

## Introduction

The idea to write *Teachers in Action* came about as a result of my own experience as a teacher trainer working with non-native-speaker teachers in various contexts. Although the tasks and materials that I have developed for this training work and for use in this book represent a very personal approach to in-service teacher education and development, I hope that they will also offer trainers in different contexts an accessible bank of ideas to employ in their work with teachers.

### Who this book is for

*Teachers in Action* is intended for use by both experienced and inexperienced trainers working in the in-service education and development of primary and secondary foreign language teachers, especially teachers of English. Typically, these teachers will be attending a training, or re-training, programme in their own country, including programmes lasting a period of months, or a series of seminars throughout the teaching year. The teachers will also conform to some of the following characteristics in that they:

- are currently teaching
- are non-native speakers of English
- possibly have limited English
- possibly have limited formal training as language teachers
- are possibly inexperienced in language teaching
- are working in primary or secondary schools (with learners aged 5 to 16+)
- are working in countries or regions undergoing educational reform
- are working with less than perfect resources

Of course, this does not mean that *Teachers in Action* is unsuitable for teachers who do not exactly fit this brief profile, such as native speakers, teachers from different countries who are attending a short training programme in an English-speaking country, or teachers whose training or experience is not limited.

Finally, I hope that the book does not necessarily require the presence of a trainer, so that it is also suitable for teachers meeting in self-help groups, or indeed for highly motivated individuals.

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## **General aims of *Teachers in Action***

It is important to state clearly at the outset that this book does not provide trainers with a series of methodological topics related to professional practice which have been already selected by me, for groups of teachers to work through and look up the answers in a key. Rather, the general aims of *Teachers in Action* are to provide in-service trainers with:

- 1 a broadly focused range of generative tasks and materials that can be used flexibly to meet the needs of different teacher education and development programmes
- 2 an accessible, flexible framework for helping teachers to investigate topics in their schools and classrooms which are relevant to them, in order to further their professional development
- 3 tasks and materials to help to develop teachers' professional knowledge, skills and attitudes, so they can educate their learners more effectively.

## **Effective in-service teacher education: background issues**

I will now describe some important background issues concerning the provision of effective teacher education and development, which in very general terms I understand to mean helping practising teachers to develop their professional knowledge, skills and attitudes<sup>1</sup>, in order to educate their learners more effectively. These issues include: teachers' identities, teachers' professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and feelings, education, and change and teacher learning.

### **TEACHERS' IDENTITIES**

#### *Teachers as individuals*

A thumbnail sketch of practising primary and secondary teachers might characterise them as ordinary people who lead very busy, often stressful, but potentially rewarding working lives. They have families and other important commitments outside school. Teachers are also, of course, unique individuals, with their own personalities, idiosyncrasies, hopes and concerns. They have different personal and educational histories, and possess professional knowledge about the subjects they teach, as well as professional experience and skills. Significantly, they have beliefs, attitudes and feelings towards aspects of their work. All of these elements change over time.

<sup>1</sup>See Section 6.1 for further discussion of terms such as 'teacher education' and 'teacher development'.

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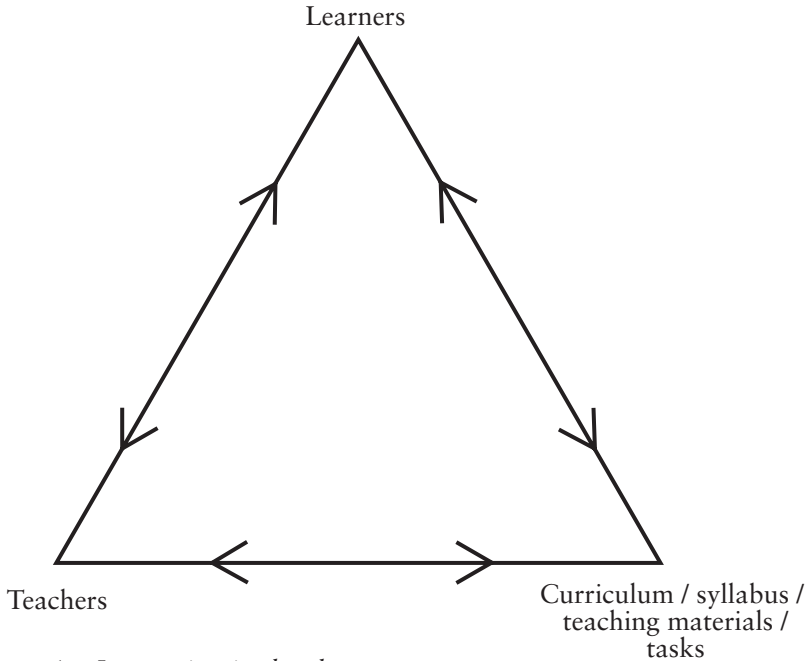


Figure 1 Interaction in the classroom

### Teachers as social beings

In their professional practice, teachers are also social beings in that they interact with their learners and the curriculum in the classroom in a three-way process, as shown in Figure 1.

The classroom is clearly located within the more extended context of a school: a complex, constantly changing world full of exuberant children learning and playing, and colleagues busily attending meetings and talking to parents.

In turn, this context extends beyond the school gates, consisting of other 'layers', including the local community (a town or city with, for example, school inspectors, teachers' centres, higher education institutions); a region or country (with, for example, government ministries, publishers, national teachers' associations), and beyond this the international community at large (with, for example, organisations such as the European Union, the British Council, and international professional associations such as IATEFL or TESOL).

This social context is important in the present discussion, as the expectations of all the participants involved in the educational process exert an influence on a teacher's behaviour in school and in the classroom. The nearer the participants are to the teacher, the stronger their influence. See Figure 2.

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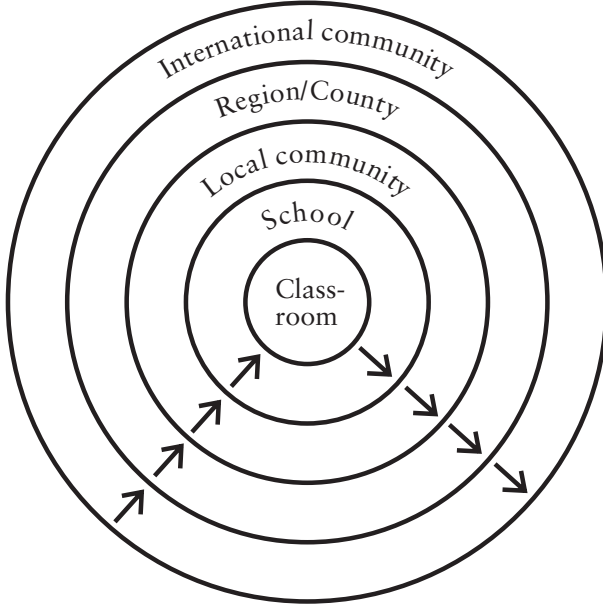


Figure 2 *The social context of educating, teaching and learning*

There is another crucial sense in which teachers are social beings, in terms of their own professional development. In this way, the tasks and materials in *Teachers in Action* are rooted firmly in the principles of ‘social constructivism’: on a training programme, a group of teachers explore and experience certain phenomena together, and as a result construct their own new meanings or personal understandings which did not exist before the programme began. See Section 6.2 for further discussion of this issue. In this social constructivist sense, *Teachers in Action* seeks both to help teachers to find their own individuality and to encourage them to interact and establish links with participants in the different layers of the educational community shown in Figure 2.

## TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Teachers already possess professional knowledge when they join a training programme. This knowledge takes the form of ‘personal theories’, defined as a ‘set of beliefs, values, understandings, assumptions – the ways of thinking about the teaching profession’ (Tann, 1993: 55), and which take shape and develop as a result of individuals’ experience as learners and teachers, and as a result of their previous training, to mention but a few sources.

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One reason why these personal theories are important is that they help teachers to make sense of their past and present professional experience as educators and teachers. Making sense of experience would include the following: teachers' generalisations (e.g. 'For me a real curriculum contains...'), interpretations (e.g. 'The term "x" is really...'), principles (e.g. 'Schools should...'), feelings (e.g. 'Yesterday I felt pleased with...'), and priorities (e.g. 'We really need to improve...'). A second reason why personal theories are important is that they determine what teachers do in practice in classrooms, which has important implications for teacher education and development, which I outline below. A further important element of personal theories comprises individual teachers' understandings of so-called 'public theory', defined as 'the systems of ideas published in books, discussed in classes, and accompanied by a critical literature' (Eraut, 1994: 70). For English teachers, this might include ideas related to aspects such as what language is or how it is learned. (This idea of exploring public theory is included in aim 7 on p. 12, and in many of the tasks themselves.)

Of course, a teacher's personal theory may not necessarily be completely consistent or logical; perhaps there are gaps, or few connections between its different elements or components. It is also dynamic, changing over time, and highly individual, just as teachers are individuals. Significantly, personal theories are usually tacit or implicit.

One implication of this discussion concerning professional knowledge and personal theories is that an effective in-service programme should exploit fully the knowledge – as defined above – which teachers bring with them. *Teachers in Action* sets out to do so, for example, by deliberately encouraging teachers to reflect on their personal theories; to articulate them explicitly; to compare their own theories with those of their colleagues and so-called public theory; to relate their theories to their professional practice, and as a consequence to develop their own theories.

## TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Teachers' professional knowledge – as outlined in the preceding section – is applied to their work in the form of skills, or routinised actions (although, naturally, not everything a teacher does is routinised). For the purposes of this book, I would like to highlight the relevance of the following: those skills related to subject matter, methodology and decision-making, as well as social and enabling skills.

### *Subject matter skills*

Subject matter skills, such as language competence, or the use of the target language in class, are self-evidently of vital importance for language teachers. However, it is not a priority of this book to focus on subject matter skills directly, even though teachers often attach great importance

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to this. Instead, interested readers are recommended to consult such sources as Spratt (1994), Wright (1994), Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995), or Thornbury (1997).

### *Methodological skills*

Of obvious importance to effective educating, teaching and learning, is the range of methodological skills required by teachers in the day-to-day world of schools, such as lesson planning, using a cassette recorder, or correcting learners' mistakes. A central feature of *Teachers in Action* is that teachers and trainers are encouraged to draw up shortlists of their own methodological priorities. What the book then does is to provide tasks and materials, for example, to help participants to analyse their current practice concerning these priorities, to read relevant books and articles, to exchange ideas about their priorities and to experiment in schools and classrooms with them.

### *Decision-making skills*

These skills are defined as follows:

*Teachers are constantly confronted with a range of options and are required to select from among these options the ones they think are best suited to a particular goal. The option the teacher selects is known as a decision (Kindsvatter, Wilen and Ishler, 1988). Teaching involves making a great number of decisions.*

(Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 78)

Richards and Lockhart go on to distinguish between different types of decision: planning decisions (e.g. 'What do I want my learners to learn from this lesson?'), interactive decisions (e.g. 'Are my instructions understood?') and evaluative decisions (e.g. 'Was this lesson successful?') (ibid. 78–89).

By encouraging teachers to involve themselves in decision-making about their own training programme, *Teachers in Action* deliberately seeks to develop teachers' ability to make decisions in their own schools and classrooms, in categories such as those suggested by Richards and Lockhart.

### *Social skills*

Teachers are social beings, and their social skills are of great importance for effective educating, teaching and learning. These social skills include interactive skills, such as communicating and co-operating effectively with learners, as well as with colleagues (e.g. discussing and sharing teaching ideas, problems or concerns), or with parents (e.g. explaining aspects of teaching and learning at parents' meetings), or with other participants in the educational community. The social constructivist principles of *Teachers in Action* (see Section 6.2) explicitly encourage the development of such social skills.

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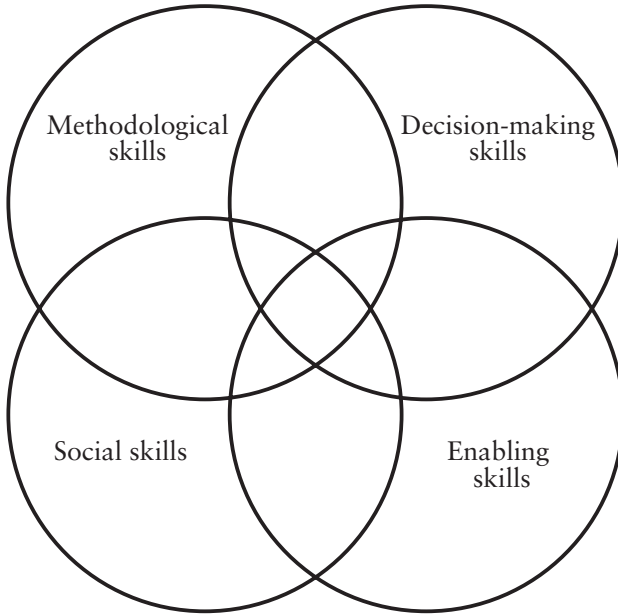


Figure 3 The skills focus of Teachers in Action

### Enabling skills

Finally, I would like to highlight the importance of professional ‘enabling skills’ in *Teachers in Action*. Enabling skills are those which facilitate career-long teacher learning and include: professional reading skills, presentation skills, investigating, and the capacity to theorise, where the last is defined as the ‘ability to acquire, refine, evaluate, and use theories for the improvement of practice’ (Eraut, 1994: 73). Thus, *Teachers in Action* specifically aims to develop teachers’ level of skills in four of the areas outlined in this section, that is to say, methodological, decision-making, social and enabling skills. See Figure 3.

### TEACHERS’ ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR WORK

Naturally, teachers have attitudes and feelings about their work; by ‘attitude’ I understand a ‘way of thinking that inclines one to feel and behave in certain ways’ (Simons *et al.*, 1993: 239). Language teachers, then, feel or behave in certain ways about the language they teach, for example, or the goals and purposes of education; they are often influenced by social forces, such as the status and value of teaching in their region or country, the levels of pay, or the political structure of the school. Of course, many teachers

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have positive feelings, hopes, desires and dreams, and are keen to improve aspects of their professional practice, and to find out about new teaching ideas. However, experienced trainers know that teachers may also have many negative feelings, concerns, doubts and worries about their professional practice. For instance, they may have little time for catching up on professional reading, feeling guilty as a result. They may worry about the thorny issue of mixed ability classes, or their learners' motivation. Language teachers may sometimes have low self-esteem, and can be very self-critical about their own command of the language they teach.

*Teachers in Action*, therefore, deliberately seeks to help teachers to reflect<sup>2</sup> on and talk about such attitudes and feelings, both positive and negative. This not only enables them to obtain a balanced view of their professional strengths and weaknesses, but also encourages them to take action and identify opportunities to change aspects of their work. In the long term such an approach also helps to enhance teachers' self-esteem and develop their confidence in their own knowledge and skills.

## EDUCATION

One question related to primary and secondary teachers' professional practice which is significant in the present discussion is 'What is education?', as there are parallels between the answer to the question and the underlying principles of *Teachers in Action* itself.

A determining characteristic of primary and secondary school teachers' practice is their involvement in the general education of their learners, a goal greater in scope than their specific responsibilities as language teachers. But how to define the purpose of education? Fullan (1993) records that two student teachers view the issue as follows:

*I hope my contribution to teaching, along with other good teachers' contributions, will help result in a better society for our future.... (10)*

*I've always thought that if I could go into a classroom and make a difference in one kid's life ... then that's what I am here for. (11)*

In addition to the rather idealistic purposes defined by these students, my own understanding of the term 'education' emphasises the following:

- developing the whole learner (the learner's knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc.)

<sup>2</sup>By 'reflect' I understand systematic, explicit and critical thinking about professional matters of importance to teachers. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between reflection and teacher development, see Roberts (1998: 47–60). See also aim 3 on p. 10 for an example of how reflecting in the above sense can be applied to teacher education and development.



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- applying general and specific educational aims, as expressed in a curriculum, across the whole school;
- preparing learners for life-long learning

The tasks and materials in *Teachers in Action* reflect these priorities, in relation to both teacher education and development and the education of school-aged children.

## CHANGE AND TEACHER LEARNING

In our daily lives we are surrounded by the shifting tides of change. Change is natural, varied and complex, simply a part of the way we live. For instance, there is political change when a new government is elected; technological change when a new computer software product is launched onto the market; environmental change when a forest fire pollutes the air with its smoke; and personal change when an individual begins a new job.

The field of education – the focus of this book – is no exception as regards change. Indeed, it is particularly susceptible to change, change of a constant nature. For example, change occurs when new curriculum plans are implemented by a ministry, granting schools more autonomy in running their own affairs. Naturally, learners themselves also change, for example, as they grow older and move up through the school, or as they respond to changes in society. For these and other reasons, therefore, teachers also need to change. If not, they risk being left behind, as the world around them moves on. Change for teachers takes place naturally; they may take on a new administrative role at school, use a new coursebook, experiment with a new idea recommended by a colleague, or apply new technology in class, such as video.

Further characteristics of change are that it is usually slow, as well as difficult, in that it always involves more work for teachers. An apparently simple decision to use video in class for the first time, for instance, requires an already busy teacher to find a time and a place to identify, view and select suitable materials before class.

Two important pre-conditions for change are that the educational system in which teachers are working actively promotes change, and that teachers themselves are ready to and want to change. Teachers must recognise a need to change, as it cannot be successfully imposed by others. Genuine change – in a teacher's knowledge, skills and attitudes – is also a long process, in effect, career-long, and not confined to an all too often short training programme.

Finally, just as with the social context of educating, teaching and learning, the contexts in which teacher education programmes take place are complex and unique, consisting of a variety of factors, including: Who is paying for the programme? Who is teaching on the programme? What

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resources are available? How is the programme structured? What incentives are there for the teachers to participate?

A training programme or training materials that work successfully in one context will not necessarily do so in others (see Section 6.3, for example, for two case studies of ineffective in-service training programmes). For this reason, the materials in *Teachers in Action*, whose aim is to deliberately help to facilitate change, need to be flexible to cater for differing contexts and needs, as well as to take into account the views outlined above with regard to the nature of change and teacher learning.

### **Specific aims of *Teachers in Action***

The following specific aims of this book state explicitly how it sets out to help trainers or teachers to develop or change:

- 1 *to improve the effectiveness of teachers' professional practice as educators and language teachers by developing their existing professional skills and developing new ones*

Of course, teacher education and development can hardly be said to be effective unless it helps teachers to do their work as educators and teachers better, by developing their professional skills (methodological skills, for example). Teachers come to a training programme with certain strengths and weaknesses in these areas, so a programme can develop or fine-tune existing skills, such as correcting learners' spoken language, or develop totally new ones, such as applying new technologies.

- 2 *to help teachers to make more informed, principled professional decisions in the future*

Teachers are required to be able to make the best professional decisions in their day-to-day lives, but in a changing world we do not know what kind of decisions they will need to make in the future. If teachers are well informed about the latest developments in their professional field, if they have reflected critically and systematically about their practice and have been involved in making their own professional decisions, they will be better equipped to cope with new and different problems that arise in the future.

- 3 *to enable teachers to reflect on, discuss and evaluate their current professional practice, and to help them to articulate and develop their personal theories of education, teaching and learning*

Educating, teaching and learning is a complex process. Each teacher comes to a training programme with different knowledge and concerns, and works in different circumstances. This complexity points to the need for teachers to understand better what happens in classrooms, or schools,