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Teaching and Assessing Skills in  
**English as a  
Second Language**

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# 1 Introduction



## **Purpose and contents**

It is hoped that this book will prove useful to teachers throughout the world who are involved in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at IGCSE and similar levels, and who need up-to-date input on some of the current issues in teaching and assessing language skills. While many teachers will be preparing students for examinations, this book does not focus purely on examination skills, but will hopefully provide teachers with a broad overview of ways in which they can assist students in the classroom through language skills development, as well as focusing on grammar and vocabulary.

When giving examples, I have endeavoured wherever possible to draw on my own classroom experiences as a teacher and teacher trainer, but at the same time I have not attempted to be dogmatic about the teaching of English. I am a firm believer that there is no best way to teach – what is effective and suitable for one teacher in one situation may frequently be ineffective and unsuitable for another teacher in a different teaching situation. However, there are common areas of quality teaching practice which we all need to strive for, and which are discussed in various parts of this book.

In many ways I am in a somewhat privileged teaching position because I only have to deal with relatively small groups of students, who are, for the most part, fairly motivated to learn. I appreciate that there are other teachers who daily have to deal with large groups, and others still who may be dealing with students who lack any real motivation. Some teachers will be preparing students for external examinations, while others may not; some will teach their students for as few as two or three hours each week, while in some cases they may have as many as ten or more contact hours. The variations in teaching and learning situations are endless, and thus a book of this type cannot realistically advocate one particular approach.

However, what this book does attempt to do is to provide teachers with an understanding of the importance of the role of skills in teaching English. Increasingly nowadays we see curriculum and syllabus development making steps towards a skills-focused design. In teacher training, initial courses as well as INSET and diploma courses are highlighting more and more the importance of language skills and task-based learning.

In Chapter 2, the role of language skills in ESL is discussed, with emphasis on sub-skills and their importance for the student. Furthermore, the reasons why teachers need not teach grammar and vocabulary explicitly are considered. Chapter 3 looks at some key issues in teaching and learning ESL: communicative language teaching, student interaction in the classroom, a task-based approach to teaching and learning, and the structural approach to language teaching. Chapter 4 focuses on the ESL curriculum, in particular on how teachers can make their curricula more student-centred. There is also a section on lesson planning in this chapter. Chapter 5 discusses the language skills in ESL, while Chapter 6 is concerned with the teaching and development of these skills, dealing with both receptive and productive language skills in detail. In Chapter 7, how language skills (particularly writing) are assessed is discussed in detail.

### **What is ESL? Is it different from EFL?**

‘English as a Second Language’ is the term used to refer to the role of English in those countries where people generally use their native language (L1) at home and with their friends and family, but may use English (L2) at school or work. Additionally, ESL is the term given to the role of English in countries where it is used widely, for example in business and government, but where it is not the first language of the indigenous population. In Britain, ESL is distinguished from EFL (English as a foreign language), the latter being used for the role of English in countries where it is taught as a school subject, but is not used as the language of instruction in education nor in business and government. In the USA, the term EFL is not normally used, with ESL serving for all the above situations.

#### **Teacher activity 1.1**

Describe your local teaching situation. Which term, EFL or ESL, would you use to describe it? Why? What do you regard as the key differences between the two?

## **The importance of English in a global context**

Whether we choose to use ESL or EFL, there is no doubt that English is a world language, with more than 60 countries where 'English is now the dominant or official language' (Crystal 1999: 106). The importance of English throughout the world in education, business, government and social situations continues to grow, despite the understandable desire of people to preserve their own 'native' languages. The growth in the number of people using English as either a first or second language continues to provide the language with a wealth of varieties, dialects and accents, none of which can be said to be 'the standard'. As David Crystal points out, 'a totally uniform, regionally neutral, and unarguably prestigious variety [of English] does not yet exist worldwide' (ibid.: 111). Each and every country which uses English has its own particular identity and culture, and while to some extent it can be said that British English, American English and Australian English tend to dominate, 'we are a long way from uniformity' (ibid.: 111).

Students who are preparing for examinations in English at a fairly high level of language proficiency (for example, IGCSE) need to have had exposure to a wide range of material, including personal, factual and advertising texts, as well as other genres. These texts should be selected not only for their content, but also for their international perspective, and should strive to be 'culturally fair though it is recognised that they cannot be, nor is it intended that they should be, culturally free' (UCLES 1997: 1). Teachers need to imitate the stand taken by examination boards when choosing texts for teaching purposes, and ensure a rich spectrum of global input. The syllabus for the UCLES IGCSE ESL 2003 examination states that the rationale for 'English as a Second Language is based on the widespread use of English as the medium of instruction and as the language of commerce or the environment. The subject matter of the examination material will reflect this international perspective' (CIE 2001: 1). It is important to point out, however, that students may sometimes face texts (whether written or spoken) which they feel uncomfortable with because of a lack of familiarity with the subject matter.