

# A Troubleshooter's Guide to the Classroom



This book concludes with discussion of some of the most common problems teachers in EFL settings encounter as they attempt to bring communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches into the English classroom, especially if they try to include more oral skill practice in class through pair and small-group activities. Many of the suggestions in this chapter have been mentioned in other chapters, but here they are organized around how they relate to specific problems you may encounter.

## Overly Large Classes

In many countries, large class sizes (thirty to fifty students or more) are perceived as a major obstacle to the adoption of CLT or student-centered teaching approaches. For listening comprehension or reading lessons, such large classes are generally not an insurmountable obstacle; for speaking and writing lessons, however, large classes can present serious problems. In a speaking class with fifty students, you simply cannot give much individual attention to students, and writing classes of this size mean that you have to face either mountains of compositions or guilt for assigning students too little writing.

Obviously, the ideal solution to this problem would be to reduce the size of the classes. Unfortunately, this is often not possible. Large classes are generally a result of necessity (e.g., lack of funds, staff) rather than a philosophy of education; most educators the world over would agree that smaller classes are better and would reduce class sizes if they could. So generally you need to cope with the situation instead of hoping it will change. The danger for you in this situation is that you may consciously or unconsciously assume that, with such large classes, it is impossible to use CLT approaches. However, while CLT approaches can be harder to use in classes with many students, they are not necessarily impossible to use there.

In all but the smallest speaking classes, students will get most of their practice talking to each other rather than to you, so the problem presented by a class of fifty is different from that presented by a class of twenty only in degree, not kind. In both cases, speaking practice should ideally consist primarily of pair and small-group work rather than dialogue between teacher and student. The real problem in large classes is one of management, specifically of ensuring that students will actually speak English when you are out of earshot. (This issue is discussed below.)

If most of the students in a class will not speak English unless you are present, the problem becomes much more difficult because the class must be more teacher centered. In such cases, until you solve the attitude problem that keeps students from speaking English in pairs and groups, you may be forced to rely heavily on listening comprehension exercises and teacher-focused question-and-answer exercises. While less than ideal, such use of class time is by no means the end of the world. The development of listening skills contributes to the development of speaking skills, and teacher-focused dialogue can be useful even in a large class if you remember to interact with students in a random pattern so that all of them need to listen and think through responses to questions. Remember, the mental process of creating sentences is the most difficult part of the speaking process, and any practice that forces students to go through this process under time pressure is valuable for the development of speaking skills.

Overly large writing classes are somewhat more problematic in that they almost inevitably require you to work very hard just to respond to a small amount of writing per student. As suggested in chapter 9, in large writing classes it is particularly important to make sure that students edit and polish work as much as possible before you go over it, so in-class self-editing and peer editing are recommended. Putting strict length limits on assignments—as well as emphasizing the virtues of terse writing—can also help. Finally, you can stress activities in which students are the audience rather than you. (See chapter 9 for more discussion of this problem.)

## Classes with Disparate Skill Levels

A particularly frequent and annoying problem is classes in which some students have much better English skills than others do. This situation is especially common in night schools and other institutions in which students come from a variety of backgrounds, but it is also found in school

systems where groups of students move up the educational ladder together as a class. Because of differences in background, or simply in the diligence with which students study, some students already know most of the material you plan to cover while others have fallen completely behind in both mastery of the material and skill development. This situation makes lesson planning difficult because it is hard to meet the needs of students at one skill level without neglecting those of students at another skill level. It may also produce motivation problems in the class; students with more advanced-level skills may be bored while students with less advanced-level skills are dispirited and confused.

As with the problem of overly large classes, the ideal solution would be to redistribute students into classes of more equal skill levels, and sometimes this is possible. Schools that have little experience with CLT or proficiency-based approaches to language teaching might not yet be aware of how important it is to place students of roughly equal skill levels together. (They may tend to think of students' levels more in terms of test scores rather than actual skill levels, but sometimes test scores do not reflect actual skill levels—especially oral skills—very accurately.) So, in some situations it may be worth the effort to gradually advocate skill-based placement. However, this might involve a rather long campaign and does not provide a quick solution to your problem—especially if the school term has already started—so the immediate problem for you becomes one of how to make the best of things.

In classes with mixed skill levels, the difference between a teacher-centered class and a student-centered one becomes especially critical. The pace and difficulty of activities in a teacher-centered class will necessarily be dictated by the teacher, and this forces students to march together in lockstep. If, for example, all the students in a class must listen to the same story together, students who could understand more rapid speech have to suffer through an overly slow presentation while their weaker classmates are embarrassed to stop you and ask questions or ask for repetition. This same dynamic holds true for whole-class activities such as large-group discussions, in which students with stronger English skills usually set the pace and many of their classmates have to sit through an activity that is completely inappropriate for their skill level.

In contrast, to the extent that students work alone, in pairs, or in small groups, they are better able to work at their own pace. For example, taped listening assignments done at home allow students with better listening skills to complete the activity quickly and move on to something else; other students can stop and listen to difficult segments as many times as they need to. In small-group discussions, students with weaker speaking skills can express themselves at their own level without as much fear that they will slow down other students. Thus, one key to dealing with a class with varied skill levels is to make the class as individualized and student centered as possible.

Another way to approach the issue is by talking about it with the students. It often helps to do a little special public relations work with the students at the upper and lower ends of the class. Let students with unusually strong English skills know that you recognize their high level of ability, and then challenge them by giving them a little extra responsibility (e.g., as discussion group leaders) or some difficult but interesting extra projects. You may also suggest that they have a responsibility to help and encourage others in the class or at least give others a chance to talk. Let less advanced-level students know that you don't consider their present skill level an indication of lack of ability, but also emphasize that they need to put extra effort into catching up to the rest of the class. Students who remain below the skill level of the class average will face a constant series of activities and assignments that are not well suited to their skill level, and they will not only learn less from these activities than their classmates do but will also find the work difficult and painful. It is therefore worthwhile for them to put in the extra effort necessary to catch up.

All the pep talks in the world are not likely to be of much use in raising the morale of students with weaker skills if the talks are followed by a series of grades that tell the students they

really are at the bottom of the class. Unfortunately, if all of the class assignments and exercises are graded based on of general skill level, and if assignments are all graded on the curve, less advanced-level students are unlikely to receive much encouragement from their marks. This is one reason it is good to grade based at least partly on progress rather than on absolute skill level. It is also a good argument for including a content component, such as culture, in a course. Students with advanced-level language skills do not necessarily have much more Western cultural background than their less advanced-level classmates do, so the inclusion of such an element in a course gives less advanced-level students at least one opportunity to begin from the same starting point as their classmates.

Even the most student-centered class will have at least some teacher-focused interaction, even if only when you give directions, and in these interactions you will need to decide the skill level to which you will target your communication when you speak to the class in English. My advice is that you avoid slowing your English down to the pace of the less advanced-level students. While speaking English slowly may seem to be more humane, in the end it is not. As much as I would like to believe otherwise, the problem with at least some of the weaker students in any class is that they do not put forth as much effort as their peers, and if you slow down to the level of the weakest, often the lazier students relax rather than endeavoring to catch up. Even worse, this approach discourages those students who have worked harder. My suggestion is that you tailor your English communication to a level slightly higher than that of the average student in the class, thus keeping it within the range of a majority of the students but making it challenging.

## Lack of Class Response

One problem teachers in EFL settings often face when attempting to use CLT approaches is that getting the class to respond to you in English may be difficult, at least at first. The classic scenario for this problem would go like this: you ask a general question to the class at large (e.g., “What did you all do this weekend?”). However, instead of answering you, the students all look down at their books and do anything else they can to avoid being noticed by you. Finally, when you get tired of waiting for a volunteer and simply call on a student to respond, an expression of deep reluctance—or perhaps stark terror—crosses her face. She seems to have little idea what to say or how to say it, and it is only slowly and painfully that she stammers the briefest possible answer to your question and then hopes you will turn your attention to tormenting someone else.

Lack of response is particularly a problem in situations where students have had little previous experience speaking in English and simply aren’t used to it; it also tends to be more of a problem in cultures where individual display is not encouraged and where face is considered very important. However, fear of speaking out in a foreign language—especially in front of the whole class—is a rather common problem in many settings and cultures because it is quite natural for students to be reluctant to make mistakes in public. Keep in mind that being forced to express their ideas in a foreign language robs students of the competence and dignity that they possess when speaking their mother tongue; to put it bluntly, it forces them to sound incompetent or even stupid. For students who are not yet confident of their ability to express ideas in English with a passable degree of fluency and accuracy, every sentence they utter is a challenge that forces them to pluck up a considerable amount of courage, and the temptation to simply avoid the challenge is often great. So, for teachers, the question is, what can you do to make it easier for your students—or at least most of them—to pluck up their courage and take the plunge?

One strategy has to do with reducing the difficulty of the challenge, thereby giving students

more confidence that they can cope with it in a reasonably effective way. As pointed out in chapter 7, speaking in English is actually a rather complicated process that requires students to do many things simultaneously under time pressure. For the purposes of this chapter, these might be summarized as two kinds of challenges: the challenge of figuring out what to say and the challenge of deciding how to say it. You can make it easier for students to speak out in English by reducing the difficulty of either of these two challenges. In situations where students do not easily or rapidly respond to questions you address in English to the class, there are several specific measures you can take:

1. Make it easier for students to formulate responses by asking questions that only require a yes/no or true/false answer, or questions that allow students to respond with a body motion like shaking their heads or raising their hands (e.g., to vote). While this kind of interaction does little to build students' speaking skills, it is a useful first step toward building the habit of responding to your questions; in other words, it is better than having students hang their heads and not respond at all.
2. Allow students to prepare their responses by first discussing the question briefly in pairs or small groups or even simply thinking about the question silently for a minute and jotting down a few notes. Either of these methods allows students a little time to decide what they want to say and prepare for how they will say it; it also means that they will have something written on paper that will give them a little more confidence as they respond to you.
3. Allow students to rehearse their responses by surveying each other quickly on the question you asked. This not only gives students time to formulate answers but allows them to practice an answer one or more times in pairs before they have to present it with the whole class listening.

A second strategy involves reducing the sense of threat and making the situation feel safer. Students are more likely to take a risk and speak out if the potential rewards (praise, sense of achievement, encouragement) seem greater than the potential costs (embarrassment, criticism). One way to convince students that the chances of reward are relatively high is to make a conscious habit of rewarding effort, even if the results are not always correct. For example, when a student answers a question incorrectly (with regard either to content or accuracy of English), it is more encouraging to respond with "Good try, but . . ." than to simply say "Wrong!" In any classroom, students will quickly figure out whether the teacher rewards them more for playing safe by taking few risks (thus avoiding mistakes but also cutting down on language use) or for taking chances by speaking out even when they are not sure if they are right (thus making more mistakes but also using language more). A teacher who does not punish students too much for taking risks is more likely to get responses from students.

Teachers can also reduce the sense of threat in the classroom by establishing a warm, supportive atmosphere in the class. Teachers can contribute to such an atmosphere directly by smiling, offering praise and encouragement, and bringing humor into the classroom; they can also contribute indirectly by teaching students to encourage each other and discouraging students from criticizing each other.

In setting the tone of a class, an element of challenge and pressure can obviously be useful; in fact, motivation tends to be enhanced by tasks in which the goal is relatively challenging, though not so difficult that students perceive it as being impossible (Dörnyei 2001b, 20, 26). So what I am advocating here is not an atmosphere in which there is no discipline and any and all

behavior is rewarded; rather, I am suggesting a need for balance in which the class atmosphere is warm and encouraging as well as challenging. Students need to be inspired to make an effort but are also more willing to try if they feel an honest effort will be fairly rewarded.

## Reluctance to Speak English in Pair and Small-Group Activities

Another problem is that students are often not very willing to speak to each other in English during pair or small-group activities, in other words, during activities in which you cannot watch them all the time. Sometimes this lack of willingness is due to the awkwardness of talking to their friends in a foreign language, or even to sheer laziness. However, it is also sometimes encouraged by a belief that the only useful kind of speaking practice is conversation with an English teacher who will correct all their errors—in short, they expect to do their practicing with you. Students who believe this may be reluctant to practice with their peers because they doubt the usefulness of such practice or because they fear making uncorrected errors, building bad habits, and incurring a vague host of other evil consequences.

Faced with students who resist practicing spoken English with each other, you probably need to resort to a combination of persuasion and persistent pressure. For your campaign of persuasion, you might begin by suggesting that the main problem in speaking is one of quickly forming thoughts into English sentences and that this kind of practice does not require a teacher as listener. (In fact, it doesn't require any listener at all, and I quite heartily advocate that students talk to themselves in English if they don't mind occasional curious looks from passersby.) A culturally relevant analogy may also help; for example, you might have students ask themselves who will learn guitar (violin, kung fu, basketball, etc.) more rapidly—a student who practices two hours every day or one who only practices during a weekly half-hour lesson with the teacher?

It may also help to point out that students should not be worried that their errors will be reinforced if they spend too much time talking to classmates. As Brown (2001) notes, "There is now enough research on errors and error correction to tell us that (1) levels of accuracy maintained in unsupervised groups are as high as those in teacher-monitored whole-class work, and that (2) as much as you would like not to believe it, teachers' overt attempts to correct speech errors in the classroom have a negligible effect on students' subsequent performance" (p. 181).

To encourage students to speak English in class, I personally prefer a prescription of light-toned nagging ("Kim, that doesn't sound like English") and occasional pep talks on the importance of practice.<sup>1</sup> It is also important to be realistic about how far from supervision you can reasonably expect the students to actually practice English. A good rule of thumb is this: break students into the smallest groups in which most of them will speak English a significant percentage of the time.

<sup>1</sup> Some teachers have students monitor each other, levying a minimal fine on students who speak something other than English in class (the proceeds eventually to go to a class party). I am personally uncomfortable with demanding money from students and even less comfortable making the speaking of their native tongue a misdemeanor, but it seems to work for some. Ur (1981, 20) suggests that placing a tape recorder near an offending group may increase their amount of English practice.



## Students Who Participate Too Little

There is yet a third problem related to reluctance to speak English—the problem of individual students who rarely or never volunteer to participate by speaking English in class, at least in whole-class discussions. Here, however, the question is whether this is really a problem or not.

Teachers often assume that participation means answering questions or offering opinions during all-class activities, and it is generally assumed that this kind of participation is an important part of the learning process. On reflection, however, it should be clear that the few moments a semester students spend speaking in front of the whole class are not a significant part of their total speaking practice time, and students who never volunteer in a large-group setting do not necessarily get much less practice than their classmates. In fact, the only unique benefit of speaking out in front of the whole class is that it trains students to pluck up their courage for speaking in front of large audiences. So I would suggest that the failure of a few reluctant students to speak up in large-group settings should not be considered a serious problem.

In fact, pressuring quiet students to participate unwillingly in whole-class settings may be counterproductive. They may be less than entirely confident of their English skills and already somewhat intimidated in English class. Knowing that they could be called on to publicly perform in front of a large audience increases the level of anxiety, and fear may well become more salient in their minds than interest in learning. If you single out such students by calling on them, the result is tension and wasted class time; the reluctant student often sits in embarrassed panic, unable or unwilling to answer, while classmates become either more nervous or bored. The only thing that such an exercise accomplishes is putting enough fear into students' hearts that they are more likely to do their homework; it achieves little in terms of in-class learning.

The saddest aspect of trial by questioning in class is that it may torment students who are in fact participating, in other words, students who pay attention in class, actively think through responses to questions, and participate actively in pair or small-group activities. These are the most important forms of participation because it is through them that students will get the bulk of their English practice. Only a very few highly vocal students will get significant amounts of practice in an all-class forum.

I have mentioned strategies you can use to make it easier for students to respond to you in class, and use of such strategies may help some of your quieter students find the courage to speak out. Ultimately, however, there is a point at which you have done what you can to provide opportunities and encouragement, and then it is up to students to take advantage of those opportunities. One element of treating students with respect is allowing them the freedom to make choices, and beyond a certain point further intervention on your part may do more harm than good by creating fear and tension or simply by wasting time that could have been better spent on other students who are more willing to respond. Make sure that opportunities and channels of communication remain open, but don't feel guilty about every student who chooses not to speak up in class.

## Students Who Participate Too Much

You are probably familiar with the kind of student who tends to dominate, always being the first to answer a question or offer an opinion. The problem is that such behavior limits the other students' opportunities to participate and may also discourage their willingness to try. For you, the problem is how to control the behavior without discouraging the student; the student who participates frequently is, after all, doing what teachers wish most students would do.

One approach is to simply ignore the eager student's hand when it goes up and to direct activity to other members of the class. This approach, however, often makes the eager student more vigorous in efforts to be noticed. Students who talk a great deal tend not be shy or overly sensitive types, so more direct approaches may be necessary. One is to speak to these students individually, praising their willingness to participate but asking them to give others a chance. During class, when the hand pops up again, you might even say, "I see your hand, but let's see if we can't get someone else to respond first."

Try not to become visibly annoyed with such students. They may already be viewed as teacher's pets who have popularity problems in class (though they may also be class leaders), and your disapproval can encourage other students to be more critical of them. They may also, quite understandably, feel there is no good reason to let speaking opportunities go to waste if others won't take advantage of them, a view that you should encourage rather than discourage. Your ultimate goal is to encourage other students to participate more rather than to make overly talkative students participate less, and you may make more progress toward this goal by showing appreciation of eager students' efforts than by becoming irritated at them.

## Getting Students Interested

In EFL settings, the greatest challenge English teachers face is often one of getting students interested in English study, and this is especially true if teachers try to make greater use of CLT approaches. Of course, student interest and motivation is important even when teachers use traditional teacher-centered approaches, but when using a traditional lecture approach, the teacher finds it is somewhat easier to keep class going simply by continuing to lecture; students don't actually have to respond much in order for a class period to keep right on moving along. However, when teachers try to employ methods more typical of a CLT approach, such as pair and small-group work, the level of student interest has a greater impact on how well a class goes because if students are not interested in what they are doing, there are many long uncomfortable silences and much wasted class time.

Of course, the underlying problem is that students in EFL settings often have relatively little inherent interest in studying English, which often seems quite distant and unrelated to their lives. To be more precise, students are often interested for a while at the beginning of English study because the subject is novel and perhaps even a little exotic; they may also have heard from teachers or other people that learning English may in various ways be good for their future prospects. In addition, study of English tends to be somewhat simpler and easier at the beginning, and progress is relatively more visible because there is such an obvious difference between knowing absolutely no English and knowing some.

However, as time goes on and students move further into English study, their interest often begins to diminish. The novelty of learning a foreign language wears off, and students begin to tire of hard work that seems to have no end in sight. There are also generally few opportunities in EFL settings for students to make genuine use of beginning- or intermediate-level English skills, so the ratio of reward to effort tends to be rather low. Additionally, it becomes harder for students to see what—if any—progress they are making, especially in the intermediate stages of English study when they study low-frequency vocabulary items and grammar structures that may not reappear for months or years after students first learn them. Finally, the ultimate goal—a good command of English—may still seem quite distant and unreal. In EFL settings, this intermediate phase of English study is something like a wide desert that students need to cross on their journey toward English proficiency. In this phase, many students lose interest in building genuine profi-



ciency in English—or lose hope that they will ever be able to attain such proficiency—and begin to settle for the less ambitious goal of simply doing what is necessary to pass tests whether or not this actually helps them build genuine skills. In fact, the most important question in language teaching may be: How do you help build and sustain students' interest through the long middle stages of language study until they reach a breakthrough point where the reward/effort ratio begins to improve and sustaining continued language study becomes easier?

There is no single easy solution to this problem, but there are a number of strategies that will increase the number of students who are interested in English study in general—or your classes in particular—and the number who will sustain their motivation long enough to reach the green meadows at the other side of the desert. These strategies have been mentioned elsewhere in this book, but a review of them seems an appropriate way to close this chapter.

## INTERESTING CONTENT

It is not always within your power to determine what kinds of topics and issues are addressed in the study materials that students use. However, to the extent that you have a say in what students read about, listen to, talk about, and write about, their motivation will generally be better sustained if the topics themselves are at least somewhat interesting. Of course, the problem lies in figuring out what will be interesting, and there is unfortunately no single magic indicator that will tell you what topics will and won't catch the interest of any group of students.

Two rough guidelines may be of help, however. First, topics tend to have more appeal to students if they are intellectually as well as linguistically challenging. Especially for beginning- and intermediate-level students, an incomplete command of English will place limits on how well students can express ideas, but this does not necessarily mean that they can deal only with simplistic topics, and students will generally be more willing to make an effort to express ideas if the content seems worthy of talking about. Second, when assessing how interesting a topic is likely to be to students, ask yourself what your own level of interest in the topic is. You will often discover that topics that are genuinely interesting to you are more likely to be interesting to the students, if only because your interest can be contagious. (The other side of this coin is that topics you find boring are also more likely to be boring to students.)

## GENUINE COMMUNICATION

As I have suggested repeatedly in this book, people tend to be interested in sharing their ideas, opinions, and feelings with other people, and the more opportunities students have to do this in English courses, the more likely they are to keep investing effort in learning how to express their ideas. Including as much genuine communication as possible in English courses not only tends to make them more interesting but also helps remind students of the ultimate goal of English study: to build skill proficiency that allows them to communicate and share ideas with people from other countries and cultures, whether face-to-face or indirectly through books, magazines, films, and other media.

## A SENSE OF PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

As suggested in this chapter, one of the main challenges in the intermediate stages of language study is that it becomes difficult for students to see and feel the progress that they are making, and this difficulty is often a major factor in causing them to give up on English study. Often the problem is not that they are making no progress; rather, the problem is that the progress has become harder to quantify and see. This idea can be illustrated by the analogy of a person rowing

a boat in the ocean, out of sight of land. As the person rows, the boat moves forward, but because the water around the boat tends to always look the same, there is little visible evidence to convince the boat rower that the boat is actually making any progress. So, to see progress, the rower can occasionally drop little floating things in the water, buoys or perhaps even little bits of wood. As the boat moves away from the buoy, the rower is then able to see and measure progress. This, in turn, helps the rower sustain a feeling of progress and motivation.

The kinds of buoys that are effective in helping students see their progress in English will depend on what skills students are working on and at what level; specific ideas have been introduced in the Criteria for Measuring Progress sections of the sample language learning projects at the ends of chapters 6–11. The point here is that one of the most valuable steps you can take as an English teacher is to find ways to help students see and feel their progress—both by dropping buoys in the water for them and, better yet, by teaching them to drop buoys in the water for themselves.

## CONTROL AND EMPOWERMENT

One common danger in many EFL settings is that much of students' motivation for English study is driven by external forces such as school requirements, examinations, and demands of teachers and parents. This would not necessarily be a problem if the outside pressure were sustained long enough that students were forced to develop a functional level of proficiency in English—in other words (referring to the analogy above), if the teacher stayed with students long enough to force them at gunpoint to march all of the way through the desert. The problem is that, in many countries, the external pressure of required courses and examinations takes students only part of the way to functional English proficiency; in effect, the teacher disappears when the students are only halfway through the desert. Of course, the hope is that students will continue on the journey on their own, but the likelihood of this is smaller if students have never chosen any part of the journey themselves (especially if they have grown to dislike it precisely because it is forced on them).

As an English teacher, you are probably not in a position to change your country's educational system; however, you have the opportunity to encourage students to begin making some choices about their English study themselves. Having the opportunity to set at least some of their own goals in English study allows students to experience a degree of control over their own learning that helps enhance their motivation (Dörnyei 2001b, 128); likewise, choosing their own materials, methods, and other aspects of English study helps students increase their sense of ownership in the learning process. All of this tends to help make students willing participants in English learning rather than reluctant prisoners. It also increases the chances that they will keep moving toward the goal of English proficiency even when outside pressures such as course requirements, teachers, and examinations disappear.

## STRATEGIZING

In the desert journey analogy above, the goal is to cross the desert and reach lush, green meadows on the other side; once the meadows are reached, it becomes easier to continue the journey. Let me suggest here that how close the first patch of green meadow is to the traveler depends on the route of the journey, and some routes will allow the traveler to reach the green meadows sooner than others. Obviously, a traveler who plans the journey well by choosing a shorter route is more likely to complete the journey than a traveler who takes a longer and more difficult route.

Likewise, how long students need to study English before they reach a breakthrough point where they can begin to use their English skills for rewarding purposes will depend on how they

strategize their language learning campaign. If they design it so that it is as easy to sustain as possible and that it as soon as possible allows them begin using skills for personally rewarding or interesting purposes, they are more likely to eventually develop a functional command of English. In contrast, if they never reach a breakthrough point in any skill, once their formal English courses end, it is more likely that they will stop using their English and that their skills will begin to deteriorate.

You are not in a position to personally design English learning campaigns for each of your students. However, you can help students learn to strategize about their English study so that it is as sustainable as possible and so that they reach breakthrough points as soon as possible. Once students reach a point where they can actually begin using English skills for purposes that they find rewarding—in other words, once the effort/reward ratio balance tips in favor of the rewards—it will be much easier for both you and them to sustain their continued interest in English study.

## INSPIRATION

In motivation, one key factor is the expectation that one can reasonably hope to succeed in a task; in other words, people who think they have a chance of success in a task are more likely to continue investing effort in it than those who think that they have no hope of success (Dörnyei 2001b, 20). With regard to language study, the idea is that students who believe that their efforts to learn English may eventually lead to success are more likely to keep trying than those who believe there is no hope for them.

From a theoretical perspective, this idea suggests that you need to convince students that there is a realistic possibility for them to learn English—and perhaps other foreign languages as well. While it might seem that this idea should be obvious to students, it often is not; in fact, many students believe that the ability to learn a foreign language is more dependent on some kind of gift for languages than on sustained, strategic effort. While aptitude seems to affect success in language study, there is little evidence that it is the determining factor; to the contrary, there is a great deal of evidence that most students will continue to make progress toward proficiency in English if they continue investing effort in reasonably well-thought-out ways.

One implication of this for you is that, as you encourage students in their English studies, you should remind them that ultimately the road to success lies mainly in sustained effort. However, this idea is more convincing to students when they see concrete evidence of it, and this is where one of your most important contributions as an English teacher lies. Unlike native speakers of English, you learned English through a sustained effort over a considerable period of time, so your achievements in English show students in a very concrete way what is possible for them as well. In this sense, the fact that you learned English as a second language is not a weakness; it is one of your greatest strengths.

## For Thought, Discussion, and Action

1. **dealing with large class sizes:** If you will need to teach classes with many students, talk with one or more experienced local teachers about how they deal with the problems involved in teaching large classes.
2. **using the local language:** In classes where the skill levels of students (especially listening skills) vary considerably, one choice you will have to make is how much to use the local

language—rather than English—when speaking to the class. Make a list of informal guidelines as to when you should use the local language and when you should use English in classroom communication.

3. **grouping students with disparate skill levels:** When breaking students into small groups for language practice, one question you need to consider is whether it is better to group students of the same skill level together or to try to ensure that each group has both stronger and weaker students. (1) List the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches. (2) Decide whether this issue is important enough that you should consider it when breaking students into groups.
4. **getting students to talk:** Interview an experienced local teacher to find out what strategies he or she uses to encourage students to respond to questions in English in class.
5. **dealing with students who don't speak up in class:** This chapter suggests that it is OK not to force each and every student to speak up in front of the whole class. Naturally, however, such an approach has disadvantages as well as advantages. First list the advantages and disadvantages of the suggested approach, and then decide what approach you think would be best.
6. **dealing with students who talk too much:** Talk to experienced local teachers to find out what they suggest about dealing with the problem of students who tend to talk too much and dominate in class.
7. **getting students interested:** Interview an experienced local teacher to find out what kinds of problems he or she encounters in keeping students interested and motivated, and what strategies he or she uses to interest and motivate students in their English studies.