1   Who are the students?

1.1 Introduction

The students we work with are the real reason for the whole
learning/teaching encounter. So the most important thing we can do
before, during and after classes is, in my view, to listen to students, watch
them and read their work. This will help us to get to know them as
individuals and thus will give us invaluable information when choosing
topics and types of material including coursebooks, and when selecting
activities and shaping lessons and courses. We can also involve students
in these decisions. Even if our hands are tied in many matters because,
for example, we have to stick to a syllabus or teach a certain coursebook,
knowing as much as possible about our students will still help us decide
on error correction, testing and homework and respond to them as
individuals and as a group. It's perhaps the most natural sequence of all
in teaching: finding out about the students and then taking account of
this information in our work.

In this chapter I'll look at the things you can find out about learners,
who you can find out from, how and when, and what you might use
your understanding for.

1.2 Who can you find out from?

If you have been asked to take on a new class or one-to-one student, you
can get information from the sending institution (if the students are com-
ing in from somewhere else), past and present teachers, other 'stake-
holders' (see below), and the students themselves. Let's look at the
institutional level first.

The institution

Students from a different institution

Sometimes students come to our institutions from a different company,
school or country from our own.

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1.2 Who can you find out from?

If the arrangements between your own institution and the sending institution are long term, what procedures are already in place for receiving, testing and teaching?

If a government or company is sending students to you for the first time, there will usually be some anxiety on both sides about getting procedures sorted out. It's vital that the teacher notes any kinks in a programme and makes adjustments fast.

If the relationship between the institutions is relatively new or you are new to the relationship, you will want to know:

- the nature of the sending institution
- its aims for the students
- what demands are made by the institution on the students before, during and after sending them
- whether the students are tested before they come
- whether a representative of the sending institution will be coming too and, if so, what relationship they have to the students. For example, whether they will be expecting to visit classes, or help with discipline while you are teaching.

Students from inside or outside your own institution

The sorts of things we could do well to know at the organisational level, whether students come from inside or outside our institution, are:

- whether the course is described or advertised anywhere and, if so, how
- whether any reports exist on past courses and whether any examples of past student work are available
- who is paying for the students to attend and whether attendance is voluntary or compulsory
- how the students are selected
- the length and frequency of the course, the mode of contact and the prescribed syllabus and materials, since these will affect the students
- why YOU were asked to take the course rather than another teacher. If you are told you were chosen because you were the only teacher who has experience of a particular exam or the target language, this will have a different effect on your work from being told, for example, that 'they want someone very creative'.

Although we might imagine that this kind of essential information would be provided for us, it's not always the case! Sometimes institutions feel these issues are so fundamental that everybody must know them already. Other institutions feel that these are somehow not teachers' but managers' concerns and that teachers should just go ahead and teach the

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course. Sometimes teachers can't be bothered with this level of enquiry or we are too shy to ask.

Since the teacher is the one who works with the students day to day, it's vital that we know whether our students are forced to be in class, are paying for themselves, have a very specific aim in mind, or, for example, have heard very positive or negative things from past generations of students about our institution or ourselves!

The obvious person to ask about these issues is the person who suggests you take the class on. Ask gently, for it may be that the person has no idea of the answers and has not even thought of asking the questions themselves. Once you have explained how useful the information will be for planning and teaching the course though, most people will see the wisdom of the request. It's a good idea to suggest ways of getting the information or even offering to get it yourself, for example, by finding old files or reports, or phoning the sending institution. This will usually prompt some action.

Past and present teachers

If you are taking over or are going to share a class, it makes sense to talk to past or present teachers about the class (or write to them if they are in another institution). If possible, ask questions, and look at any notes on past work, materials used, test results, files on attendance, behaviour, etc. and any language learner portfolios. If at all possible, watch the students while they are being taught by their present teacher. You may or may not like the teacher's style but at least you will know what the students are used to and whether they seem to like it! You're also bound to pick up some ideas from watching someone else teach. If there is a good relationship between you and the previous teacher, then methods of working, materials and grading queries can all be dovetailed smoothly.

Other stakeholders

Other people from whom you can gain interesting information about the class may be parents and teachers of the same class but in different subjects. Try to talk to them where possible.

1.3 What you can know and why

The students

Your main source of information about a class will be the students themselves. You can get to know them by phone, letter, journal, tape, e-mail or face to face. You can get information before or on first meeting that helps you to do some initial planning. Information you get as you go

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1.3 What you can know and why

along will help you to adjust your planning continually. Information gained after classes have left will help you plan for similar future courses. Below is a list of some of the things it is useful to know about students and the reasons why you might want to know.

What	Why
• The number of students	So you can choose a room, plan the seating and materials and know whether one-to-one, pairwork or group work will be possible. Very large (50+) and very small (1–3) classes necessitate even more careful activity planning than usual if you are not used to these numbers.
• Names	So you can get them right!
• Sex ratio	So you know whether teacher and students match, and what the balance will be in your pair and group work.
• Age range	So you can allow for different energy levels, concentration spans and choices of topics. The amount of life experience students have to invest in particular themes such as 'work' or 'pop music' will make a huge difference to how long an activity will last.
• Mother tongue	So you can work out what to do if one or two students are without a mother tongue friend. So you can figure out how to establish an English-speaking community and predict what common strengths and weaknesses in the target language there are there likely to be.
• Nationality	So you can understand more about the politics, cultural conventions, prejudices and expectations of the students. Are there any possible 'enemy' nationalities in the group? Will this affect your seating plan? Are there cultural differences between students in, for example, the time of day they like to study, or the amount of background noise they can study with?
• What other languages do they speak?	So you can know how used to language learning they are, where English comes in individual students' and the school's priorities and thus what difficulties you can predict in their workload.

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1 Who are the students?

What	Why
• Target language level	What results are there from any placement tests and outside exams?
• Student perceptions of their own competence	So you can add this information to standard test results and make decisions regarding student placement. A confident student may want to join a challenging class. A less confident student may prefer to go into a class slightly under their own level. If the students are already placed, it's still good to know who might be feeling under- or over-confident, and who you'll need to support or stretch.
• Profession and/or interests	So you can judge what content will support or expand their interests. What is each student an expert in and thus what can they teach others?
• Books and materials already used	So you can avoid duplication.
• Learners' target situation	So you can make decisions about the topics and skills you work on. Do the students need their English for jobs in, e.g. air traffic control or some other specialised use? Are they learning a little at primary level so as to get a head start at secondary level?
• Educational background	So you can judge what basic reading and writing skills they have in their own language. How cognitive and academic are they?
• Other commitments during the course	So you can judge how much time and energy they will be able to devote to classes and homework, how stressed or relaxed they will be and thus what workload and pace they can take.
• View of the course	So you can gauge how realistic their perceptions are and how well you can match their expectations.

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Things that take a little longer to find out

What	*Why*
• Group dynamic and personality	So you can predict what attendance will be like and consider what to do about it if it's bad as well as considering who needs to sit next to or apart from whom. Are they often quiet, lively or motivated?
• What learner styles seem to be represented in the group? (You may take one of the frameworks available in the literature here, e.g. 'dominant sensory channel' (learning best by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, moving), or 'type of intelligence' (musical, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, spatial, naturalist, religious, etc.) or others such as self-concept, students' feelings about being in control of their own learning, or the difference in factors to which students attribute their successes and failures in learning (see Williams and Burden 1997 Ch. 5.3).	So you can choose methods and materials, and consider if your learners' ways of working fit your style and, if not, what compromises will need to be made.
• How learners perceive or mentally organise the language	So you can decide how to move students' understanding on.

These are some of the things it can be helpful to know. Some ideas
follow on ways of getting the information from the students.

1 Who are the students?

1.4 How to get information before meeting the class

A Letter writing

Depending on the students' language level, age and the resources available, pre-meeting can happen by different means.

• A letter can be sent from you to the new class, addressed to individuals in the group or, if their English is not very proficient, to them care of their teacher, in their mother tongue if necessary. In the letter you can tell them a little about yourself. You can also ask them to write to you telling you a little about themselves.

  If you have liaised with their teacher then she can help them to write individual or group responses to your letter. Alternatively, at higher levels and ages, they can reply on their own or with just a little bit of help. Of course some students won't answer the letter. They may forget, be too busy or shy or may not have the language. Others may give inaccurate information. For example, I have received letters from Norwegian or Swedish students who describe themselves as 'elementary' at English. From the naturalness of their letters, I find them near native in proficiency! In my experience, with pre-meeting letter writing, at least half of the students in their teens and above will answer. So you will gain a useful impression of the class you are about to teach. When you actually meet the class, you can start off by referring to the previous contact. It will make things friendly right from the start.

• If you feel that a letter is too personal for you, a questionnaire can be sent instead (see Scharle and Szabo 2000). If you have a good relationship with the class's present teacher, she may be able to coordinate more than just letters and questionnaires and get the class to send things such as photos or local information.

1.5 How to get information on first meeting

First lesson sequences

Some teachers hate first classes with a new group. Others really enjoy it. Many have a fairly routinised set of 'first lesson chunks' that they can use again and again with different groups. Such sequences mean that first lessons can be enjoyable and informative and therefore less stressful for both teacher and students. Picking up the odd new activity for an

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otherwise well-established 'first lesson' repertoire ensures that an experienced teacher keeps interested.

The way different teachers put a first lesson sequence together will differ. I prefer to start with names and a little personal information and to build rapport in this way before moving on to serious language work. A colleague of mine likes to get going on language work first using the sequence '*How much can they understand?*' (see page 32), before doing work on names in the middle of the first class, and then giving information on the course and eliciting students' hopes for the class. Of course if you have gained information from letters and questionnaires or from watching the class before the first lesson, or if the class members know each other very well already, you will need to spend much less time on 'getting to know you' activities. Similarly if you know the new class level, perhaps from the results of a test you really trust, you can happily work with texts and tapes in the first class. Otherwise, it may be as well to work either with a selection of short texts at different levels or to plan mostly speaking and listening work with a little writing. Even if you are very skilled at thinking up reading tasks on the spot, when you find out that the level is different from what you expected, using one long text that is 'frozen' in level can be a tricky way for a teacher to start. It can also be a bit of a jolt to student confidence to meet a very difficult text or tape on the very first day, so you want to avoid getting the level wrong if possible.

Name learning

There are scores of activities in coursebooks and teachers' resource books encouraging teachers and students to learn each other's names. This is because, whether you learn first names or family names, you accord a real identity to each human being in the room, you can call on them individually and as a result you can teach individuals rather than just the group. If you are not too good at remembering names and have large classes, here are some techniques to help you.

A Labels

Ask students to make a little stand-up sign and to write their names in large dark letters. They add a little drawing connected to themselves as a mnemonic, for example, a pair of glasses or some tennis balls (see page 24). Take the signs in at the end of the first class and put a rubber band around them. Next time, using the students' mnemonics to help you, see if you can hand the labels back to the right people.

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STUDENT NAME CARD FOR 'LABELS'

A Register mnemonics

Using the class register, call out names one by one. Ask each student to say 'Yes!' and to do something easy in English, for example, say two words they can remember or introduce their best friend. While each student is doing this, note down a way of remembering that student. Use any mnemonic you can think of including hair length, posture, colour of clothes or wordplay on their names (for instance, if you have a student with the name Regina, imagine her with a queen's crown on her head). Make a note of these mnemonics on a piece of paper next to the name of the student. Don't forget to cover these notes up immediately, as a student glancing at your notes might see the helpful but potentially embarrassing mnemonics you have for them!

A Settled places

If you have a large class with fixed seats and students who don't change places much, and you have no time for the mnemonics activity above, ask students to call out their names. Mark these on a seating plan as they do this so that you have a map of who sits where. Then as students do note-worthy things throughout subsequent lessons, mark these next to their name. It may take longer this way and you may not remember the quieter students for a long time but in the end you should have a mnemonic by most people's names.

A Testing yourself

While the students are writing or engaged in group tasks, I spend long spells in the first few lessons with a new class trying to commit their names to memory. I memorise them by rote learning from left to right, from right to left, row by row. I test myself on all the students who have the same name, and all the ones that start with 'S' or 'B'. I continue this self-testing after class by taking a piece of paper and drawing two horizontal lines across it so that I have three sections on the paper. In the top section I write the names of the students that come to mind easily. When I start to slow down and search mentally for names, I move down to the middle section and start recording names there. After a while, I get stuck. I'll know there

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are, say, 30 students in the class and I've only got 25 names recorded. So then I go to the register to see who I have forgotten. This will give me names of people whose faces or personalities I can't recall at all. These are the people I make a special effort to call on and remember in class next time. I repeat the exercise over the next few weeks until I have all the students well in mind.

(I learnt this from Mario Rinvolucri.)

Building a sense of community

You need to get the individual students in your classes working together as a cooperative unit. Here are some ideas to help you do this.

A Drawing yourself

1 Showing by quick lines on the board that you are no artist and that the drawing part of the exercise is the least important part, do a quick sketch of yourself, just head and shoulders.
2 Next, start labelling easy bits of yourself. For example, draw a line from the part of the picture showing your hair and write the word 'Hair' by it. Sign the picture as if you were an artist, using a flashy signature across one corner.
3 Now give out pieces of paper and ask students to sketch themselves, head and shoulders. Call it a 'vocabulary' exercise as this will take the students' attention off the potentially embarrassing fact that they are required to make a quick drawing of themselves. At higher levels encourage labelling of more difficult parts of the face such as eyebrow or freckle and ask for adjectives as well as nouns, so students write 'Oval face' and 'Pale complexion' rather than just 'face' and 'complexion'.
4 Provide any vocabulary that individual students are curious about. In a smallish class (up to 30), you can call yourself the vocabulary waiter and ask students to call you over when they want to order a word. In a large class (50+), store the requests for extra vocabulary and either teach them to the whole class or suggest that they look the words up for homework. They can bring the words they couldn't find to the next class.

Variation
A variation on this exercise involves students sitting in pairs drawing each other, and then interviewing their partners and writing sentences about their partners under their picture. Done either way, the students will peep at each other's drawings. There'll be plenty of fun and laughter and this

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