

# Introduction

The first edition of this book, entitled *A Course in Language Teaching*, was published in 1996, and updated to *A Course in English Language Teaching* in the 2012 second edition. This third edition includes much of the content of the previous one, but has been extensively rewritten and updated, taking into account recent research and thinking in the field and developments in digital technology, as well as changes in my own thinking.

It retains, however, the same basic rationale underlying the first two editions: that good teaching is that which results in significant learning outcomes. A good teacher is not necessarily someone who is charismatic, or memorable, or loved, or who uses the latest teaching methods. A good teacher is defined first and foremost by results: first, how well their students learn the subject being taught, and second, how motivated they are to learn and continue learning.

The main criterion for my choice of methods or procedures recommended in this book, therefore, is how likely they are, as far as I can judge, to lead to good language learning outcomes and motivation, rather than whether they accord with a particular currently fashionable approach or method.

The book is appropriate for the needs of students in a teacher-preparation course, or for novice teachers in their first year(s) of teaching. It can be used, therefore, as the basis for a trainer-led course, or as a self-study text. Its goal is to equip the beginner teacher with the knowledge and skills needed to perform competently in the classroom: to plan and run interesting and learning-rich lessons, use texts and tasks effectively, and more.

Each chapter is framed by introductory and concluding summaries of content. The introductory **Overview** gives brief descriptions of the topic(s) treated in each section of the chapter; the concluding **Review: Check yourself** consists of a list of questions which may be used to help recall of the content of the chapter, and/or to test understanding. Following the review there are annotated suggestions for **Further reading**, and a **References** list, which provides details of publications mentioned in the course of the chapter.

## Chapter content

The main sections within each chapter provide:

- **Evidence-based information** on the theory and practice of English language teaching;
- **Practical guidelines** on how to teach the different aspects of the language in a variety of contexts;
- **Samples of classroom procedures** or teaching strategies;
- **'Pause for thought'**: Reflection and discussion tasks with following **commentary**.

Introduction

## Organization of content

The chapters may be studied in the order in which they are laid out in the book, or in a different order, or selectively, according to the preferences of the user.

### 1 The English language and how it may be taught/learned

1 Teaching English today

### 2 Basic processes and components used in English language teaching

2 The lesson; 3 Classroom interaction; 4 Tasks; 5 Texts

### 3 Language components and skills

6 Teaching vocabulary; 7 Teaching grammar; 8 Teaching listening;  
9 Teaching speaking; 10 Teaching reading; 11 Teaching writing

### 4 Response to learner performance

12 Feedback and error correction; 13 Assessment and testing

### 5 Resources for organization of course content

14 The syllabus; 15 Teaching/learning materials; 16 Teaching content

### 6 Specific pedagogical issues

17 Classroom discipline; 18 Digital technology and online teaching; 19 Learner differences 1: age; 20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion

### 7 Continuing professional development

21 Teacher development

### 8 Endmatter

A Glossary of terminology and abbreviations used in the book

A cumulative list of References

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## 1

# Teaching English today

## Overview

- 1.1 **EPIC: English for purposes of international communication.** The variety of English usually taught: that which is likely to be understood and used internationally, including different modes, registers and domains of use; English for specific purposes.
- 1.2 **EPIC: Some implications for teaching.** The teacher's knowledge of English; language and culture; the place of the first language (L1) in the teaching/learning process.
- 1.3 **Second language acquisition (SLA) and English-teaching approaches and methods.** A brief overview of SLA theories; twentieth-century approaches and methods; the communicative approach and associated methods.
- 1.4 **Standards of proficiency.** The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors of levels of language proficiency.
- 1.5 **Online English teaching.** A brief discussion of the rapid increase in online teaching resulting largely from the ban on face-to-face teaching during the COVID pandemic.

## 1.1 EPIC: English for purposes of international communication

Perhaps the most dramatic development that has taken place in the field of English language teaching in my lifetime has been the shift in its primary function: from being mainly the language of nations such as the UK or USA or an intra-national means of communication in countries that were formerly colonies of English-speaking countries, such as India or the Philippines, to being mainly a means of international communication. English today is primarily used worldwide in a variety of spheres of activity: professional or business interactions, study and research, travel and tourism, entertainment, personal relationships, and more. The number of speakers of English whose first language (L1) is another language already vastly exceeds that of those whose L1 is English, and the gap will only widen in the foreseeable future. For most of its learners, English is therefore no longer a foreign language (i.e., one that is owned by a particular 'other' nation or community) but first and foremost an international language: one that has no particular national owner. This development has brought with it a number of changes in the principles and practice of English language teaching.

### Pause for thought

How many of the people you have spoken or written to in English recently spoke the language as their L1, and how many were speakers of other languages, using English as a means of communication?

### Comment

The answer to this will depend of course on where you are living as you read this; but unless you live in an English-speaking country, it is likely that most people you interact with in English are bi- or multilingual speakers using it as an additional language.

There are several implications of this development.

### The variety of English to be taught

A question which many teachers used to ask was: ‘Which English should I teach: British or American?’ This is no longer a relevant question, unless the students are learning the language specifically in order to study, work or live within one of the (American or British) English-speaking communities. In the vast majority of situations, this is not so: English is being taught instead for purposes of international communication.

An additional complication is the existence of multiple Englishes in the world. Some varieties, such as British or American English, are the first languages of English-speaking communities; in other cases, English is the official language (or one of the official languages) of a multilingual country such as India; elsewhere it may be learned, but has no official status (as in mainland European countries or Latin America). These are the three contexts famously defined by Kachru as the ‘three circles’ of world Englishes (Kachru, 1985). In any of these, the language may develop its own specific forms or meanings: in pronunciation (for example, the pronunciation of the word *my* as /ma:/ in Black English); in vocabulary (the words *lakh* and *crore* in Indian English); or in grammar (the use of *ain’t* for *isn’t*, *aren’t* and *am not* in some American and British spoken varieties).

Some would suggest that we need, therefore, to teach a flexible model of the language, allowing for different varieties. This is not, however, a very practical option. Teaching different varieties of pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary or grammar is, first of all, very time-consuming. Second, many of these are not very useful: it is not likely that students will in fact encounter them, still less need to use them.

We cannot avoid the conclusion that there has to be a standard basic variety of English variously termed *English as a global language*, *English as an international language* (EIL) and *English as a lingua franca*, whose forms, meaning and uses can be understood and produced by speakers of English engaged in communication worldwide for purposes such as those listed above (McArthur, 2006). I shall refer to this variety as *EPIC*: English for purposes of international communication. EPIC forms and usages, I would suggest, need to be related to as standard by teachers and learners. This is not because they are those used by speakers of English as their L1, but because they are the ones used by the vast majority of

English speakers who employ the language for various purposes in international contexts, regardless of what their first language is, or was.

This does not mean, of course, that we should ban from the classroom variant forms such as *ain't*: but it does mean that such forms do not need to be part of the basic language features we teach our students to use, but rather only taught if we encounter them incidentally in a text or task. In such cases, we need to make it clear to students that these are features that they may come across, but should not normally be part of their own speech or writing.

Our choice of language features to teach will be based on the criterion: is this likely to be clearly understood and seen as acceptable worldwide? For example, it is better to teach *two weeks* than *fortnight*, as many English speakers would not understand *fortnight*. It is useful to encourage, or at least allow, students to pronounce the /r/ in words like *girl*, *teacher*, as this pronunciation is probably more widely used, easier to understand and corresponds more closely with the written form. And it is likely to be more useful to teach the spelling *organize*<sup>1</sup> than *organise* – again for reasons of clarity, frequency and general acceptability.

### Pause for thought

Of the following pairs of items, which do you think we should prioritize in teaching for EPIC (i.e., are more likely to be understood and used by English speakers worldwide)?

*fall* or *autumn*

*truck* or *lorry*

*do you have* or *have you got*

*program* or *programme*

*elevator* or *lift*

### Comment

Many would respond: 'Can't we teach both?' Yes, of course you can, and more advanced learners will eventually learn both, as they encounter more varied types of input. But it's useful to know which is more likely to be familiar to an international audience; and if you are teaching a class of beginners or elementary learners (A1–A2), it's best to teach the more widely used form first. Why overload them with unnecessary synonyms? You can always add the other later. My choices would be: *autumn* (*fall* is only used in informal American English, and is potentially ambiguous; *autumn* is used worldwide); *truck* (far more used worldwide than the British English word *lorry*); *do you have* (again, more widely used; *have you got* is mainly confined to British English, and even there only in informal interaction; and it can't readily be used in the future or past); *program* (more common worldwide, and why use a longer spelling when a shorter will do?); *elevator* (understood worldwide, whereas

<sup>1</sup>It is interesting that the suffix *-ize* in words like *organize*, *recognize*, though often thought of as a feature of American English, has always been the default spelling in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

*lift* is confined to British English, and possibly ambiguous). A useful and easy-to-use online tool that will help you decide which of two or more items is most common is the *Google NGram Viewer* (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>), based on a corpus of published books. If you enter items with a comma between them, you will be shown the relative frequencies over time of the two items.

### Different language modes, registers and domains

We need to be aware that even within EPIC, there are different kinds of language use. The most obvious is the *mode*: speech or writing. In speech, students need to learn not only the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but also how these are expressed through pronunciation, stress, intonation and so on. In writing, they need to know how to form the letters, spell, punctuate and more.

Then there are differences between formality levels, or *registers*, which only partially overlap with the distinctions between speech and writing. Informal language is likely to be used in conversations or texting; formal language in essay-writing or academic lectures. A parallel distinction between the kind of language knowledge needed for each has been defined by Cummins (2008) as BICS and CALP: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills, as contrasted with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Finally, there are the different kinds of language that are likely to be used depending on the subject matter, or domain, that is the subject of the discourse. This, of course, can vary from lesson to lesson, or even within lessons; but increasingly we find entire courses that are dedicated to teaching a particular subject, academic field, or profession, as discussed in the following section.

### English for Specific Purposes

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of courses that teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Perhaps the two types of ESP most in demand are Business English (BE), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

More and more businesses are going international, opening branches in different countries or performing transactions with companies abroad, and requiring easy and fluent communication between branches and between individual employees. Some businesses run their own English courses; others send employees to language schools that specialize in this area. The number of coursebooks specifically targeting BE, or 'English in the workplace', is huge and increasing daily.

EAP is at least equally in demand: a large number of students every year travel abroad to study or register for international online courses. Even if the institutions of higher education that they attend are not located in an English-speaking country, many teach specific courses, or even complete programmes, in English, and therefore demand a knowledge of that language to at least B2 level. EAP courses may be divided into two types: those that teach general academic English; and those that teach specific discipline-oriented English (mainly vocabulary). Some important work has been done in drawing up lists of vocabulary items that could be the basis of a general academic lexical syllabus

(Coxhead, 2000; Gardner and Davies, 2014; Deng et al., 2017). It can be argued that the vocabulary and grammar necessary to understand or produce academic papers or lectures in general academic English is very similar in practice to advanced general English (B2–C1) needed for a variety of non-academic contexts. This, however, is not true of specific discipline-oriented English; and it is in this area that we have seen a rapid expansion in courses and publication of materials.

Other types of non-academic ESP courses include those oriented towards particular professions or occupations: English for tourism, for example, or English for nursing. But in all these areas, learners need first to raise their general proficiency in English to at least a B1 level before starting to learn the domain-specific vocabulary.

## 1.2 EPIC: some implications for teaching

### The teacher's knowledge of English

The majority of English teachers today have as their L1 a language other than English. They learned English, like their students, as an additional language. The English spoken by such teachers, if they are (as they should be!) fully competent and fluent in the language, is likely to be a better model of international English for their students than any variety of English perceived as 'native'. In addition, they have been through the same learning process as their students, and therefore have insights into the kinds of problems that are likely to come up and how to deal with them. Finally, they can function as role models: 'If I can do it, so can you!'

This is not to say that L1 English-speaker teachers cannot be effective teachers. Many teach successfully in schools in non-English speaking countries of the world: this is, indeed, my own professional background and that of many of my colleagues. L1 English speakers are particularly in demand, obviously, in situations where the language is taught as a preparation for study or work in an English-speaking country.

The bottom line is that in the majority of teaching situations, it doesn't matter very much what language the teachers originally spoke as their L1. What matters is that they have a high-level mastery of English – usually EPIC – and know how to teach it.

### Language and culture

In most English-teaching contexts, it is inappropriate to talk about a 'target' culture, meaning one belonging to a nation of L1 English speakers. Learners of EPIC need to become aware of a diverse, international set of cultural customs, social conventions, literature, art forms and so on, rather than those of a single community. It is, therefore, important these days to foster multicultural awareness on the part of our students. We cannot, obviously, teach them all the cultures of the world. However, we can expose them to samples through our materials, make them sensitive to the kinds of cultural differences that they may come across, raise awareness of characteristics of their own home culture that other people may find strange or difficult to cope with, and foster the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to different cultural conventions: what is known as *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram and Wagner, 2018).

**Pause for thought**

Can you think of an example of how your own culture differs from that of another speech community? Has this difference ever produced difficulties or embarrassments which, with hindsight, you could have avoided if you had known about it?

**Comment**

When I first came to my country, I used to go straight into the 'business of the day' when meeting someone or starting a phone call, like: 'Hi, do you know ...?' I should have started with 'Good morning' or similar courteous preliminaries, and was even reprimanded on one occasion for my 'rudeness'.

**The place of the first language (L1)**

For most learners today English is a tool, like basic arithmetic, literacy or computer skills: an ability they need to master in order to function effectively in the modern world. They do not need to be like L1 English speakers; they need to be bi- or multilingual: what Cook (1999) has called *multicompetent language users*. The L1 remains the learner's primary, and usually dominant, language. What we as teachers are aiming for is to enable our students to function in English side by side with their L1. If we discourage or even ban the L1 from the classroom, we risk implying that it is in some way irrelevant, inferior, or to be marginalized.

In most instructional situations, moreover, the L1 is likely to play a valuable role in the acquisition of English. Translation – at least at word or sentence level – is a useful ability in itself, as well as a facilitator of learning, to be promoted rather than discouraged. Clearly if most of the English lesson is in fact conducted in another language, then the students will not learn very much English; but to ban the L1 completely from the classroom may result in negative implications as to the value of the first language, and neglect of valuable learning opportunities.

**Pause for thought**

Thinking back to your own school lessons in English or another additional language: do you think the teacher used the L1 enough? Not enough? Too much?

**Comment**

I was taught French in school by very traditional methods, with a lot of translation, and most of the lesson was in English: definitely too much. It wasn't until I went to stay with a family in France for a while that I was exposed to an enormous amount of comprehensible input in that language and learned to communicate (relatively) fluently.

### 1.3 Second language acquisition (SLA) and English-teaching approaches and methods

An *approach* can be defined as a principled model of language teaching/learning, based on theories of language and language acquisition. A *method* is a collection of teaching procedures that accord with and apply a particular approach. A wide variety of approaches and methods have been used for language teaching in the last century, often based on research or thinking on second language acquisition.

#### Second language acquisition (SLA) research and theory

The importance of SLA research and theory lies in its contribution to an understanding of how languages are best learned; such insights may in turn contribute to the design of effective language-teaching approaches and methods.

Early SLA work focused mainly on the acquisition of grammar. Behaviourists believed that language is a set of habits, and that grammatical patterns are therefore acquired by a process of habit-formation. According to the linguist Noam Chomsky (1969), on the other hand, humans have an inbuilt language acquisition device which enables them to acquire basic awareness of the grammatical structures of a language, from which they can invent an infinite number of actual sentences. Both behaviourist and Chomskian theories were assumed to apply both to first and second language learning.

With hindsight, neither of the above viewpoints have been very influential in SLA theory. Behaviourism has been largely discredited as being too simplistic, and unable to account for language creativity, and the Chomskian language acquisition device is too vague to provide a useful model of acquisition.

The issue of how the language will best be learned within instructional settings – in a course of lessons rather than through total immersion in a naturalistic immigrant situation – has in recent years focused on a key controversy relating to *implicit* and *explicit* processes. Implicit processes take place where the language is learned through exposure and use, as we acquired our L1; explicit ones occur when the learner pays conscious attention to the learning of the features and rules of the target language. On the whole, current research is in favour of explicit teaching/learning in the context of instructional settings (e.g., Akakura, 2012), while not, of course, denying the value of the inclusion of implicit processes as well. One example of an explicit teaching/learning model is that based on skill theory, which claims that language is learnt in the same way as other skills like playing a musical instrument or driving a car: features are explained by the teacher (the ‘declarative’ stage), then practised (the ‘proceduralization’ stage) until their use becomes automatized (DeKeyser, 2007).

While not necessarily accepting a linear skill-theory based process, other thinkers have also included conscious cognitive processes in theories of SLA: Richard Schmidt (1990), for example, claims that there is no such thing as ‘subliminal’ absorption of language features, and that these must be consciously noticed in order for learning to take place. All this is not to deny that implicit processes – learning incidentally through reading and listening – do not have an important role in language learning within instructional settings, particularly with younger learners. For an overview of these and other SLA issues, see Ellis (2021).

## Language-teaching approaches and methods in the twentieth century

The dominant approach for much of the twentieth century (and, indeed, before it) was that language is composed of grammar, vocabulary, phonology and orthography, and that effective language teaching should aim to enable learners to understand and produce correct combinations of these components. The traditional *grammar translation* method, for example, dominant until the mid-twentieth century, involved a lot of grammar rules, reading and writing exercises, and translation. It is still used today in some places. *Audiolingualism*, popular in the 1950s to the late 1960s, was based on an approach that saw the language primarily as a set of grammatical patterns, and learning as primarily behavioristic habit-forming: hence teaching should be based on drilling and getting students to automatize grammatical patterns through mimicry and memorization. *The direct method*, introduced in the late nineteenth century, prioritizes the oral skills, and lessons are conducted entirely in the target language; it is in use in Berlitz schools to this day. And there were various other minor 'boutique' methods briefly fashionable in the second half of the twentieth century (for a more detailed summary, see Richards and Rodgers under **Further Reading** below).

### The communicative approach

The methods summarized above, however, have been largely superseded by those based on, or fundamentally influenced by, *the communicative approach*, which has dominated the scene from the 1980s. According to this approach, language is seen essentially as a means of communication, and language learning should therefore be based on the gradual acquisition of language forms and uses through meaningful, communicative activity, in rather the same way as children acquire their first language. Classroom procedures should thus prioritize the understanding and conveying of meanings over the production of correct sentences (Widdowson, 1978). Stephen Krashen's *input hypothesis* (1981) posits that comprehensible input (of either spoken or written language) at a level just beyond the present level of the learner is a necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition to take place. This, however, has been controversial: Swain (2005), for example, claims that there is an essential place for what she calls 'pushed output' in instructed language learning; and as discussed above, there is today general acceptance of the value of explicit language-teaching and -learning processes within instructional settings.

*Task-based instruction*, or *task-based language teaching* (TBLT), is perhaps the most well-known (though not necessarily the most used in practice) of the methods based on the communicative approach, and is widely promoted in the professional literature today (Ellis et al., 2019). In TBLT, learners are required to perform tasks whose goals can only be achieved through communicating or understanding content expressed in English. Such tasks frequently involve interaction between students in pair and group work. Most models of TBLT today include some explicit language teaching components through a procedure called *focus on form*: attention is temporarily drawn to formal aspects of a language feature which has come up in the course of a communicative task or text, or in which students have made errors (Ellis, 2015).