CHAPTER 1

PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Preview

▶ How well students learn a language ultimately depends more on their own efforts than on the teacher's. Thus, any attempt to understand effective language teaching must consider the issue of effective language learning.

▶ Four basic realities of language learning are that language is a tool for communication, learning a language involves mastery of both knowledge and skill, the struggle to learn a language is a battle of the heart as well as the mind, and learners vary considerably in their preferred approaches to language learning.

▶ The language teacher is not simply a transmitter of knowledge; like a coach, the language teacher needs to assist students in understanding the task before them, staying motivated, building discipline, and learning how to pursue the task on their own.

▶ Students or colleagues in your host country may not share the assumptions stated above, so it is important to make your assumptions explicit to the students and to make sure that there is not too large a gap between your expectations and the students'.

What is a language teacher? Perhaps the first image that occurs to you is of a tidily dressed woman or man standing in front of an attentive class, explaining a grammar point or a new word. Then he or she checks whether students understand the point by asking each one a question or two, patiently correcting any mistakes they make. Most people have seen this model of teaching in films and on television, and many have been in language classes that were taught largely in this fashion; it would therefore be easy to let this model shape the way you set out to teach your own classes.

As a starting point, there is nothing wrong with this model, and it does a reasonably good job of portraying some aspects of the teacher's role. However, there are also some ways it is misleading about a teacher's role, and, in this chapter, we challenge some of the assumptions underlying this language teaching model, introduce a number of basic principles of language learning, and suggest a more nuanced and flexible model of the language teacher.

Why Focus First on Students?

Even though this is a book about language teaching, any discussion of teaching needs to start with students. In recent years, more and more books on language teaching place students rather than teachers at center stage. This shift is due to a growing recognition that whether or not students succeed in learning a language depends more on their own efforts than on the teacher's and that a good program of instruction therefore needs to be student centered instead of teacher centered.

One reason it is important to view language learning as student centered is that students are individuals who differ in significant ways. First, students differ in their language knowledge and skills; one student may read well and have a broad vocabulary but be almost incapable of speech, while another student may have exactly the opposite profile of skills. Second, students differ in their learning styles and strengths; a study method that is intolerably boring, confusing, or intimidating for one student may prove comfortable and effective for another. Finally, students differ greatly in their levels of motivation, their attitudes toward study in general, and their feelings toward English study in particular. One student is quite diligent but resents Western cultural influence in her country, another thinks the West is appealing but he has little love for study, a third doesn't care one way or another about English but would like to get a good grade on the final exam. Consequently, the reasons for a student's successes or failures differ greatly

from person to person; inevitably, no teacher-designed, one-size-fits-all lesson or program will meet the needs or suit the styles of all of the students in a class. Instead, as much as possible, students need to take charge of their own learning, choosing goals that fit their needs and strategies that work for them.

A second argument for student-centered approaches is that students learn more effectively if they are active participants in the learning process than if they only passively follow the teacher's instructions. This is true if for no other reason than that much language study and practice takes place when the teacher is not around to give instructions or to check up on students. Students who actively take advantage of out-of-class study and practice opportunities will make much more long-term progress than students who consider them a chore to deal with as quickly as possible. Students who take responsibility for their own learning will not only improve their language skills more effectively throughout the course but have the agency and skills they need to continue studying after the course ends.

The final reason that language learning needs to focus on students is that few English as a foreign language (EFL) programs are long enough to guarantee that students will master English before they leave the program. In many countries, English is offered in middle school and even primary school—often as a required subject—but students study English only a few hours a week and have little opportunity to practice what they learn. Even the few students who complete a university major in English still usually have gaps in their English skills when they graduate, and students who are not English majors or who study in a night school have even less English training and practice. Thus, if a high level of proficiency is the goal, students will probably have to continue studying English long after they leave the educational system, and the students most likely to keep making progress toward mastery of English are those who are already accustomed to designing and carrying out their own language study plans.

Why Is It Important for Language Teachers to Be Language Learners?

For the reasons stated above, the focus of this book is frequently on language learning as much as on language teaching. To become increasingly effective as a language teacher, you must understand as much as possible about how the process of language learning works and what it feels like. Therefore, as you embark on your career as a

language teacher, you also need to either continue or begin your career as a language learner. Given that this point is not normally emphasized in books on language teaching, we make this argument in some detail here. There are at least four main reasons language teachers should also be language learners.

1. **Personal experience:** The first and perhaps most obvious reason is that the more experience you have as a language learner, the more you will know about what does and doesn't work in language learning. Decisions you as a language teacher make about what you require of students will have a significant impact on how students invest their study and practice time, so you must be sure that what you ask students to do will actually enhance their language learning. One of the best ways to assess the effectiveness of a given method is by trying it out yourself. Granted, what works for one person may not always be effective for another, so your personal experience as a language learner does not provide a perfect guide for what will benefit students, but it certainly provides a very good start. Furthermore, as you try different approaches and methods in your own language learning, your bag of language learning ideas and tricks will gradually fill, and you will have more alternatives to offer to students when they need to try something new.

2. **More effective encouragement:** A second reason your ongoing experience as a language learner will enhance your language teaching is that it will deepen your understanding of what it feels like to try to learn a new language. As we argue, language learning is a battle of the heart as much as of the mind, and your ability to empathize with students — to know how they feel — is the first step toward knowing how to more effectively encourage and motivate them (not to mention knowing how to avoid overwhelming them).

3. **Conviction:** Let us tentatively suggest that a third important benefit of language study has do with the level of conviction underlying your teaching. Novice teachers (NTs) may have only limited experience with foreign language study themselves, and many — especially those from English-speaking nations — have not achieved a significant level of proficiency in a foreign language. In fact, some NTs' primary takeaway from high school or college foreign languages classes is that language study can be hard work.

Rubin and Thompson (1994) make the interesting observation that "if an individual's first experiences with a foreign language were not particularly pleasant or successful, he or she will tend to expect the next language learning experience to be just as stressful and unfruitful as the first" (p. 8). It would seem reasonable to assume that negative language study experiences could color one's language teaching. Teachers who have never experienced success or reward in language study may find it difficult to be emotionally convinced that such success is possible, and they may not really expect students to achieve a high degree of proficiency. These teachers may, in turn, communicate this lack of expectation to students through teaching practices that focus more on grades than on proficiency. We do not mean to suggest that someone who does not speak a foreign language cannot be a good English teacher. We do suggest, however, that language teachers who have never felt the rewards and successes of language learning may not have as much enthusiasm or as strong a proficiency orientation as those who are at least beginning to experience those rewards and successes in their own language study.

4. **An equal exchange and mutual need:** A final reason for you to be a language learner has to do with the symbolic message that choosing to study the host language sends to your host community. Presumably, one motivation for teaching English lies in a desire to build bridges of understanding between people of different nations and cultures, and the growing role of English as the world's international language makes its mastery especially important in a world brought ever closer together by globalization. However, the same dominant role of English and its close association with globalization can make it a threat — symbolic or real — to other nations, languages, and cultures. English may be seen as a symbol and driving force of world homogenization or of the growing power of English-speaking nations.

We believe this problem makes it imperative for English teachers to be not merely advocates of the English language and Western culture but rather ambassadors who believe in the value of all languages and cultures and who promote the value of language and culture learning in general. If this is a message that you as a teacher wish to embody in a convincing way, it is one you must practice as well as preach. One of the most convincing ways to demonstrate respect for the value of languages other than English is by actively making the effort to learn another language (and culture). One additional symbolic advantage of studying

the language of your host country is that it changes the nature of your relationship with your host. If you arrive in your host country solely as a knower and giver of the English language, your presence suggests an unequal exchange in which you have gifts to bring but need nothing that the host country has to offer. If, on the other hand, you arrive with the desire to learn as much as to teach, your presence suggests a more equal exchange, a mutual need to both teach and learn.

Though the primary function of this book is to introduce you to the teaching of English, our hope is that you also read it as a language learner, perhaps one about to embark on the study of a language you have not had much previous experience with.

What Are Some Basic Principles of Language Learning?

Of the great many points one could make about language learning, we focus on four that deserve special attention because they are central to communicative language teaching (CLT) and because they are points that learners in EFL settings can easily lose sight of:

1. Language is a tool for communication,
2. learning a language involves mastery of both skill and knowledge,
3. learners need to give serious consideration to the impact of feelings on language study, and
4. learners vary considerably in their preferred approaches to learning.

Language Is a Tool for Communication

Perhaps the most fundamental reality of language learning is that language is a tool for communication. As obvious as this point may seem, its implications are not always clear to students. Remember that many students' experience of English learning trains them to see English as anything but a communication tool. The daily reality of English study for many students is one of memorizing words and rules in preparation for a test and rarely involves using English for communicative purposes. After years of this kind of noncommunicative study, students often lose interest and begin to see language learning as an exercise geared toward formal accuracy, especially on tests.

When English is presented as a tool for establishing communication with a new world, it is potentially more appealing. This communication can take a variety of forms; it can mean sharing ideas face to face with someone from a foreign country or gaining access to the knowledge embedded in the world's vast library of material published in English. Although learning any language opens new doors, English's growing role as an international language means it is now the language of publishing and speech for most international communication; it is often used even by people from non-English-speaking countries when they need to interact with people from other nations (Crystal, 2003). Learning English means developing the ability to understand and interact with a universe that is largely inaccessible to those who don't know English.

There are other reasons to focus on communication in your teaching, one being that such a focus may make language teaching easier for you and interesting for your students. Many aspects of language teaching may initially seem unfamiliar and awkward to you; for example, most native speakers of English don't start out with a natural knack for explaining the rules of English grammar. However, it is entirely natural for you to want to communicate with your students—and for them to want to communicate with you. Though your English courses can't and shouldn't focus entirely on "getting to know you" chats, they most definitely can and should harness the natural human desire to communicate. You will generally find that the more often you can give students the opportunity to communicate genuinely with you and each other in class, the more quickly you will be comfortable in your new teaching role.

Students must experience language as communication as early as possible in their learning if they are to see language as a communication tool and if they are to taste the thrill that mastery of a new language can entail. In an English class, this means using speaking or writing practice as an opportunity for students to share what they really think, feel, or believe. It also means that when students say or write something, you should respond to the ideas expressed rather than only to the accuracy of the language.

Building Skills Is as Important as Building Knowledge

A second important truth of language learning is that it requires mastery of a skill as much as acquisition of knowledge. In other words, it is not enough for students to know word meanings and structure rules; students need to be able to apply this knowledge quickly, even automatically, to express themselves smoothly, read competently, and comprehend spoken English rapidly. To build these skills, practice is necessary; study alone will not suffice.

Again, this point might seem obvious, but remember the unintended lessons that many approaches to language teaching leave students with. For many students, language learning has always been about learning grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary to perform well on tests. Many students have had little experience using English in actual conversation, and have not built the speed and automaticity that can only be developed through repeated practice. Naturally, students' perceptions of the important parts of language learning are shaped by their experience in language classes, and it is not surprising if students are inclined to neglect practice in favor of study.

Language use has a heavy skill component, which demands that the user perform complex operations accurately and quickly, and this has some important implications for the ways in which students must learn:

1. **Language learners need a lot of practice.** To learn to speak well, students need to spend a lot of time speaking; in order to learn to read quickly and effectively, they need to spend a lot of time reading, and so forth. Almost all teachers would assent to this principle in theory, but in many English classrooms, the teacher still talks most of the time. Sometimes this is because teachers feel they need to dominate in order to maintain control in class; sometimes it is because teachers feel that if they aren't "teaching," they aren't really earning their pay. For whatever reasons, stepping off the podium and giving students a chance to speak (read, write, etc.) is more problematic than it may initially seem.

2. **Language learners need repeated practice.** One important concept related to language learning is *automaticity* (Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Brown & Lee, 2015). The idea here is that many language skills require a student to do many different things at the same time; for example, speaking involves choosing words, applying grammar rules, and attending to pronunciation and intonation— all while trying to decide what to say. A speaker cannot consciously pay attention to all of these operations simultaneously, so some of them must be practiced often enough that they can be performed automatically. It takes repeated practice to learn to perform any skill smoothly and automatically, and language learning is no exception.

This point is important because students and teachers often unconsciously assume that their job is to cover the material in the book and ensure students complete any related exercises. Part of this unconscious assumption is that each point should only be covered one time and that, once the material is covered, students should know it. (Among students who have internalized this view of language learning, the protest that "We've done this already" is expected to effectively veto an activity whether or not they have really learned the skill in question.) The problem, of course, is that covering material in a textbook is often not enough to allow learners to build necessary skills, and you may need to repeat activities several times before students can use the new material automatically.

Language Learning Is a Battle of the Heart

A third fundamental reality of language learning is that feelings play a major role in language study and need to be taken seriously in planning a successful language learning campaign. As Ehrmann, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) put it, "It is at least as important to manage feelings as it is to use more cognitive strategies, since negative feelings reduce the effectiveness of most [language] learning activities. Appropriate self-efficacy promotes persistence in the face of difficulty" (p. 319). Learners who have a strong desire to learn and who feel good about their progress are far more likely to continue working hard in the long term.

One reason emotions play such an important role in language learning is that learning a foreign language well involves a great deal of effort over a long period of time. The basic rules of English grammar and a survival vocabulary can be learned within a few months, but mastering the language takes much longer. Students need considerable practice to develop effective skills in listening and speaking, not to mention reading and writing. It also takes a long time to amass a sufficient vocabulary for reading texts and listening to speech (e.g., movies, television) intended for native speakers. Finally, students can benefit from a good understanding of the cultures of English. All of this is particularly difficult for students in an EFL environment to achieve because they have few opportunities for practice and contact with Western culture. The problem is especially severe for English students in places such as Asia, the Middle East, and Africa whose native languages, writing systems, and cultures have little in common with those of the English-speaking world and whose English study entails far more learning.

FROM MAXI: Some students are surprised by the amount of time and effort required to learn a language. When I began studying Japanese in college, I had thought I would be advanced in Japanese after six

semesters of courses (approximately 3 years); after all, the fifth and sixth semester courses were entitled "advanced" Japanese. At the end of these courses, I still felt incapable of having a conversation in Japanese, and I was too afraid of making grammar mistakes to even try. Most language students are probably not quite this naïve, but unreasonable expectations are not rare. As Scarcella and Oxford (1992) point out, "Students are often unrealistic in what they believe they can and should accomplish in a given period of time, so their self-esteem suffers" (p. 58).

Students who feel bad about their language learning are particularly vulnerable to discouragement and the temptation to quit. Even students who recognize that language study is emotionally demanding often fail to account for this problem in their study plans. Too many students assume that being a good student means toughing it out, slugging away at a language until it finally gives in.

> **FROM DON:** I remember fantasizing that if I could just read one big Russian novel — even if it meant shoveling my way through the book word by word with a dictionary — I would conquer the Russian reading problem forever. The strategy may well have worked if I had been able to keep at it, but I never could. (Farber, 1991, seriously suggests this approach for beginning-level readers, using newspapers instead of novels. Granted, he makes it very clear that this approach is not for the fainthearted.) This tendency to try to take a language by frontal assault, of course, often reflects the way languages are taught, with inadequate attention to learners' emotional needs.

Another problem arises from a peculiarity of the language learning process: The further students go, the more their rate of progress seems to slow. To some extent, *plateaus* are often experienced by intermediate- and advanced-level learners. Many learners also tend to make progress in spurts more than in a neat, step-by-step progression, and between those spurts students often feel that they have hit a plateau and are making no progress. These plateaus, however, are generally temporary and therefore do not pose a serious threat to students who know that such periods are a common feature of language learning, and that the best thing to do is keep on studying or lighten up for a short break before plunging back in.

A more serious problem arises from the fact that the more students learn of a language, the less visible impact each additional day of study makes on their skills; progress becomes harder and harder to discern. Beginning-level language students can see their progress very clearly; between Unit 1 and Unit 2 in a textbook, their knowledge of English doubles, and every new word they learn significantly increases their ability to communicate. However, as they reach more advanced skill levels, their progress becomes less apparent. Successful completion of Unit 74 does not make as obvious an impact on students' English skill level as completion of Unit 6 did, and learning lower-frequency words like *manual* and *tome* doesn't enhance their ability to communicate as much as mastering earlier words like *book* did. This means that students in the intermediate stages of language learning are especially vulnerable to discouragement because they often have relatively little sense that they are making progress.

A final reason English study can be emotionally demanding is that the first years of English study in an EFL setting generally offer few rewards. Reaching a level of English skill that allows students to actually use English for practical or personally rewarding purposes helps sustain interest in continued use and study of the language. For example, students who can finally follow a news broadcast in English no longer need a sense of daily progress to keep them going. However, students in the middle stages of language learning, whose progress seems to be slowing and who cannot yet do much with their English, may find it very difficult to resist the temptation to give up. It may take years for students to develop their speaking to the point where they can converse with an English speaker or learn to read well enough to comfortably read an English newspaper or book. It is hard in such circumstances to sustain much enthusiasm for language study.

It is hard to overstate how important *affective factors*, in other words, those related to feelings, are in language learning. As Brown (1991) points out: "The emotions are the foundation on which all your learning strategies, techniques, and gimmicks will stand or fall. . . . Without that emotional foundation, you are fighting an uphill battle at best" (p. 73). It thus makes sense to structure teaching in a way that gives students the maximum sense of progress and reward and encourages them not to abandon the effort halfway.

Language Learners Do Not All Learn the Same Way

Sometimes we talk about "students" as if they are a more or less homogeneous group and that there should be a set of learning and teaching methods that would work well for

all of them. However, learners vary considerably, and there is no reason for us to believe that they should all go about language learning in the same way. In the language teaching profession, this point is often made when talking about learning styles. One contrasting set of learning styles that has received much attention has to do with learners' sensory preferences, with learners categorized into four groups:

▶ **Visual learners:** those who learn best by seeing

▶ **Auditory learners:** those who learn best by hearing

▶ **Kinesthetic learners:** those who learn best by moving and doing things

▶ **Tactile learners:** those who learn best through feeling and touching

Another set of learning-style categories has to do with learners' personality types, and some learning-style contrasts that have been suggested include the following distinctions:

▶ **Extroverted versus introverted learners:** This one is fairly self-explanatory.

▶ **Thinking versus feeling learners:** This is a distinction between learners who are more cognitively oriented and those who are more affectively oriented. For example, in a discussion, thinking-oriented students would generally be more interested in the factual content of the discussion, while feeling-oriented learners would be more attentive to the feelings and emotional needs of others in the discussion.

▶ **Closure-oriented and judging learners versus open and perceiving learners:** The former would strive for clarity, results, and closure; the latter are more comfortable with ambiguity for longer periods and feel less internal pressure to resolve questions any time soon (for more categories, see Oxford, 2001, p. 360–362).

Recent research calls into question the notion that individual learners have distinct and relatively stable learning styles (e.g., Willingham, Highes, & Dobolyi, 2015). However, we definitely should assume that language learners differ from each other in a variety of ways, and that these differences can have a significant impact on what works for any given student when it comes to language learning. Obviously, it is not possible for each student to have a teacher and classroom situation tailored precisely to his or her preferred language learning approaches; this can't happen even in small classes, let alone large ones. However, teachers can do two important things to accommodate individual differences between students. The first is to use a reasonably broad and rich variety of teaching techniques, so that each learner has

a greater chance of experiencing a method that works well for him or her. The second involves encouraging learners to explore different approaches to language learning so that each learner can find study and practice methods that work for him or her. This is one of the most important reasons any consideration of language teaching needs to start with a look at the learners.

What Is the Role of the Language Teacher?

Many people are accustomed to a model of language teaching that is heavily teacher centered. To our minds (influenced no doubt by many years in China), this teacher-centered approach calls up images of the great sage Confucius sitting amidst his disciples, explaining the Way and occasionally asking questions to check his disciples' comprehension; hence, we will refer to this approach as the *sage model* of teaching. The sage owes his exalted position to the fact that he knows more than his students do, and his primary task is to transfer his knowledge to his students. Once the students understand what the sage is trying to explain, the teaching task has been successfully completed.

A certain amount of the sage is virtually inevitable in your teaching life, and it is not necessarily bad. You do in fact know far more about English than the students do, and one of your roles as language teacher is to convey as much of that knowledge as possible. However, excessive reliance on this model has serious drawbacks. One is that it can be hard to play the sage role well. For example, setting yourself up as the final authority on English can result in very uncomfortable situations, particularly if you are not a master at explaining the intricacies of English grammar. Students often have more explicit knowledge of grammar rules (and the vocabulary used to discuss them) than NTs do, and this can prove awkward when students ask questions that you can't answer.

Even for NTs who become proficient in explaining obscure points of grammar, the teacher-centered sage model still presents problems. In this model, teachers are personally responsible not only for transmitting most of the knowledge students are to learn, but also for deciding what is to be learned and how. A (usually unintended) side effect of this approach is that students learn to be passive, to do what they are told rather than actively finding ways to enhance their own learning. Another unfortunate side effect is that, as suggested earlier, the teacher's role may degenerate into a formal one of covering material during

class so that students can be held responsible for it on the final exam.

A second flaw of the sage model is that it is often classroom centered; in other words, it assumes that most learning takes place in the classroom and downplays the importance of work students do on their own. Of course, the sage also assigns some homework, but in the minds of the teacher and students, the homework is simply rehearsal for the main show. For students, the subtle message of this assumption is that real learning requires the teacher; for teachers, the temptation is to measure success by the polish of classroom performances rather than by student progress.

A final problem with the sage model is that it assumes that learning a language is essentially an accumulation of knowledge that is complete once students understand what the teacher is trying to explain. Unfortunately, this assumption isn't true. Though acquisition of knowledge plays an important part in language learning, it is not enough—as we have seen, learning a language is also mastering a set of skills, and skills are not learned via explanation. Explanation is generally only the beginning of the learning process, and the teacher who plays the sage role often puts on an impressive show but leaves students to face the real battle alone.

A better model for a language teacher is that of the athletic coach or piano teacher, a model that we will call the *coach* (for more on this analogy, see, e.g., McKay, 1987, and Stevick, 1988). The main advantage of this model is that it assumes that most of the learning process takes place during practice away from the teacher's watchful eye, and that success or failure depends much more on what students do outside class than on what teachers do in class. A coach provides tips on how a basketball player should make jump shots, but it is the player's hours of practice shots that teach the skill. Likewise, a piano teacher cannot teach a student digital dexterity by explaining it; a student must practice scales many times before they can be played smoothly.

Of course, one duty of the coach is to share knowledge of the subject, but equally important parts of the coach's role are

1. helping students better understand the learning process,
2. encouraging students and cultivating motivation,
3. helping students build discipline through accountability, and
4. guiding them toward taking initiative and responsibility for their own learning.

These are not the only possible roles that NTs could adopt, but they are vitally important ones that are worthy of further discussion. In the following sections of this chapter, we consider these four aspects of the coach's role and the way they relate to basic principles of language learning and teaching.

Helping Students Understand Language Learning

One of your first tasks as a language teacher is to help students understand some of the concepts discussed above. In part, you do this by talking with the students about these principles, and you should certainly do so as often as you have the chance. However, if your views are going to have much impact on the students, the way you teach should reinforce what you say about language learning. In other words, if you stress the idea that students should take responsibility for their own language learning, you need to find ways to structure room for student initiative into your courses. If you argue that language is a tool for communication, you must allow students to use language for genuine communication as often as possible. If you emphasize that mastery of English involves developing language skills through practice, you need to give students ample opportunities to practice in class. Finally, if you urge students to attend to the affective side of language learning, you need to show concern for the issue in the way you structure class exercises and practice.

Another important aspect of helping students understand language learning is teaching them to think through their goals and methods. This is especially important for students who have generally been passive participants in the language learning process. Without a clear sense of goal, it is difficult to decide what language learning methods will be most effective. One question NTs may hear often from students is "How can I improve my English?" The initial urge may be to suggest that the questioner study hard, but this invariably brings a groan from the student and a demand that you stop avoiding the question. Instead, ask the questioner to be more precise about his or her goal—is it to build a better reading vocabulary? Improve oral fluency? You may find that the questioner often has no clear idea of what he or she wants to achieve beyond "improving English." Later in this book, especially in Chapters 7–12, you will find many ideas that can help you answer the "How do I improve my English?" question. However, simply asking students to think more carefully about what their goals are—and then what methods they might use to work

toward those goals—is a big first step toward helping them become better language learners.

A final way to help students become better language learners is to help them explore different methods and strategies for language learning. In part, this involves sharing what you know about language learning from your own experiences, both positive and negative. However, it is equally important to encourage students to explore new methods on their own and share with each other what works and what does not. Often, the mere fact that you raise this issue from time to time for class discussion expands students' horizons and serves as a useful stimulus, prodding them to get out of an old study routine that may have outlived its usefulness for them.

Encouraging and Motivating Students

In EFL settings where opportunities to use English are relatively few and far between, one of the main challenges faced by English teachers is how to motivate students. Though many students are initially interested in learning English, it is not unusual for their enthusiasm to disappear over time, partly because learning a foreign language involves lots of hard work, partly because English doesn't seem immediately useful or relevant to their lives, and partly because they rarely get a chance to use the skills they learn.

For many students in EFL settings, to the extent that they are motivated to study English at all, their primary motivation is extrinsic: motivation based on a reward that comes from outside the learner. Examples of extrinsic motivation would include the desire to get a good score on a test or to get a good job. Such rewards can have significant power in motivating students to study and learn, but they are also problematic. For example, students who are motivated primarily by a desire to do well on tests may study only what they need to in order to pass the test, and then lose interest in English study once the test is over. Similarly, if the prospect of a job is years in the future, it becomes a reward that seems too distant and may not have much power to motivate students to study today.

Rather than relying exclusively on extrinsic rewards to motivate students, English teachers should also try to build their students' intrinsic motivation by encouraging them to consider rewards that come from within themselves, such as a sense of accomplishment, the love of learning new things, the love of creating, or the desire to pursue their curiosity and interests. In fact, many researchers suggest that intrinsic motivation is a more powerful driving force than extrinsic motivation (Brown & Lee, 2015). One reason intrinsic rewards tend to be especially effective as motivators is that, coming from within the learner, they are always there to

EXTRINSIC REWARDS

▶ Good test scores

▶ Increased range of education opportunities

▶ Better job opportunities (e.g., wider range, better pay, more promotion opportunities, opportunity to travel)

▶ Ability to interact with people from other countries (for practical purposes)

▶ Access to professional information in English (e.g., books, journals, websites, lectures)

▶ Access to a wider range of information about the world and world events

▶ Easier travel

INTRINSIC REWARDS

▶ Sense of accomplishment (e.g., pride, self-respect)

▶ Sense of confidence in one's ability to handle a wider range of situations

▶ Opportunity to pursue a wider range of interests (e.g., through reading books or watching films one likes in English)

▶ Sense of understanding the world better, being more in touch with the international scene, and being a "world citizen"

▶ Opportunity to develop friendships with people from other countries (out of a personal desire to do so)

drive one's study—they are not years away, and they don't disappear when the test ends.

One way you can help motivate students to engage actively in English study is simply to make your class as lively and interesting as possible; on the whole, students tend to learn more about something they like and find interesting than about something that holds no appeal for them. A class that is lively and enjoyable is—all other things being equal—usually better than one that is boring or tense. It is also helpful if students find you encouraging and friendly, and if the class environment is as nonthreatening as possible.

A second way to arouse and maintain student interest in English study is to make your courses as genuinely communicative as possible. Most people enjoy talking about themselves and learning about others, which provides a natural opportunity for speaking and even writing practice—and is certainly more interesting than rewriting sentences or parroting a memorized dialogue. Many students are also interested in the world beyond the borders of their town or country, and learning about this broader world provides an excellent excuse for reading and listening. In fact, as a foreigner in your host country, you have a powerful advantage as a teacher because your presence in the classroom creates a natural *information gap*. In other words, you know many things that the students don't, and vice versa, so you have a great deal to talk to each other about without having to manufacture a topic.

The two other important factors in the sustaining of student motivation, a sense of progress and feeling of reward, have been mentioned above and are also covered in more detail in Chapter 3. Here, suffice it to say that praise from the teacher and a good time in class will not go far if students do not feel that they are making progress or that their study has any purpose.

A final way you can be a source of encouragement for students is by serving as a role model (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Students often have great respect for a teacher who has mastered a foreign language, and this respect may make them more eager to follow the teacher's example. However, it by no means follows that a good language teacher must be a great language learner; in fact, those rare individuals who seem to absorb languages effortlessly may be discouraging for struggling students to be around, and such individuals may not make very good language teachers because they don't understand the difficulties that mere mortals face. To be a good role model, what is perhaps most important is for you to make a serious effort to learn what you can and

for students to see you practicing what you preach. Your effort to learn the language of your host country will make your life there easier and richer, give you a much better idea of the difficulties that the students face, and increase your ability to empathize with them. In general, students tend to work harder for a teacher who they feel understands them and identifies with them than one who doesn't seem to share their burdens. (See further discussion of learning the host language in Chapter 15.)

Building Accountability and Discipline

When it comes right down to it, one of the greatest advantages of taking a language course (as opposed to studying a language on your own) is that it provides someone who holds you accountable for how much and how well you learn. In other words, when you take a course, you must study because tomorrow there might be a quiz, a test, a discussion covering tonight's reading assignment, or at least a teacher who will be disappointed if you don't do what you are supposed to. Thus, as long as human beings are naturally inclined toward procrastination and laziness, a third important role of the language teacher will be to see that students put in the many hours of work necessary for language mastery and to help them learn the discipline to keep them working diligently when there is no longer a teacher around.

Many of the ways teachers hold students accountable come under the heading of assessment and evaluation, discussed in Chapter 4, but let us note here that accountability is not only a matter of quizzes, tests, graded homework assignments, and other measures that students often view as more akin to the stick than the carrot. Accountability also includes praise, encouragement for work well done, and almost any other response that recognizes students' efforts. Research in psychology indicates that such rewards have a strong positive impact on students. In fact, praise from respected people tends to act more like intrinsic than extrinsic motivation, even though it comes from outside the learner (Brown & Lee, 2015).

The basic idea of accountability is that you consider students' efforts important and care whether or not they did their work. Some students will work only if threatened; others only need a gentle reminder. Most, however, are a little more likely to work if they know that they will be held responsible for doing so. Though excessive anxiety in a situation can hinder learning, "a certain amount of it can stimulate a learner to invest more energy in the task" (Littlewood, 1984, p. 59).

Encouraging Students to Take Command

The language teacher's final role is to move students toward taking charge of their own language learning — setting their own goals, making their own study plans, and then holding themselves to those plans — because it is self-starters who are most likely to succeed in language learning. As Brown (2001) notes,

> All too often, language teachers are so consumed with the "delivery" of language to their students that they neglect to spend some effort preparing learners to "receive" the language. And students, mostly unaware of the tricks of successful language learning, simply do whatever the teacher tells them to do, having no means to question the wisdom thereof. In an effort to fill class hours with fascinating material, teachers might overlook their mission of enabling learners to eventually become *independent* of classrooms — that is, to be autonomous learners. (p. 208)

Even as you plan your course, then, you need to think about ways in which you can encourage students to take initiative. There are endless ways to do this:

▶ Have students keep their own vocabulary list,

▶ let them choose their own books for reading practice,

▶ have them choose topics for writing or discussions,

▶ ask them to tape their own listening material (e.g., off the radio), or

▶ even have them design and carry out their own study plan as a component of your course.

It is most important that students get into the habit of taking charge of their own study programs as much as possible.

One aspect of helping students take control of their own learning is exposing them to different learning strategies (e.g., see Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 2011). As mentioned above, students are individuals who differ in their learning styles as well as in their English skill levels. Some students learn language best through careful analysis, and others may rely more on instinct; some thrive in freewheeling group discussion, and others in quiet conversations with a partner. However, in many countries, students are only familiar with a narrow range of study methods that are recommended — or required — by teachers, classmates, or tradition, and may use methods unsuitable to their personalities or skills simply because they are not aware of alternatives. One of your roles as a teacher is to suggest approaches to language learning that students might not have previously considered. Of course, this is easier if you have yourself had experience with a broad range of study methods and strategies, but you can still make a valuable contribution simply by calling students' attention to the issue — many students have never consciously asked themselves what study methods are best suited to them. That you are from a different culture also means that you are probably familiar with a somewhat different range of study methods than those normally used by students in your host country, and this creates the possibility for useful and interesting cross-fertilization.

Language learning projects (LLPs) are another aspect of encouraging students to take control of their own language learning. In the framework of your course, an LLP is a separate, additional project in which students choose their own goals, methods, and study plans. Though doing an LLP may be a required part of your course, students are expected to take as much responsibility as possible for all aspects of the project — including evaluation. The virtue of such projects is that, in addition to helping students learn a little more English, they help students become more independent and autonomous as language learners. The hope is that by helping students become accustomed to taking as much responsibility as possible for their own language learning, you are helping prepare them for the day when they can no longer rely on teachers and ready-made courses to drive their further language study. (See Chapter 3 for more on LLPs.)

Getting students to take charge of their own language study is often more easily said than done. Many students don't truly desire to learn English and only long for the day when they complete their requirement and can kiss the whole thing good-bye. However, there are other students whose attitudes toward language study will change if you carefully but firmly hand the reins over to them.

Making Your Assumptions Explicit

The assumptions we've made about language teaching are basic tenets of CLT and would not raise many eyebrows in the Western English teaching world. However, some very different assumptions may shape the approaches of your host-country colleagues and students. Here are a few examples:

1. **Teacher-centered approaches to education:** In many societies, the teacher's social role is much closer to that of the sage than that of the coach; teachers are respected in the community primarily for their knowledge of their field, and their word is not to

be challenged. In such a society, a teacher-centered approach to education fits the culture better than the student-centered approach we have argued for.

2. **Emphasis on standardized education:** The emphasis on the student as a unique individual with a distinct learning style may seem rather foreign in some societies. Compared to the United States, for example, many societies are more culturally uniform, have a more standardized education system, and encourage individualism less.

3. **Text-centered, grammar-focused approach to language:** Some of your host-country colleagues may have had little opportunity to develop their English skills, particularly spoken fluency; in contrast, they may be very familiar with the formal features of English, especially grammar and vocabulary. They may also tend to give lectures that stick closely to the text because this allows them to prepare a limited body of material. This text-centered, grammar-analysis approach to teaching plays to their strengths; a highly communicative teaching approach might be unfamiliar and very difficult for some of your colleagues to adopt.

Note also that for many students who are in educational systems in which test results determine their academic futures and careers, learning how to communicate is not the primary goal; the primary goal is to score well on exams. In such situations, though it is desirable to add a communication skill element, it would be irresponsible for the teacher to fail to prepare students for tests, and traditional methods may well be as effective in preparing students for exams as communicative methods are—or more so.

Our point is not to undermine all of the principles that we have argued for in this chapter; those CLT principles are sound and provide a good foundation for your language teaching. However, it is important not to arrive in your host country with the attitude that your colleagues and students are backward and that your job is to reform their English teaching system; likewise, you don't want to create the impression that you think your local colleagues' work is of little value. A more generous, fairer, and diplomatic way to look at the situation is to recognize that all approaches to teaching have advantages and disadvantages, and that in many ways the teaching methods we have described as traditional may be very efficacious within their context. However, they also have weaknesses, and your different approaches to teaching can help round out the diet of language learning approaches offered to students.

We have two suggestions for helping students deal with discrepancies between your language teaching approaches and their language learning expectations:

1. **Communicate your expectations explicitly.** You cannot assume that students share your assumptions. Students should know what to expect in your class and how you perceive your role as teacher. You may sometimes also need to modify your assumptions so that you are more in tune with your class. In fact, this may even be necessary in classes in English-speaking countries, and Nunan (1989) recommends negotiation in these cases.

2. **Present your approaches as assumptions.** You need not explicitly or implicitly criticize other approaches to teaching. Instead, present your assumptions as just that—your assumptions—rather than as the only acceptable approach to language teaching. As suggested previously, some of these ideas have a Western flavor, and you might present them as an alternative approach that you are adopting in class because it suits your teaching strengths and because it is a part of your culture.

By approaching your teaching in this way, you are less likely to come into conflict with your host culture, and it will be easier for you to maintain an open mind when considering other approaches to teaching.

A Concluding Thought

When all is said and done, your most important role may be an unintended one, related more to who you are than what you do. Many schools like having NTs less because of their expertise in language teaching than because they are natives of an English-speaking country, and your presence has a number of advantages for an English program. First, as Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) note, the presence of foreigners brings a sense of authenticity and reality to the classroom—you are living proof that there is a place where real people use the peculiar sounds and symbols of English for real communication. Second, your presence forces students—possibly for the first time—to use English as the medium for real communication. Unlike your host-country colleagues, you probably can't speak to students in any language other than English, and even limited communication with you is evidence to students that they have in fact learned something that has a purpose beyond exams. This realization can be a boost to students' self-confidence. Finally, the opportunity to meet and get to know a native of

an English-speaking country often does a great deal to raise students' level of interest in English study. As Rubin and Thompson (1994) point out,

> Research has shown a definite relationship between attitudes and success when foreign language learners have an opportunity to know people who speak the language they are studying. Such positive attitudes usually help learners maintain their interest long enough to achieve their goals. (p. 6)

The implication of these realities is this: Though you should still strive to make your teaching as professional as possible, you should also bear in mind that, simply through your presence and your efforts, you may be making a far greater contribution than you would have imagined.

For Thought, Discussion, and Action

1. **A look back:** Look back at your own foreign language learning experience to date, and list lessons you have learned about what does and does not seem to work in foreign language learning. Compare your ideas with those of your friends or classmates and discuss.

2. **Feelings in language learning:** Think back to your experience learning a foreign language, and try to remember the role feelings played in the process. List ways in which feelings entered the experience and the effect they had on your learning.

3. **Language learning survey:** Ask several friends or classmates to talk with you about their language learn-ing experiences. What are the best language learning experiences they had, and why were they good? What experiences were more difficult, and why?

4. **Skill learning:** Think back on your experience learning a skill (e.g., playing a sport, doing a craft, playing a musical instrument). Describe the process, and compare it with your foreign language learning experiences. In what ways were the processes similar, and how did they differ?

5. **Past language teachers:** Think back on positive and negative examples of language teachers you have had. Who would you like to be like, and why? Who would you not like to be like, and why?

6. **Description of a language learning experience:** Think of a successful language learning experience you had, and prepare a detailed description involving everything you can remember that might be relevant. Then share your experience — and any lessons learned — with

a friend or classmate. Include answers to questions like these:
   ▶ What was your skill level at the time?
   ▶ What was your goal?
   ▶ Why did you do what you did? What motivated you?
   ▶ What exactly did you do? (Describe in detail.)
   ▶ What materials did you use?
   ▶ What role did a teacher play?
   ▶ What influence did classmates have?
   ▶ What was the environment in which you learned/ studied like?
   ▶ Why did it work?

7. **Legacies:** Ask a friend from the host country to talk with you about the history — both good and bad — of relations between the host country and your country. Ask what impact — if any — the historical legacy or current relations might have on the students' attitudes toward studying English.

8. **Host-country learning culture:** Ask someone from your host country to tell you about the normal language teaching and learning practices there. Talk with that person about the learning and teaching assumptions discussed in this chapter, and find out how they compare to the assumptions commonly held in the host country.

9. **Communicative language teaching:** Talk with an English teacher from your host country about CLT. Find out what he or she knows about it, whether or not it is promoted or accepted in the host country, and what he or she thinks about it.

10. **Choices in language learning:** One of the most important strategies for helping students become more independent and autonomous as language learners is to give them as much choice as possible in their own study. The more they make their own choices, the more they are likely to take responsibility for their own English study. Consider a typical English course in your country, and make a list of ways you could give students some choice in their English study (e.g., with regard to goals, homework, activities). Be as specific as possible.

11. **Intrinsic motivation:** Brown and Lee (2015) argue that teachers should try to build students' intrinsic motivation as much as possible, and provide the following checklist of criteria to determine whether a particular language teaching technique, activity, or strategy promotes intrinsic motivation. Analyze each of

the criteria, and explain how or why it would contribute to intrinsic motivation:

- ▶ Does the technique appeal to the genuine interests of the students? Is it relevant?
- ▶ Do you present the technique in a positive, enthusiastic manner?
- ▶ Are students clearly aware of the purpose of the activity?
- ▶ Do students have some choice in choosing some aspect of the activity?
- ▶ Does the activity encourage students to "discover" on their own?
- ▶ Does it encourage students to use effective strategies?

- ▶ Does it contribute to students' ultimate autonomy and independence?
- ▶ Does it foster cooperative negotiation with other students in the class?
- ▶ Does the activity present a "reasonable challenge"?
- ▶ Do students receive sufficient feedback on their performance? (p. 170)

12. **Genuine communication:** This chapter suggests that one way to motivate students is to include as much genuine communication as possible in English courses. Make a checklist (like the list above) for assessing whether or not an activity is genuinely communicative.