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English teaching today: what do I need to know?

Overview

The sections in this unit are:

- 1.1 **Teaching priorities.** The importance of teaching for both accuracy and fluency; making learners aware of the variety of 'Englishes'; a focus on vocabulary; and the teaching of informal writing skills.
- 1.2 **English as an international language.** The increasing use of English for international communication and some of the implications for English language teaching worldwide.
- 1.3 **Language-acquisition theories and teaching methodologies.** A critical discussion of some of the most important language-teaching methodologies today and their roots in language-acquisition theories.
- 1.4 **Computerized teaching materials.** The increasing use of digital materials and internet-based texts and tasks to supplement coursebooks and other paper materials.
- 1.5 **Motivation.** Factors which motivate, or demotivate, learners in their learning of English, and what the teacher can do to increase learner motivation.

1.1 Teaching priorities

Teaching priorities in English language teaching have varied over the years: fashions are constantly changing. The summary below represents those that seem to me to be well established at the time of writing, and acceptable to most teachers and writers on methodology.

Fluency and accuracy

The balance between fluency and accuracy is a good example of something that has not changed very much, in spite of some temporary fluctuations in fashion. It is important for our students to learn to use English both fluently and correctly so that they can get their message across effectively while using standard grammatical, lexical, phonological and spelling conventions. However, something that has changed is that these conventions are no longer necessarily those of native speakers. They are, rather, those which are used by the majority of fluent, educated speakers of the language in international communication.

There will be situations where we are less fussy about absolute accuracy, because getting a message across is more important; and others (perhaps less frequent) where correctness is the priority. However, in general, we will do the best we can to make sure our students maintain a balance between the two (see, for example, Unit 6: Teaching grammar, and Unit 7: Error correction).

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Task

Recall an occasion when you were reading or listening to English which had obvious mistakes in it. What effect did these mistakes have on you? Which of the items below best describes how you felt?

1. I had no problem at all with reading/listening and understanding. The mistakes didn't make any difference.
2. I felt slightly uncomfortable reading or listening. I would have felt more comfortable if there had been no mistakes.
3. I sometimes had to make an effort to understand.
4. I found it quite difficult to understand.
5. I actually misunderstood.

Inaccurate vocabulary, grammar, spelling and pronunciation very rarely produce misunderstandings. They may, however, interfere with the smoothness of the communication and result in a feeling of slight discomfort for both speaker/writer and listener/reader.

Different styles and Englishes

Since English is today being used for all sorts of purposes worldwide, it is important for our students to know that there is not just one 'English style'. There is, in fact, an enormous number of them. For example, students need to know the differences between informal speech and more formal written discourse; between the kind of text you can acceptably write in emails, or when chatting online, and the kind of text you should write in an academic essay. We therefore need to make sure that our teaching programmes include exposure to a range of styles in order to raise students' awareness of the differences between them. In some cases we may also want to get the students to try producing the different styles themselves.

There is also a large number of different varieties of English (Kirkpatrick, 2007), each associated with a particular local community (e.g. Singlish in Singapore), social group (e.g. teenage English in any native-speaking community) or profession (e.g. legal English).

Task

Make a list of the different kinds of English styles or genres you have heard, read, spoken or written over the last few days. For example: a shopping list, a telephone conversation, a text message (SMS) or a novel. How many different kinds of texts did you find?

Vocabulary

There has been a great deal of research on vocabulary teaching in recent years. A major finding has been the overall importance of vocabulary knowledge,

particularly for reading comprehension. In order to read and understand an unsimplified text in English and guess the words they did not know before, learners probably need to know several thousand word families. Moreover, it appears that acquiring vocabulary simply by reading or listening during a language course will not provide learners with the amount of vocabulary they need. We have to supplement such incidental acquisition with deliberate teaching and review of lexical items (see Unit 5: Teaching vocabulary). This recommendation certainly matches the professional intuition of many experienced teachers, including myself. It contrasts with earlier methodologies which recommended spending most time teaching the grammar, assuming that the vocabulary would take care of itself. It also differs from an extreme communicative approach, according to which it is not necessary to teach vocabulary consciously because learners will acquire it through general communicative exposure to the language (see Section 1.3 below).

Task

What is your own experience of vocabulary learning when you learnt a new language in school? How did your teacher help you acquire vocabulary?

Writing

Writing is often – perhaps mainly – used in language teaching as a vehicle for language practice and testing, rather than for the sake of the writing skill itself. Until comparatively recently, it has been far less useful for communicative purposes than the other three skills of listening, reading or speaking. For this reason communicative writing activities are less common in teaching materials than ones which promote communication through the other three skills. However, the importance of informal writing for communication has increased immensely in the last generation (Crystal, 2006), mainly due to the widespread use of email, online chat, blogging, texting (SMS) and social networking tools such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

This means that we need to invest more effort in helping our students achieve written, as well as reading, fluency (see Unit 11: Teaching writing). They need to master basic spelling, common abbreviations typical of informal texts (e.g. *u* for 'you' and *r* for 'are'), the use of punctuation and so on. Perhaps even more important for written fluency is the promotion of fast typing. This does not mean that we need, as English teachers, to teach students how to type! But it does mean that we need to encourage them to practise doing so. (Note that the ability to type fast in another language does not immediately transfer to English, even if the L1 (mother tongue) uses the Latin alphabet, since fast typing – particularly touch-typing – involves the automatic production of typical letter combinations rather than individual letters.) This does not, of course, mean neglecting the teaching of clear and legible handwriting, which will continue to be a necessary skill for the foreseeable future. But the ability to type fast and accurately is at least as important, and in some cases more so.

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Task

Have a look at your answers to the earlier task on p. 2 where you listed the different styles and genres you have encountered.

Which of those you listed involved your own writing?

How many of these, as far as you know, were being used before 1990?

1.2 English as an international language

Perhaps the most dramatic development that has taken place in the field of English language teaching in the last 50 years has been the shift in its primary function: from being mainly the native language of nations such as the UK or USA, to being mainly a global means of communication. The speakers of English whose L1 is another language already vastly outnumber native English speakers, and their number continues to grow. 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 ethnic group) but first and foremost an international language (one that has no particular national owner) (Rudby & Saraceni, 2006). This development has brought with it a number of changes in the principles and practice of English language teaching.

Task

How many of the people you have spoken to in English recently were in fact native speakers of that language, and how many were native speakers of other languages, using English as a means of communication?

The answer to this will depend of course on where you are living as you read this; but if you are not living in an English-speaking country, it is likely that most people you interact with in English are not native speakers.

Language standards

A question which many teachers in the previous generation had difficulty in answering was which of the major varieties of English to teach: British or American? This is no longer a relevant, or even an interesting, question. The question which needs to be asked is rather: which lexical, grammatical, phonological or orthographical (spelling) forms are most likely to be understood and used worldwide? These are the ones we should usually be teaching. For example, it is more useful to teach *two weeks* than *fortnight*, as *two weeks* is more universally used and understood. It is useful to encourage our students to pronounce the /r/ in words like *girl*, *teacher*, as this pronunciation is easier to understand and more ‘transparent’ for those who know the written form. And it is likely to be more useful to teach the spelling *organize* than *organise* – again for reasons of transparency, clarity and general acceptability. The same applies to choices we may need to make in the area of dialect, conventions of style and so on. The question should not be ‘What does a Brit (or American, or Australian or whatever) say?’ but rather ‘What is likely to be most easily understood and accepted by other English speakers, native and non-native, around the world?’

Task

Can you think of any other vocabulary or grammatical forms which are specific to the variety of English you might use yourself with friends or family or in your local community, but that you would not use if you were communicating in English in a wider context?

The native and non-native English teacher

English teachers who speak the language as an additional rather than as a native language are, as implied above, the majority worldwide. The English spoken by such teachers, if they are (as they should be!) fully competent and fluent in the language, is also likely to be a better model of international English for their students than any ‘native’ variety. In addition, they have been through the same learning process as their students. They have insights into the kinds of problems that are likely to come up and how to deal with them. And they can function as role models: ‘If I can do it, so can you!’

This is not to say that native English-speaker teachers cannot be effective teachers: of course they can. The point is that they are not necessarily superior to their non-native colleagues. Many teach very successfully in schools in non-English-speaking countries of the world (this is my own teaching background and that of many of my native-speaker colleagues). They are particularly in demand in some language schools whose students expect to be taught by ‘native speakers’, and in situations where the language is taught as a preparation for study or work in an English-speaking country.

The place of English literature and the culture of the English-speaking peoples

Methodology books of the twentieth century typically talk of the culture of the English-speaking peoples as the ‘target culture’ and assume that reading texts in course materials should be copied or adapted from ‘authentic’ texts from English-speaking countries. This also has changed. Courses today may include not only texts from English-speaking countries, but also those written in English, or translated into it, from anywhere in the world. And in most teaching contexts, it is inappropriate to talk about a ‘target’ culture, meaning a native-speaker one. Most learners need to become aware of a diverse, international, cosmopolitan set of cultural customs, literature, art forms and so on, rather than those of a single community (see Unit 15: Teaching content, pp. 218–19, 223).

It is, therefore, more important these days to foster multicultural awareness on the part of our students than to teach them particular codes of conduct or literary traditions (Byram, 1997). We cannot, obviously, teach them all the cultures of the world. However, we can expose them to a sample through our materials, make them sensitive to the kinds of differences from their own cultures that they may come across and foster intercultural competence (see Unit 15: Teaching content, pp. 219–20).

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Task

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

The place of the L1

It has been taken for granted in the past that the aim of an English course is to make the learners communicate like native speakers. This is for most learners an inaccessible goal; and these days it is not even an appropriate one. Even if the aim is to communicate with, among others, native speakers, this does not necessarily mean trying to be a ‘native speaker’ oneself. The appropriate model in most cases, as suggested above, is probably the non-native-speaker teacher. For most students today, English is a tool, like basic arithmetic, or literacy, or computer skills: an ability they need to master in order to function effectively in today’s world. The L1 remains the learner’s primary language and the one they identify with. What we as teachers are aiming for is functional English-knowing bilingualism (or, in many cases, multilingualism). There is, therefore, no particular reason to ban the use of the L1 in the classroom. On the contrary, the L1 is likely to play a valuable role in the acquisition of English, and translation – at least at word or sentence level – is a useful ability, to be promoted rather than discouraged.

Task

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?

1.3 Language-acquisition theories and teaching methodologies

Theories of language acquisition

The main ideas on how we acquire second or foreign languages in school can be summarized as follows:

- **Intuitive acquisition.** We learn another language the same way as we learnt our first: intuitive acquisition through lots of exposure to the language in authentic communicative situations (Krashen, 1982).
- **Habit-formation.** Language is a set of habits: we mimic and memorize and drill the patterns of the language until we learn to produce the correct forms automatically (based on an interpretation of Skinner, 1957).
- **Cognitive process.** Language involves the understanding of underlying rules: if we master these rules, we will be able to apply them in different contexts (based on an interpretation of Chomsky, 1957).
- **Skill-learning.** Language is a skill. We learn it in school just as we learn other skills: someone explains rules or words to us, we understand and practise them until we master them and use them fluently and skilfully (Johnson, 1996).

The main contrasting concepts underlying these four theories are *explicit* versus *implicit* teaching and learning. If you think that we learn languages through subconscious acquisition without actually working out rules or translating words, then you prefer an implicit model and would favour the first or second items above. If, however, you think that we need consciously to understand how the language works, then you would favour an explicit model, expressed in the third and fourth.

Probably all of these theories have some truth in them. None on its own can really cover the complexity of the second-language-learning process. They provide, in various combinations, the theoretical basis for the different methodologies summarized below.

Language teaching approaches and methodologies

An approach can be defined as a principled model of language teaching/learning, based on theories of language and language acquisition. A methodology is a collection of teaching procedures that accord with and apply a particular approach.

A wide variety of approaches and methodologies has been used for language teaching in the last century, and many continue to be used today (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). *Grammar-translation*, *audio-lingualism* and '*PPP*' were probably the dominant models of the early and middle twentieth century, and are still widely used. The *communicative approach*, expressed through various methodologies, dominated the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, though most people today would adopt what I have called, for want of a better term, the *post-communicative approach*.

Grammar-translation involves, as its name implies, explanation of grammar rules (by the teacher, in the L1) and translation of texts from and to the target language. It focuses on the written form of the language and more formal registers, and does not include very much oral or communicative work.



The direct method was largely based on a reaction against grammar-translation. It emphasizes oral communication more and bans the use of the L1 in the classroom: everything should be taught through the target language. It is still, to this day, the basic methodology of the Berlitz language schools.

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Audio-lingualism is based on the idea that language is a set of habits and involves a lot of teacher-led drilling, learning by heart and repetition (Rivers, 1980). It is most important to learn the spoken form of the language, and most classroom procedures are speech-based. Like grammar-translation, its main aim is accuracy rather than fluency, and it focuses on grammar rather than vocabulary.

PPP stands for ‘Presentation, Practice, Production’. This is a component of a methodology, or a description of suggested stages in a lesson, rather than a whole methodology. It is important because it is based on a skill-learning theory of language acquisition. Like the previous three items, it emphasizes grammatical accuracy and is very teacher-dominated.

The communicative approach gained increasing support from the late 1970s onwards (Widdowson, 1978). It is based on the assumption that language is (for) communication and that we learn it best through naturalistic acquisition processes (i.e. processes similar to those used when learning a native language). The classroom is more learner-centred, and the conveying of meanings is seen as more important than accuracy. There are a number of methodologies based on this: perhaps the most widely used and written about ones today are task-based instruction and CLIL (content and language integrated learning). According to the first, learners perform communicative tasks such as problem-solving, conveying information to one another or filling in information on a map from instructions. They learn language in the course of these tasks naturally, by understanding and negotiating meanings. CLIL focuses on the use of English for the teaching of other school subjects or specific content (see Unit 15: Teaching content, pp. 220–3). As with task-based instruction, the assumption is that learners will absorb the language best through using it purposefully, and through understanding and creating meaningful texts.



The post-communicative approach maintains the position that the primary function of language is effective communication. Therefore any methodology based on it should include plenty of activities that involve meaningful use of the target language in communicative tasks. But it allows a much larger role for procedures such as explicit teaching of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation

and spelling, including form-focused (but usually meaningful) exercises. It also includes techniques associated with previous methodologies, such as translation and learning dialogues or texts by heart.

In fact very few teachers or textbooks have adopted the recommendations of the communicative approach to the letter and used them as a basis for all their teaching. Explicit language instruction in general, and grammar exercises in particular, have continued to play a major role in language teaching worldwide. The ‘post-communicative approach’ is one which most coursebooks and teachers today are using, and on which this book is based.

Task

Thinking back to your own learning of English or another additional language, do you think the methodology that your teacher used was similar to one or more of the models described above? How effective was it, and in what ways do you now think it could have been improved?

Action task

Observe two lessons in your school. How much of the lesson, more or less, was used for communicative language use? If you are working in a group, compare your results with those of colleagues.

1.4 Computerized teaching materials

The huge development that has taken place recently in the area of teaching materials is, of course, the dramatic increase in the use of computers and other digital resources. The acronym ‘CALL’, or computer-assisted language learning, started to be widely used in the 1990s and early 2000s, and there is already a large number of books and journals devoted to it: see, for example, Dudeney and Hockly, 2007, or the journal *ReCall* (www.eurocall-languages.org/recall/index.html).

However, it is important to remember that many students and teachers still prefer to do most of their learning and teaching through a coursebook. This is partly because books are cheaper, and in some places electronic facilities not easily available. It is also, perhaps mainly, because they can be quickly opened, used and navigated without dependence on technology, electricity or an internet connection. On the other hand, they lack the flexibility, adaptability to the individual, enormous range of informational sources and various interactive options of computer hard- and software. The main issue is, therefore, not *whether* to use computerized materials or not, but *how and where to use them*.

When personal computers and laptops became more widely available, they were at first used mainly for composing or editing texts and for doing self-check exercises. The production of new materials by teachers or of assignments by students could

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now be done more quickly and easily through word processing and presentation software like *Microsoft Word* or *Powerpoint*.

More recently, computerized hardware is being used in classrooms. The data projector enables presentations and teaching materials to be displayed on a screen. And the interactive whiteboard (IWB) combines the functions of data projector and conventional whiteboard, revolutionizing classroom teacher-led lessons. There are constant innovations in software as well. There are, for example, tools that enable you to hear what you are reading, or correct your pronunciation; and text-translation programs are developing fast, though at the time of writing they are still inferior to human translators.

The Internet was first used in the classroom for two main purposes, which are dominant to this day: communication through email, which enables teachers and students to interact outside the classroom; and information-gathering through the World Wide Web. More recently, interactive tools such as blogs, wikis, forums and Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have provided a range of possibilities for teaching different language content and skills (see Unit 14: Materials, pp. 212–14). And social networking tools like *Facebook* can be used for teacher-student and student-student interaction. All these are used in what has come to be called *blended learning* (see Unit 16: Classroom interaction, pp. 239–42).

1.5 Motivation

Motivation is a crucial factor in successful language learning; and a good deal of research has been carried out on how and why learners are motivated to learn, and what teachers can do to enhance such motivation.

Integrative and instrumental motivation

The terms *integrative motivation* and *instrumental motivation* are associated with the work of the Canadian researchers Lambert and Gardner (Gardner, 1991). Integrative motivation refers to the desire of the learner to learn the language in order to integrate into the community of speakers of that language. Instrumental motivation, in contrast, refers to the need to learn the language for material or educational benefit: to get a better job, for example, or to progress to advanced study. The original Canadian study found that integrative motivation was the more important of the two. More recent studies of learners of English in different countries, however, have found the opposite (e.g. Warden & Hsui, 2000). This is probably because of the changing role of English worldwide discussed earlier, and the fact that learners today need English for a variety of instrumental purposes rather than in order to join a particular English-speaking community.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation

These concepts represent a rather different, though overlapping, contrast. Extrinsic motivation is based on the perceived benefits of success in learning and penalties of failure. So instrumental motivation, as defined above, would be extrinsic, and so would the desire to pass exams or avoid getting bad grades at school. Intrinsic