

Language Teachers as Language Learners



- A good language teacher should first and foremost be a good language learner.
- It is important for English teachers to be reasonably successful learners of English because this makes them better models of good English for their students, gives them greater confidence when using English in class, and makes them role models who can inspire students.
- It is also important for English teachers to have extensive experience as language learners because this gives them a better understanding of how to learn languages, helps them empathize with students, and makes them good role models for language learning habits and skills.

In this chapter—and throughout this book—I assume that a good language teacher should first and foremost be a good language learner. I feel this should be true for all teachers of English, including those who are native speakers of English. However, because my focus in this book is on local English teachers, I discuss this issue especially as it relates to teachers who learned English as a second language.

By the term *good learner*, I mean two rather different things. First, a good learner is someone who has succeeded in gaining the best command of English possible. Second, a good learner is someone who is a skilled and effective language learner, who knows how to learn a new language and how to teach this skill to students. I believe that this second quality may be even more important than having a good command of English, and in this chapter I make my case for why this would be true. I also discuss ways teachers can continue their own independent study of English by designing and carrying out language learning projects.

Why Should an English Teacher Be a *Successful* English Learner?

First and foremost, the English language skills of English teachers should be as good as possible. While this is not the only criterion for determining whether someone is a qualified or effective teacher of English, as I discuss below, it certainly is an important one. So, as Medgyes (2001) argues, “the most important professional duty that non-NESTs [nonnative-English-speaking teachers] have to perform is to make linguistic improvements in their English” (p. 440; see also Lee 2004, 244).

There are three main reasons why I feel it is important for local English teachers to gain a good command of English. The first and most obvious has to do with the model your English presents to the students. It is probably not overstating things to suggest that, at least while students are in your class, your English essentially becomes their English standard. Your English serves not only as the model that students will imitate, but also as a standard they will use in deciding what is right and what is wrong. In fact, one of your main roles is to set a standard for students and encourage them in their efforts to draw closer to that standard in their own mastery of English.

To set a good standard for students, local teachers do not need to have a native command of English, and such a command is perhaps not even very desirable. For the great majority of students in EFL settings, a natively like command of English is simply not a realistic goal because they do not have adequate practice opportunities or exposure to native models to develop a full range of natively like skills (Sridhar and Sridhar 1994, 46–47, cited in McKay 2002, 40). Instead, their goal is to develop a degree of competence in English that meets whatever communicative needs they have for English, and not every student needs native-level English skills; in fact, most do not. This being the case, a skilled nonnative speaker is often a more realistic model than a native speaker. Also, the growing use of English as an international language means that the students you teach are just as likely to interact with people who are not from English-speaking countries as they are to interact with native English speakers. This further reduces the need for students to strive to be just like native speakers in their use of English (see McKay 2002 for further discussion).

However, your English should certainly be as good as possible—well within the range that is generally understood and accepted internationally—because your English will affect the students’ English in many ways. Perhaps the most obvious example of such influence is pronunciation: some students’ pronunciation is inaccurate and hard to understand partly because the English teachers under which they studied when first learning English had poor pronunciation. The other side of the coin is that some students whose English is quite fluent and skilled were taught

mainly or entirely by local English teachers whose English—although not native—was quite good. So the point is that one reason English teachers need to have a good command of English—accurate grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and so forth—is the impact their English will have in shaping students’ English.

A second reason English teachers should have the best possible command of English is that it gives the teacher greater confidence when using and teaching the language. Even though many local English teachers are quite successful in learning English, many have not yet attained as high a level of competence in English as they would like (Liu 1999, 204). This leads Medgyes (2001)—a nonnative-speaking teacher of English himself—to note that nonnative-speaking teachers are “well aware of their linguistic deficiencies” (p. 434), and Medgyes (1999) concludes, “Indeed, most non-NESTs are all too aware that they are teachers and learners of the same subject” (p. 38).¹ This awareness naturally has the potential to negatively affect teachers’ confidence when teaching English.

My own experience teaching Chinese when I was a graduate student at Indiana University may serve to illustrate the problem. Having learned and used Chinese for many years, I was reasonably confident of my Chinese skills and generally willing to speak Chinese in class. However, despite my years of learning the language, there was always a fear lurking in the back of my mind that I would make a mistake, pronouncing words with the wrong intonation or using a vocabulary item incorrectly. Worse yet was the fear that a student would notice my mistake and tell others. So a portion of my energy and attention was consumed by the effort to avoid making any mistakes—and to a degree this diverted my attention from the issue of how effectively I was teaching. (In contrast, while I make language mistakes when teaching English, I don’t worry about it much because I am less vulnerable, and my credentials are less open to question.) Another concern I often faced was the possibility of a student asking a question I didn’t know the answer to. Granted, when a student would ask something like “Is it OK to say . . . in Chinese?” I could sometimes answer confidently that the suggested sentence was either right or wrong. However, at times the sentence sounded questionable, but I couldn’t be sure it was actually wrong, so I didn’t know if the student had made a mistake or was just asking about something I hadn’t learned yet. Sometimes the fear of such tricky questions would even cause me to shorten or omit an activity that might raise questions I wasn’t sure I could handle.

Issues like the ones I faced when teaching Chinese are an inevitable part of teaching a language other than one’s native tongue—in fact, such problems even crop up to annoy teachers who are teaching their native language—so teachers should not expect that they will ever go away entirely. However, the better your English is, the fewer such concerns you will have, not only because you are less likely to be caught in an embarrassing mistake, but also because your command of English will make it clear to everyone that you know your subject well, even if you do make an occasional mistake. Confidence in your language skills allows you to be less distracted by worry in class and makes you more willing to take risks—for example, being more open to class discussion and questions—because you are more confident that you can handle problems and challenges that may result. Also, confidence itself will benefit your teaching because students can sense a teacher’s confidence and tend to respond positively to it.

A final reason it is good for local English teachers to have made significant progress in their mastery of English is that teachers who are role models of success in language learning can inspire and encourage students. Medgyes (1999, 51) tells the story of a Hungarian English

¹In his research, Medgyes (1999, 2001) found that the areas in which non-NESTs claimed to have the most difficulty with English were (in order of importance) (1) vocabulary, especially usage; (2) oral fluency; and (3) pronunciation.

teacher who managed to achieve an almost native command of English despite the fact that he didn't start learning English until he was sixteen and didn't visit an English-speaking country until he was thirty. In many ways, this particular teacher was not ideal—he often did not prepare for class very carefully and tended to be impatient with slow students. However, he was still generally regarded as a good teacher because he provided a powerful, positive role model for students. As Medgyes concludes, “The fact that such a high level of proficiency is within a nonnative speaker's reach has an inspiring effect on his students” (p. 51).

One of the most important contributions that a local teacher can make to students is to show them that success in learning English—or other languages—is possible. The point here is not that a local teacher needs to have a perfect command of English; in fact, a local English teacher whose English is perfect may sometimes seem like an unrealistic role model for students, one that is far beyond their power to emulate. Students need a role model who can show them what they can achieve if they study and practice hard, and, to this end, the best role model is someone who has obviously faced the same challenges that students do but has made considerable progress in overcoming those challenges.

Why Should an English Teacher Be an *Experienced* English Learner?

By an experienced language learner, I mean someone who has spent considerable time studying and learning foreign languages and who knows a lot about language learning. While such people are often also successful language learners, it is still important to make a distinction between successful learners and experienced learners. Teachers who speak English well are not necessarily experienced and effective language learners; for example, they may speak English well more because they have had an unusual degree of exposure to the language (perhaps because they have studied English for many years or lived in an English-speaking country) than because they are skilled language learners who understand—and can explain—how to learn a language effectively and efficiently. Also, someone who is an experienced and knowledgeable language learner may not have the best command of English. For example, someone who has learned many languages but started learning English rather late in life may show flaws in pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and so forth, yet still be a skilled and knowledgeable language learner—and probably a good language teacher. So, in this section, my focus is on the reasons English teachers need to have as much experience as possible as language learners.

One of the most important reasons language teachers should be veteran language learners is that the more experienced teachers are as language learners, the more they can teach students about language learning methods and strategies. The field of language learning strategies has attracted increasing attention from scholars over the past decade or so within the international English teaching profession. There is now a substantial and growing list of books available on the subject of language learning strategies, and an English teacher can learn a great deal from these books about the various kinds of learning strategies and the role each plays in facilitating language learning.² Likewise, there is a large and growing literature devoted to the issue of second language acquisition—in other words, how people learn languages—and it is also of benefit to

²Probably the most important of these is Oxford's (1990) *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*, which not only introduces the categories and terms now widely used and accepted in the field of language learning strategies but also makes many suggestions for how these can be applied in foreign language classrooms.

a teacher to be familiar with the theories and findings in this field.³ However, such theoretical knowledge in and of itself is not enough and should not be taken as a substitute for personal experience. For the classroom English teacher, it is probably more important to have a large database of practical ideas and stories about language learning that you can pass on to students. Academic references to theories and authorities generally don't impress students as much as an idea that is shared in the form of a personal story, so it is best if teachers have a substantial collection of such ideas and stories.

Of course, one good way to build a collection of language learning stories and ideas is by talking with other language learners and learning from their experience. However, it is equally important—if not more so—to draw on your own experience as a language learner. Keep in mind here that simply having experience as a language learner is not enough. Many language teachers have ample experience as language learners, but they have never thought much about what lessons they learned from that experience and don't have a conscious awareness of the strategies they used in their learning. (It is quite possible to succeed in learning a language even without thinking much about how you do it, but this generally only works if you are lucky enough to have a great deal of time for language learning, an especially good language program, or an environment where there are extensive opportunities to practice. On the whole, learners who reflect on the question of how to learn more effectively will tend to become more effective language learners and less dependent on luck or especially favorable circumstances.) To build a collection of strategies that you can pass on to students, you need to not only engage in language learning but also reflect on what lessons you learn from your experiences.

A second reason English teachers need to have substantial experience as language learners is that it helps them understand and empathize with students better. This is an area in which local teachers often have significant advantages over foreign teachers who are native speakers of English (Mahboob 2004, 137). As I argue in chapter 2, learning a foreign language is a battle of the heart as much as of the mind, and success and failure in language learning is determined to a large degree by affective factors (those dealing with emotions). Teachers who have spent considerable time trying to learn foreign languages know what the process feels like, so they are better able to empathize with their students. Keep in mind that empathy is not the same thing as sympathy; I am not talking about feeling sorry for students, hence trying to make their lives easier. There are times when a teacher needs to be strict and demanding, and to challenge students to work harder. Rather, the ability to empathize with students—to feel their joys and pains—helps teachers make many important teaching decisions more effectively. Teachers need to know how much they can and should demand of students, how much encouragement students need, what kinds of encouragement students need, what kinds of goals will effectively motivate them, and so forth, and the ability to make such decisions wisely depends heavily on the teacher's ability to sense how students are feeling. The ability to empathize with students is also important in establishing a bond with them. Students generally respond better to a teacher when they feel that the teacher understands them and can see things from their perspective than when the teacher is well intentioned but seems to have little idea what the language learning experience is like.

The final reason language teachers should engage in as much language learning as possible—and why they should continue studying languages throughout their careers—is that, by doing so, they provide students with a good role model of a language learner. You might think about the difference between this kind of role model and the successful learner role model

³Two reader-friendly but solid introductions to second language acquisition are Scovel's (2001) *Learning New Languages: A Guide to Second Language Acquisition* and Lightbown and Spada's (1999) *How Languages Are Learned*.

discussed above as the difference between the result and the process. Local teachers who have succeeded in learning English well inspire students to believe that success is possible. Local teachers who are personally enthusiastic about language learning and consider it valuable tend to inspire similar enthusiasm in their students (Dörnyei 2001a, 33; 2001b, 121). The role model of their ongoing study of English, or perhaps other languages, also helps students better understand what is necessary for success in language learning.

To the extent that students know you are still a language learner—of English or of other languages—they will have the sense that you still have much in common with them. A teacher who continues to engage in language study is like a guide who leads an expedition but is also a member of the expedition, sharing in its joys and difficulties. People are often more willing to follow this kind of leader than one who gives orders and directions from a comfortable office far away, someone who may have long ago forgotten what being on an expedition is really like.

If students know that you are still a language learner, and even occasionally see you working on improving your language skills, they may get the message that success in language learning results from sustained effort as much as—or more than—from some special gift for languages. If you only see athletes perform at the Olympic Games, it is easy to get the impression that they are top world athletes mainly because they were born with some special skill or talent. If, on the other hand, you see the athletes running on the track every day as they prepare for the Olympics, you get a more realistic idea of what lies behind their success. The same is true for language learners. Sometimes, the assumption about people who have learned to speak English or another foreign language very well is that they have a special gift for languages that allows them to learn effortlessly. The lesson you could easily derive from this is that for the lucky few who have such a language gift, excellent English is a present that drops from the sky—and that for everyone else there isn't much hope. However, just like athletes who see their coach running on the track every morning, students who see their English teachers working persistently to further improve their command of English or other languages are more likely to come to the conclusion that success in language learning results from sustained effort rather than from any special talent or gift and that any learner who is willing to work can be successful. This is precisely the message teachers want students to receive, and one of the best ways for you to teach this lesson is by modeling it in your own life.

In this book, I assume that the ideal English teacher is someone who not only knows English well but also knows how to learn English (and other languages) and can teach students how to learn English. This point is important to emphasize because many people assume that the most important criterion for determining who is or is not a good English teacher is how good the person's English is. Of course, if this is the only criterion used, the ideal English teacher is generally a native speaker. While native speakers of English generally have one of the qualities that make for a good English teacher—a good command of English—they do not necessarily have much understanding of how English is learned. Because they learned English at a very early age, they generally have little or no memory of how they learned it. Furthermore, they generally learned English in a setting where it was used constantly around them and where their English learning process was inseparable from their process of learning to communicate and interact with the people around them. Of course, the process by which native speakers learn English usually differs in many important ways from the process by which your students will learn English, so to the extent that native speakers understand the process of English learning, they have to learn this in indirect ways, such as through experience in learning other languages or observation of EFL learners. In contrast, local teachers who learned English as a foreign language not only have a command of English but also have experience with the process by which students will learn it. You

therefore have some experience with all of the key elements for becoming an effective English teacher—if you exploit these experiences to the full.

Language Learning Projects

I have argued that the English skills of English teachers should be as good as possible and that English teachers should have as much language learning experience as possible. Both of these ideas suggest that it is important for you to continue learning English—as well as other languages—throughout your career. I now turn to the question of how to continue your study of English and other languages, in particular, how to keep studying on your own through independent study efforts that I will call *language learning projects* (LLPs).

A successful language learning effort needs to be designed according to the learner and the situation, so planning needs to begin with an analysis of the situation and the challenges and opportunities it provides. Obviously, there will be considerable variation in the situations and challenges faced by readers of this book, but I think there are three reasonable generalizations I can safely make about most of you, each of which has important implications for how you should design an English learning plan:

- **Generalization 1:** You are probably in an EFL context, so opportunities to contact and use English are limited. Despite the increasing use of English as an international language, in most countries where English is taught as a foreign language, it plays a limited role and is used only in certain kinds of settings. While learners of English generally can find opportunities to practice and use English, such opportunities are limited, and you often need to actively seek them out. This means that a study plan for English needs to consider how to maximize the opportunities available within the context.
- **Generalization 2:** You are probably not a full-time student of English, so you will only have limited time for your English study plan. Presumably, readers of this book are either teachers who have jobs, family concerns, and so forth that take up most of their time, or graduate students who need to balance English study with the demands of many other courses. Any English study plan therefore needs to be designed so that it is sustainable within the limited amount of time you have available. (In my own experience, after dealing with work and family responsibilities, people can often find only a few hours a week for language study.)
- **Generalization 3:** You probably need to study on your own rather than taking an organized formal English course. Often people cannot find time to take regular English courses that fit in with their schedules, and there may be no courses available that are appropriate to your level of skill and study needs and goals. In some ways, independent study is actually more efficient than taking an English class because it allows you to spend all of your time doing exactly what is most helpful and useful to you, whereas in an English class you spend lots of time doing things that are not appropriate to your needs or goals. However, the fact that you are not in a formal language course means that you are under less pressure to study—there is no test that you need to study for and no teacher who will hold you accountable. This means that you have to choose to study daily—despite the pressure of many other things that cry out for your time and energy—and it is very easy to put off English study or simply to give up entirely. A successful English study

program therefore needs to be one that you can sustain even when there is little immediate pressure forcing you to study.

An effective independent English study effort needs to take these three important considerations into account. In particular, it needs to be sustainable—in other words, it needs to be something you will actually continue to do—over the long periods of time that language learning requires.

Here I discuss how to design and carry out what I call LLPs, independent language study plans that are designed to be sustainable in the kind of situation described above, in other words, in the kinds of situations many English learners the world over face. (In chapter 3, I also use the term LLP to refer to independent language study projects that you have students design and carry out as part of their work for regular language courses; these projects help build their ability to become more independent and autonomous as language learners.)

GETTING READY FOR LLPS

In the long run, the most important factor in determining whether or not you succeed in learning English is persistence; students who keep studying and practicing have a good chance at ultimate success, while those who give up do not. The key to language study, especially in situations where learners have the choice not to study, is therefore to study in a way that is sustainable—in other words, that minimizes discouragement and provides you with enough sense of progress and reward that you will keep studying. Before setting out to plan your own LLP, you can increase the likelihood that your project will be sustainable and ultimately successful by seriously thinking about the following questions.

How Much Time Do I Have Available for the LLP?

Time is a limited commodity, and you need to keep this reality firmly in mind when planning LLPs. When first planning an LLP, many people make big plans that would take massive investments of time to sustain. (“First I will review English grammar and memorize new vocabulary. Then I will listen to the BBC news on the radio each day. Then I will read Dickens for an hour”) Obviously, a plan of this magnitude is unrealistic for anyone who cannot devote hours a day to English study, and the danger of such unrealistic plans is that they result in failure and discouragement, feelings that do not bode well for the survival of the plan.

What Opportunities Do I Have to Practice English?

EFL settings vary both in the amount of opportunity to use English skills and in the skills that you might have an opportunity to use. For example, in one setting, there may be relatively few printed materials in English but a constant flow of foreign backpackers coming through town. In contrast, in another setting, there may be few chances to speak or listen to English but a reliable supply of books, newspapers, or magazines in English. In the first setting, it would probably be easier for you to find or create opportunities to speak English, so an LLP geared toward that goal would be more exciting and easier to sustain; in the second setting, an LLP focused on reading skills would have a better chance of survival. When you have little chance to use what you learn, a study project tends to seem more pointless. In contrast, if you have a chance to use whatever knowledge and skills you gain through an LLP, the effort is more interesting and exciting, so it is easier to stay motivated and keep studying.

What Do I Like Doing in English?

Learners of English vary considerably in terms of what they enjoy and do not enjoy about using English. One person may hate the embarrassment of trying to speak English but find it reasonably comfortable and even enjoyable to read something written in English. Another may be bored to tears by reading books but get a kick out of trying to talk in a foreign language. A third may dislike English study in general but find listening to radio news in English somewhat tolerable because, even though it is hard work, it provides a way to find out something new and interesting about what is going on in the world.

The point here is that an LLP is more likely to be sustainable if the skill you choose to work on is one that you find reasonably interesting and even enjoyable. While this point is fairly obvious, it is worth emphasizing because all too often people ignore it, choosing goals and making plans based more on what they feel they ought to do rather than what they want to do (perhaps because, in their experience with English, enjoyment and interest have never been suggested as part of the equation). While such a spirit of self-denial is commendable, it is also dangerous when trying to keep an LLP alive; when people are faced with an unpleasant task, it is just too easy to decide, “I’ll do this tomorrow,” and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Such self-denial is also somewhat sad in that it ignores the real possibility that English study can be rewarding. Considering your own desires and interests when deciding what to pursue in an LLP is perfectly legitimate—in fact, it is desirable.

Of course, language study usually can’t be driven by interest alone, and you often need to study in ways that are more useful than interesting. For example, someone who enjoys reading novels and wants to learn to read novels in English will inevitably also have to memorize a lot of vocabulary—whether this person enjoys doing so or not. However, the point I wish to make is that, as much as possible, learners should design LLPs that are as interesting as possible, especially when the LLP is an optional study effort that learners are free to abandon if they don’t like it. It is better to spend time doing something you enjoy in English—such as reading English novels (with some vocabulary study thrown in)—than to become bored with a study plan and have it die.

As you prepare to design your own LLP, the bottom line is that your plan will have a greater chance of success if it is realistic in terms of its time demands, if it takes advantage of whatever opportunities naturally exist or can be created for using the skills learned, and if it plays to your interests as much as possible.

DESIGNING LLPs

Designing an LLP involves four main steps: (1) choosing a goal, (2) choosing study and practice methods, (3) making a concrete plan, and (4) setting criteria for evaluating progress. (See the end of this chapter for sample LLPs.)

Choosing a (Narrow) Goal

As I have suggested, in choosing a goal it is best for you to play to your interests and opportunities as much as possible. However, for the purposes of most LLPs, it is even more important that your goal be quite specific and narrow. The problem with broad goals such as *improve my reading* or *improve my speaking* (not to mention the even broader and vaguer *improve my English*) is that it is hard to tell whether you have actually achieved them or are even making progress toward them. Furthermore, with only a limited amount of time available to invest in the LLP, progress on a broad front is likely to be painfully slow. In contrast, given the same amount of time, progress toward a more specific goal like *improve my ability to read the news articles in an English language newspaper* or *get better at talking about my local community in English* is likely to be more readily evident as

well as faster. Just as the flow of water in a river picks up speed when the riverbed becomes narrower, your progress toward a narrow, specific goal is faster than that toward a broader goal. The primary virtue of this speed is that when you can see and feel your progress, you are more likely to remain encouraged and motivated to continue the project.

Choosing Study and Practice Methods

Keep in mind that study and practice methods should be as similar as possible to the skill that you want to master. Students who spend a great deal of time reading English newspaper articles tend to get better at reading English newspaper articles, and so forth. Of course, as noted, things are not quite this simple. For example, if you are trying to improve your ability to read news items in the newspaper, you will also benefit from memorization of news-related vocabulary, such as names of places and people. However, overall this principle is a helpful one to follow.

Planning Where, When, and How Long to Study

Some people can make impressive progress in language study without having a very clear plan, just studying where and when the spirit strikes them. However, for most people the successful maintenance of an LLP involves planning for a place where they can study and practice effectively and finding reasonably regular times when they can study. On the whole, regular, sustained effort is more likely to produce noticeable progress toward the goal than more erratic efforts are and thus is more likely to generate adequate momentum to encourage you to continue.

Keep in mind here that the total amount of time per week you can give to an LLP may be quite limited, perhaps not much more than two or three hours. While this amount of time is hardly ideal—and a more significant time investment is more likely to generate encouraging results—it is often the reality for learners who are engaged in other full-time study or work. However, if the goal toward which you are working is narrow and specific enough, and the LLP is sustained over time, even this modest investment of time can produce adequate progress to sustain your motivation (whereas this amount of time would result in little apparent progress toward more broadly defined goals).

Setting Criteria for Measuring Progress

You will tend to have a stronger and clearer sense of achievement if you can see progress in your LLPs in quantifiable ways. To some degree, the goals of LLPs serve as indicators telling you whether or not you have made progress. However, goals are intended to set direction more than to measure progress, and even specific, narrow goals are often not concrete or quantifiable enough to show you your progress. Therefore, it is generally helpful to include criteria in your LLPs by which you can assess whether or not you have achieved your goals, indicators that tell you how much progress you have made toward the goals.

While these criteria do not all need to be scientifically precise, at least some of them should be concrete and quantifiable. For example, if the goal is *to improve my ability to read the news articles in an English language newspaper*, achievement criteria should include some criteria based directly on the goals, for example, *can read and understand the gist of English newspaper articles without using a dictionary*. However, it is best if there are also some very quantifiable criteria such as *have read fifty English newspaper articles and learned the vocabulary in them*.

THE BREAKTHROUGH CONCEPT

One obvious limitation of LLPs as described above is that you work only toward a limited set of language improvement goals rather than toward the enhancement of all your English skills. However, on the whole, I feel this trade-off is worthwhile because of all you gain in terms of sus-

tainability. Furthermore, I assume that, eventually, for any given skill you work on, there is what I call a *breakthrough point*, that is, a point at which you can actually begin to use the skill for a useful or rewarding purpose. For example, in the development of conversation skills, you might reach the breakthrough point when you can strike up and sustain conversations with Western tourists without being so embarrassed that you beat a quick retreat. Or the breakthrough might occur when you can understand English novels well enough that you begin to find reading more fun than work. Or it could be the point at which your oral skills are good enough that your department begins asking you to translate when foreign guests come to the office.

Of course, the breakthrough point in all of these cases may not be a particular instant; it may be a longer process. Notice also that the breakthrough involves feelings as much as skill per se; it is often a point at which you become willing to apply the skill because rewards (e.g., access to new people and information, a sense of achievement) have begun to outweigh the costs (e.g., hard work, potential embarrassment).

But no matter how it is defined, a distinct and important change happens once you can begin to use your English language skills either for personal reward or for practical benefit, and, once you reach this point, your continued language learning takes on more momentum because you can use the language in contexts other than language study. In reference to the examples above, your conversation skills will continue to improve as you enjoy chatting with tourists, your reading skills will get better as you read for pleasure, and your listening skills will be further honed as you continue to translate. From this point on, the continued use and improvement of the new language skill takes on a life of its own. Once you reach a breakthrough point in one skill, you can then move to a different LLP building a different skill and targeted at a different breakthrough point. In my experience as a language learner and teacher, once you have reached a breakthrough in one area, the reinforcement and encouragement of that success is likely to motivate you to continue working toward other successes in English—and perhaps even toward study of other languages.

Looking Ahead

As should be clear by now, there are really two agendas in this book. In the following chapters, the focus shifts more to issues of language teaching. However, as you read those chapters, you should also be looking for what there is to learn about how to become a more effective language learner, both so that you can continue to improve your own English and so that you are better equipped to teach students how to be efficient and effective English learners. To this end, it is important that you

- learn all you can about the process of language learning, both by reading about the topic and by talking with your classmates and colleagues
- look carefully into your own past language learning experience for lessons about what does and does not facilitate effective language learning
- perhaps most importantly, continue your own study of English and other languages, honing your skill in using familiar methods and strategies while experimenting with an ever broader range of new methods and strategies

The more experience you have as a language learner, the better you can help students understand the process and challenges of language learning, and the broader the range of ideas, methods, and strategies you will have to teach them.

For Thought, Discussion, and Action

1. **a look back:** Think about your own foreign language learning experience to date, and list some lessons you have learned about what does and does not seem to work. Compare with classmates and discuss.
2. **language learning survey:** Ask several friends or classmates to talk with you about their foreign language learning experiences. In what ways do they feel their foreign language experience has been successful, and why? What has been hardest?
3. **my English progress so far:** Analyze your progress in English to date. Make lists of the following things:
 - What aspects of English do you feel you have made the most progress in?
 - What aspects of English do you feel least confident about?
4. **How good is our English?** Liu (1999) writes the following about nonnative English speakers who are training to become English teachers: “Although most of these students possess a considerable knowledge of English, particularly of grammar, not many of them have a good grasp of the use of the language” (p. 204). How well do you think this statement describes local English teachers in your country? How well does it describe you? If you think the statement is not entirely accurate, how would you modify it?
5. **What is hardest?** In a survey conducted by Medgyes (1999, 32–33), he found that the areas of English in which nonnative-English-speaking teachers (non-NESTs) had the most difficulty were, in order,
 - vocabulary (especially knowing whether any given usage of an English word is or is not appropriate)
 - oral fluency
 - pronunciation
 As you consider your own English, would you agree that these are the three most challenging areas? If not, what would the three most challenging areas be?
6. **inferiority complex?** Speaking of non-NESTs, Medgyes (1999) says, “Most of us suffer from an inferiority complex caused by glaring defects in our knowledge of English. We are in constant distress as we realize how little we know about the language we are supposed to teach. Indeed, most non-NESTs are all too aware that they are teachers and learners of the same subject” (p. 380). How well does Medgyes’ statement describe your own feelings? If it does not describe your feelings very well, rewrite the statement so it better represents how you feel.
7. **confidence:** Have you ever felt lack of confidence in using English for teaching? In using it for other purposes? If so, describe the experience and how it felt.
8. **past language learning experiences:** Think of one successful English learning experience you have had (perhaps one particular course or study method you used), and prepare a detailed description involving everything you can remember that might be relevant. Then turn it into a story, and share it with a friend or classmate. Consider including answers to questions like these:

- What was your English level at the time?
 - What was your goal?
 - Why did you do what you did? What motivated you?
 - What exactly did you do? (Describe what you did 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 your approach work?
9. **improvement in English—goals:** List areas in which you would still like to improve your English. What kind of improvement would be most practically useful to you? What improvement would you find most personally satisfying? What would be most helpful in your teaching?
10. **improvement in English—challenges:** If you were to carry out a plan to further improve your English, what would the main challenges be? List them in order of importance. (Consider practical as well as methodological issues.)
11. **LLP task:** Design an LLP for improving some aspect of your English skills (or your skills in another language). (See Sample LLPs at the end of the chapter for plans that can serve as models.)
- Start by considering yourself and your context:
 - How much time will you have? (Be realistic.)
 - What access to English and opportunities to use it do you have?
 - What do you like—and not like—about English study? How can you make your LLP as appealing as possible?
 - Then make a plan for your LLP:
 - Set yourself a narrow, specific goal, such as improving your speed for reading fiction in English, building your reading vocabulary, or improving your ability to listen to films in English.
 - Decide what breakthrough point you might work toward.
 - Decide what study and practice methods you will use.
 - Make a study plan, including when and where you will study, and so forth.
12. **LLP journal studies:** One way to learn more from an LLP about what does and doesn't work for you as a language learner—and about language learning in general—is to do a journal study as you conduct your LLP. An informal journal study would involve the following:
- Before you begin the study, reflect on your previous language learning experiences and how they may affect your current LLP. It may also help to make a preliminary list of questions you hope to answer—things that you hope to learn about language learning through your LLP experience. Examples might include
 - Can I improve my reading speed enough that I won't become discouraged and give up on my LLP?
 - Can I work out an effective and efficient method for building my reading vocabulary?
 - Can I find an effective way to improve my listening by working with films?

- As you do your LLP, keep a log in which you record (1) what you do in the LLP, (2) what thoughts you have about it, and (3) what feelings you have as you go through the experience.
 - Eventually, look back over the journal to see what patterns and discoveries await you.⁴
13. **native speakers as the standard?** McKay (2002, 40–41, citing Sridhar and Sridhar) points out that in EFL settings English teachers usually don't have enough exposure to English to allow them to achieve a natively like command English, and she suggests that a native speaker standard is inappropriate as a goal in EFL settings. (She feels that a more reasonable standard would be some international form of English that is based on the English of all users worldwide, not just native speakers.) Do you think teachers in your country should try to achieve natively like English (North American or British)? Should they try to teach their students to do the same?

Sample LLPs

VOCABULARY LLP

Goal: Build my vocabulary for reading.

Material: Magazines in English.

Plan: Read and study three times a week, one hour each session, in the morning before class.

Method:

1. Read articles from a magazine in English, marking unfamiliar vocabulary.
2. Look up new vocabulary in a dictionary, record it in a notebook, and study/review until I can recognize and understand the new words readily.

Criteria for measuring progress: I will have succeeded if I

1. create a thirty-page notebook of new vocabulary
2. can understand all the vocabulary in it when I see it either in the notebook or in a magazine article

FILM-LISTENING LLP

Goal: Build my listening comprehension of natural English conversation in films.

Material: Films in English on DVD.

Plan: Watch one film each week, in two or three sessions, at home in the evening.

Method:

1. Select DVD films with reasonably clear (modern) English.
2. The first time, watch the film all the way through with the subtitles turned off. Then write a summary of the story and any questions about parts I don't understand.

⁴For a more formal journal study procedure, see Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001, 50).