

A Course in
English
Language
Teaching

Penny Ur



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Introduction

1 About the second edition

The first edition of this book, *A Course in Language Teaching*, was published in 1996, as part of the Cambridge Teacher Training and Development series. It related to language instruction in general, whereas this new edition focuses specifically on English teaching.

The second edition includes extracts from the previous one, but has been extensively rewritten. This is partly because my ideas on some subjects have developed and changed as a result of added experience, discussion with colleagues, and reading of the research literature. And it is partly because of feedback: teachers and trainers have told me which parts of the first edition were more helpful and which were less, and have provided suggestions for improvement.

2 Learning to teach

If you ask experienced English teachers how they became good at their job, the majority will tell you that most of their learning came from actual classroom experience. This is not very helpful to a new, or trainee, teacher, who does not yet have much experience but urgently needs to acquire the basic professional ability to walk into a classroom and teach a lesson.

This book provides the basis for professional learning both before and during classroom experience in the following ways:

1. It provides essential **information**, based on the experience of successful practitioners and up-to-date research-based theory. This includes topics such as what we know about how people learn additional languages, and what teaching strategies are likely to lead to successful learning.
2. It invites **reflection**, through inviting you to consider and criticize classroom activities or scenarios, relate theoretical ideas to your own experience as student or teacher, or to try out procedures.
3. It gives **practical guidelines** on how to teach particular aspects of language (e.g. grammar, or listening comprehension), run particular types of procedures (e.g. discussions, or tests), or improve lessons (e.g. how to add interest, or cope with discipline problems).

The aim is to equip you with the knowledge and skills needed to perform competently as an English teacher from the beginning: to plan and run interesting and learning-rich lessons, use texts and tasks effectively, and so on. Later, as you become more experienced, both your knowledge and your skill will increase. That is one of the nice things about teaching: you keep getting better at it as time goes on.

3 Using this book

Look through the contents page to get a general idea of the topics covered in this course. Then choose a unit whose subject particularly interests you, and glance through it in order to familiarize yourself with the layout, organization and different kinds of content.

The units

The first four units (a general introduction to issues in English teaching today, followed by units on lesson planning, the text and the task) provide enough preliminary knowledge to enable you to plan a lesson and teach it. The next seven units deal with the teaching of grammar and vocabulary and of the four skills. So the first eleven units can provide you with a short, fairly intensive training course in basic English-teaching skills and knowledge.

If you have more time, then it is up to you which of the later units you or the teacher trainer leading your course wish to study. If your top priority is practical teaching skills, then it is probably best to start with the units on assessment (12), materials (14) and teaching heterogeneous classes (19), as well as the relevant sections of the unit on teaching different age groups (18). If, however, you are aiming for longer-term professional awareness and knowledge as well as hands-on skills, then you will find the other units just as valuable.

Each unit consists primarily of informational content and critical discussion of selected practical examples. There are also occasional 'Practical tips': useful little teaching techniques or ideas about how to cope with specific problems.

At the beginning of each unit, you will find a list of the topics dealt with in the different sections. This will give you an overview of the content, and also enable you to decide which sections you want to spend more, or less, time studying.

The tasks

The tasks are optional: you can learn from the book without doing any of them. But I recommend doing as many as you can. They are interesting to do, will enrich your understanding, enable you to relate more thoughtfully and critically to the ideas provided in the main text, and ultimately result in better learning of the material.

There are two types of task. Those headed 'Task' are ones you can do without going outside the book. For example, you might be asked to relate critically to a recommendation in the light of your own experience learning a language, or to express your own opinion of a set of statements. These do not usually take very long, and can be done either on your own or in collaboration with colleagues. The ones headed 'Action task' demand some kind of action outside the book itself. For example, you might be asked to observe a lesson, or check out a particular aspect of a coursebook, or consult an experienced teacher. These demand more work, but they are also more rewarding in terms of their learning value.

Review

At the end of the unit is a set of questions which you can use to check whether you have understood the ideas given in the unit, and how much of the

Introduction

information you can remember. Doing these questions functions as a useful review of the content. If you are working alone, you might write down your answers, and then check back to see what you got right, correct yourself if necessary, and add anything you had forgotten. If you are working in a group, you could do the questions together, orally or in writing, pooling your knowledge. Then you can go back to the sections of the unit itself to check your answers.

Further reading

After the review at the end of each unit, you will find a short list of books, and sometimes websites, that are recommended if you wish to find more texts to read that will enrich your knowledge of the subject matter.

Glossary

The glossary, located at the end of the book before the bibliography, provides brief definitions of most terms associated with English language teaching that are used in the units. Usually such terms are explained where they first occur; but occasionally you may need to look up one that you find difficult to recall.

Bibliography

The bibliography at the end of the book provides a comprehensive list of all the books, articles and websites mentioned in the book. So if there is a brief reference to a research article in the course of a unit, you will find the full reference in the bibliography, not in the further reading section at the end of the unit.

4 For the trainer

Two components that are particularly useful for trainer-led courses are the tasks and reviews.

The tasks may well take up most of the time in your face-to-face sessions with trainees. They furnish the basis for hands-on experiment, sharing of previous learning experiences, and critical discussion. Although tasks are often worded as if they are addressing a single individual, they can in fact be done collaboratively. The action tasks based on actual teaching or observation are not always practicable, but they provide valuable learning experiences. In fact, if observation and (practice-) teaching are possible, you may want to add more such tasks: for example, to invite trainees to observe or try out particular procedures described in one of the units.

Tasks can also be used as the basis for written assignments, which can be checked and graded, and then used as one of the components of a final grade for the course.

The reviews can be used:

- as a basis for informal full-class review and discussion;
- as an individual homework assignment: students write their own answers and check themselves by referring back to the unit;
- as a test done in writing in class, followed by a full-class check of answers;
- as a written test at the end of the unit.