-choice format, question tags would figure largely.

I was determined to eradicate their apparently serious error, and carefully prepared a lesson. This happened back in the 1960s, and, to someone trained in the 1990s, my lesson may have appeared to be old-fashioned in some respects, since it was based initially on grammatical explanation. It began with an explanation and demonstration showing how the auxiliary or modal verb was repeated in the tag, and how an affirmative clause had a negative tag. Then we looked at some sample sentences on the blackboard, until the students were able to supply tags consistently. I called out some statements and the students responded with the appropriate tag. I finished with one half of the class repeating a statement after me, and the other half of the class responding in chorus with the right tag.

We're learning English… ***aren't we?***
We will have English next Monday… ***won't we?***
We have English every Monday… ***don't we?***

It all went beautifully. I felt all the warm satisfaction of someone who has achieved his lesson aims. There was one final stage. I asked the students to take out their exercise books so that they could write down a few sample tags to help them remember what they had learned. They all looked a little sheepish. Finally one of them, one of the brightest students in the class, put up his hand and explained the problem: *Please, sir, you've got our exercise books…* ***isn't it?*** My beautifully prepared and highly successful lesson vanished before my eyes. What my students seemed to have learnt turned out not to have been learnt, even by one of the brightest.



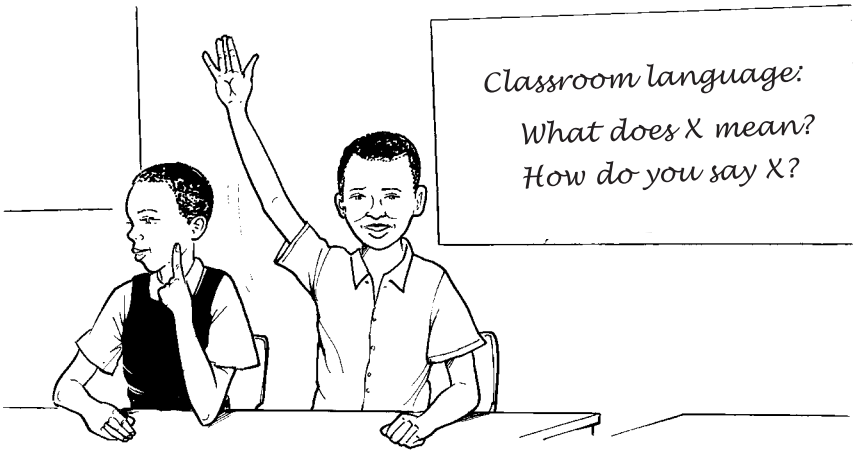
Please, sir, you've got our exercise books, isn't it?

In one sense I had done my job. I am sure that, when faced with multiple-choice questions, and given time to think, most of my students would be able to identify the correct tags. But most of them never incorporated these tags into their spontaneous speech. I soon learned that almost all Ghanaians, including those who were fluent, even eloquent in English, used only the all-purpose tag *isn't it?* – even if they could reproduce the complex system used by speakers of standard British English when asked to do so.

At the time I was simply puzzled and frustrated. I had spent a lot of time teaching something which was difficult and had little practical value. I had taught it so that it could be tested and so that my students might respond appropriately in a test. But it had certainly not become a part of their usable repertoire of English.

1.2 Some questions about questions

We know from research into second language learning that learners have to go through a series of stages before they are able to produce question forms consistently and accurately. This is something that teachers know from bitter experience. It takes a long time, for example, before learners spontaneously produce questions with the 'dummy auxiliary' *do*, as in: *What do you want?* Even sentences which they hear over and over again are distorted. On teacher-training courses I refer to this as the '*Please, teacher, what mean X?*-syndrome'. Learners may have been endlessly drilled in forms like *What do you want? Where do you live?* and so on. They will certainly have heard the phrase *What does X mean?* many, many times. But in class they consistently put up their hands and ask the question *Please, teacher, what mean X?*



Please, teacher, what mean …?

In time, usually a long time, they get past this stage and begin to produce questions with *do* in the appropriate form, and the teacher breathes a sigh of relief at this evidence of real progress. But later we move on to reported questions: *Do you know **where they live?** Tell me **what you want**.* In these forms there is, of course, no dummy auxiliary *do*. Students are familiar with the forms … *they live* and … *you want*. There should be no real problem with putting these after a WH-word such as *what* or *where* to produce: *Tell me what you want* and *Do you know where they live?* But what happens? They regularly produce the forms: *Do you know where do they live? Tell me what do you want*. In a test on reported questions they may be able to produce the

appropriate forms, but it takes some time, often a considerable time, before they eliminate the *do* auxiliary from their reported questions. This process is similar to that observed among L1 learners. The mastery of question forms might appear to be straightforward, but it involves a complex developmental process.

Why should this be the case? It may be that the forms *What do …? What did …?* and so on have become 'consolidated'. Once students have learned to use direct questions, then a WH-word like *what* or *where* automatically triggers an auxiliary, including the dummy auxiliary. What once came to them naturally – *Where I live? What you want?* – no longer comes naturally to them. The new forms – *Tell me what you want; Do you know where they live?* – are easily demonstrated, explained and understood, but they are not used spontaneously. To use them spontaneously it seems that learners first have to unlearn their old habits. They have to break the link between a WH-word and the auxiliary which they have acquired with such difficulty in the process of learning direct questions.

1.3 Some questions about learning

Some years ago, on an in-service teacher-training course, I asked teachers to make a list of the ten commonest mistakes made by learners. I asked one half of the group to list the most frequent errors in their first year classes, and the second group to list errors made in third year classes. When the lists were compared the teachers were horrified to see that seven of the mistakes they had listed occurred in **both** the first year **and** the third year. Third year students, like their first year counterparts, consistently produced forms like: *She want …* instead of: *She wants …* First and third year students seemed to have the same problems with articles, including the production of the forms: *I am student* and *You are teacher*, which I referred to above. Third year students still had problems with question forms, particularly the *do-* auxiliary, and so on.

This, of course, raised serious questions about what was happening in these classes. Had teachers really taken a full two years of teaching to eliminate only three mistakes? Were their third year students really not much better than their first year students? How could we account for this appalling failure?

Although the teachers accepted that they had been conspicuously unsuccessful in eradicating common errors, they still insisted that third year students had a much better command of English than first year students. They pointed out that third year students had a much wider

vocabulary than the first years. They used English with greater fluency and confidence. Some of them were able to produce several consecutive sentences, albeit littered with errors. This was quite beyond their first year counterparts. The third years could understand and produce language that was quite beyond a first year student and, as part and parcel of this, they could make lots of mistakes that the first years could not even dream of.

The conclusion we reached was this: if it is the teacher's role to eliminate error, then these teachers had been remarkably unsuccessful – even though most of them were, by all reasonable standards, very good teachers. But if it is the teacher's role to help students develop enhanced performance and confidence, then all the teachers could claim genuine success. Their third year students spoke more English than their first year students, and they spoke it with greater fluency and confidence.

This, however, still left us looking for an explanation as to why the teachers' efforts to eliminate error had met with so little success. One teacher asked me if I had been any more successful in my days as a classroom teacher. Remembering my lesson on question tags, and countless other similar experiences, I had to admit that I had not. I had no simple answer to the question why some aspects of language are so resistant to teaching, and I certainly had no simple solution as to what might be done about this.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that learners are simply careless. They know that they should add *s* to the third person singular of the present simple tense, and they know how to form questions with the auxiliary *do*, but they are simply too careless to apply this knowledge when they are using the language spontaneously. But second language acquisition research, as well as our experience as teachers, tell us that these are stages that almost ***all*** learners go through. We can hardly dismiss ***all*** learners as careless. It seems much more likely that the processes we have described are a necessary part of learning, that learners have to go through a process which involves making mistakes before they can produce appropriate forms spontaneously and without conscious attention.

There is, then, plenty of evidence that learners do not move immediately from an understanding of new language forms to the spontaneous production of those forms. They go through a stage at which they can produce the form only when they are paying careful attention. They cannot produce the form when they are using language spontaneously, when they are thinking about getting meaning across rather than producing accurate sentences. In spontaneous language use

there are conflicting priorities. The learners' main priority is to get their message across with appropriate speed and fluency; they may also be keen to produce language which is accurate – but speed and fluency conflict with accuracy.

1.4 Learning processes

It seems, then, that there is no direct and straightforward connection between teaching and learning. We cannot determine or predict what learners will make a part of their spontaneous language behaviour. However, our experience as teachers and the experience of the teachers in training reported above suggest that classroom instruction does help learners, and this is reinforced by second language acquisition research (see, for example, Long, 1983, 1988) which appears to show that learners develop more quickly and go on learning for longer if they are supported by instruction.

It is possible that teaching makes learners more aware of a particular form, it makes the form more noticeable. Until their attention is drawn to it, learners may not even notice the structure of *do*-questions. Perhaps they simply identify these forms as questions through their intonation patterns without paying attention to their form. Once the structure has been pointed out to them they begin to notice it when they come across it. Over time this repeated noticing enables them to incorporate the acceptable forms into their spontaneous language production. It is also possible that teaching helps learners form hypotheses about the language which they then go on to test and to refine. Yet another possibility is that classroom procedures encourage learners to think carefully about the language for themselves, and help to make them more independent learners.

It is worth looking at a number of processes which might contribute to learning, and following on from that we can go on to consider ways in which teachers might assist learning. Let us begin by postulating three language learning processes which I will refer to as **Recognition, System building** and **Exploration**. Let us look at these processes one by one.

Recognition: The first stage in learning probably involves recognising what it is that is to be learnt. Whether or not something is recognised is subject to a number of influences. It is subject, for example, to **salience**, how much it stands out from its background. This can be annoying for teachers, because strange and unusual words and phrases often stick in students' minds. On the other hand, syntactic markers, such as articles

and auxiliary verbs, are far from salient. We need to draw attention to such items quite explicitly, and to encourage learners to look for them in future input.

Recognition takes place at a number of levels. We might, for example, encourage learners to recognise a general phenomenon, such as the behaviour of uncountable nouns in English, nouns which are not found in the plural nor with the indefinite article. We might do this at first by drawing attention to a number of frequently occurring nouns which refer to items of food and drink: *bread, food, rice, water* etc. Later we might go on to make the same point about other substances such as *oil, gas, iron* and *wood*. Once learners are aware that some nouns in English behave in this way they may immediately make links with similar nouns in their own language, and as a result go on to generalise that abstract ideas (*beauty, bravery, death* etc.) and activities (*help, travel, sleep* etc.) behave in the same way. If the learners' first language does not offer this kind of support, they may need more help with recognition. Even if their own language is similar to English in its general classification and treatment of uncountable nouns, the teacher might still usefully provide help with some very frequent nouns which are uncountable in English but not in most other languages, words like *advice, furniture, homework* and *equipment*.

Thus, teachers can help learners with recognition by explanation, by showing students how to recognise uncountable nouns. They can reinforce this by pointing out specific examples of these nouns as they occur in the language which learners experience in the classroom, and later by encouraging learners to identify these nouns for themselves. They can go on to exemplify and list uncountable nouns.

With some vocabulary items learning proceeds largely by recognition. If a word has an obvious referent in the outside world, it can be learnt as an individual item. I have an impressive restaurant vocabulary in Spanish even though my competence in Spanish conversation is very limited. I acquired my restaurant vocabulary mainly by studying restaurant menus and lists of words in a Spanish phrase book. As a result I can work my way through a menu and find what I want, even though I cannot engage a waiter in a productive discussion of how the food has been prepared. There are a number of lexical fields which lend themselves to this kind of learning, but we do need to be wary of rote learning. Even a simple word like *foot* can cause problems. For a speaker of Greek, for example, the word ποδι is the closest equivalent to *foot*, but ποδι refers not simply to the foot, but to the entire leg below the knee. This can occasionally cause problems for Greek learners of English as well as for English learners of Greek.

Depending on which is the student's first language, some grammatical items in English may also be assimilated without too much trouble once they have been recognised. Most European languages have words which are almost exact counterparts of the English direct and indirect articles, for example. Speakers of those languages can acquire the article system as if *the, a* and *an* were straightforward lexical items, without worrying about complex differences in use. For speakers of Greek, for example, the basic distinction is clear, but there are difficulties with proper names which in Greek always take a definite article. The way proper nouns are handled in English is inconsistent. In general we do not use the definite article with names but it is used with the names of seas and oceans, for example, although not with lakes. There is no logical reason why English should talk of *Lake Geneva* and *Lake Superior*, but insist on *the Atlantic Ocean* and *the North Sea*. French is similar to English in that it operates an inconsistent system, but the inconsistencies in French are different from those in English. For example French uses the definite article for the names of countries (*la France, la Grande Bretagne*), but not for towns or cities; it often uses the definite article for days of the week, but not for the months of the year. There is, therefore, a certain amount of 'tidying up' to do for all learners, but for many, including speakers of most European languages, the basic distinction between the definite and indefinite articles is straightforward, and the article system can be assimilated without too much difficulty.

Teachers can assist learners with recognition by providing lists of words organised into useful groups and by encouraging rote learning. They can identify grammatical systems which can usefully be transferred from the students' first language. As we have seen, one example for most European learners of English is the article system. In the same way, for French learners of English, the *going to* future can simply be transferred from the French.

System building: Language learning involves conscious processes which are familiar to all who have learnt a second language. Learners begin to form hypotheses about how grammatical systems work and teachers can help them do so. A good example is the relationship between continuous and simple tenses in English. In most elementary English courses learners begin by recognising the difference in meaning between the present simple and the present continuous. Without help and direction from the teacher it would be very difficult for learners to make the generalisation that the present simple is generally used for habitual actions or ongoing states:

I usually ***go*** *to church on Sunday.*
We ***live*** *just outside Birmingham.*