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From Experience to Knowledge in ELT

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To Karolina, as she makes her own way.

To Enzo, per tutti.

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Before it took its own direction, this book had started life as a revision and updating of *Essentials of English Language Teaching*. It has come a long way since then, but an overall attitude and framework, along with some of the basic content, has survived. Plus ça change ...

Our sincere thanks to Nur Kurtoğlu-Hooton for her dedicated collegiality and her comments on an earlier draft of this book.

INTRODUCTION

Who is this book for?

This book is for people who:

- are keen to teach and eager to learn
- realize that their own previous and continuing experience plays an important role in what they learn and how they teach
- recognize that *learning* from experience involves more than just *having* experience
- believe that understanding a situation is more important than abstract theory, but that learning new concepts and terminology can help them to understand a situation better
- want to turn their experience (as language learners and teachers) into knowledge, so as to improve the quality of their future teaching.

If you recognize yourself in any of the above, this book is for you.

About theory and practice

You may often hear a teacher say, *It's all right in theory, but it doesn't work in practice.* However, as authors and teachers, our position is that, if something is not *useful in practice*, then it is *not all right in theory*, either. In fact, this book moves away completely from the view that teaching is about applying theories. The position taken here is that:

- good practice is central
- practice can always be improved
- the most likely way for teachers to improve practice is to understand their experience of it
- to understand this experience, teachers need to be able to talk about it
- to talk about practice, they need to learn relevant concepts and terminology
- as they talk about their practice in new terms, teachers build their practical knowledge out of their experience
- this process of expressing and extending their understanding enables them to develop their theories of what is happening
- on the basis of this expanding knowledge, teachers can improve their practice.

So, this book does *not* ask teachers to *apply theory*. What it does propose is that it can be personally and professionally liberating to *theorize one's practice*, in the sense of understanding and questioning the whys and wherefores of experience. The book aims to involve its readers in that process of developing in tandem what we know and what we do.

Good practice, but no best way

When we say that there is no single ‘best way’ of teaching English, that does not mean that each teacher has to start from scratch, as though there were no agreement on what counts as good teaching. This book, therefore, gives examples of a variety of reliable teaching methods related to sound principles. It makes suggestions, gives advice, and recommends titles for further reading.

On a daily basis, however, each teacher has to make appropriate decisions for his or her own particular classrooms. Good practice is an interaction among *people* in a *situation*, guided by teachers who use their intelligence, experience, knowledge, skills, sensitivity, creativity, and awareness to help other people learn.

In order to do that, you need to understand why this book makes the suggestions that it does, and on what basis you might want to move away from them. So, having offered reliable methods that you can depend on and alternatives for you to try out, we also introduce ways of thinking about the work that will help you develop your own style. You can make the book even more useful by doing the review activities at the end of each chapter.

About terminology, tests, and materials

The book is not tied down to any specific course or exam, but there is advice on classroom observation and on how to write about teaching, as well as explicit **HIGHLIGHTING** in the index of key concepts, as tested by the Cambridge ESOL Teacher Knowledge Test.

The expression, English Language Teaching, and its abbreviation, ELT, is used throughout the book to cover what is also referred to as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

The examples used have been taken from genuine classroom interaction and actual published materials wherever possible, but some examples have been made up where either brevity or clarity seemed the more important considerations. The convention of using * to indicate non-standard English usage has been used throughout. Words in small capitals in the text are listed in the Glossary at the end of the book.

An open invitation

Teaching English to speakers of other languages in the twenty-first century is a global activity that requires local sensitivity in order to be at its best. In a similar spirit, this book is offered as a common basis for particular individual and collegial growth. The authors hope that it will help you establish the teaching identity you wish for, both in your own professional context and as a member of the international ELT community.

PART ONE

Familiarization

The first part of this book explores the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom in order to examine what is to be found there. The main elements of ELT in any situation are:

- the people
- the processes of language learning and teaching
- aspects of the language itself
- the language learning materials usually available
- the classroom environment and kinds of equipment you might use.

At the same time, the way in which these elements are involved in practical teaching techniques will also be considered.

In one sense, you know all this already from your experience of such classrooms, either as a language learner, or as a language teacher, or both. But if you investigate that experience more carefully, what more might you learn?

While you work on the ideas in this book, think about the actual details of your own situation, or of situations you have known. Do the ideas in the book match up with your experience? Can you be specific?

The activities at the end of each chapter also summarize the chapter. They are meant to help you enrich your reading with your experience and enrich your experience with your reading. They will be of most use if you have a friend or colleague to discuss them with. In that way, you can develop your ideas as you talk and listen.

1

PEOPLE

This chapter looks at the people most obviously involved in ELT: learners and teachers. We start by looking at similarities and differences among learners wherever they are in the world and what this means for teachers. We then go on to look at teachers and the roles they take on in the ELT classroom.

Learners

All learners are the same: outside the classroom, they have a family, friends, work, study or play, responsibilities, a place to live, and all the joys and sorrows that come with those things. They bring into the classroom their names, their knowledge, experience, intelligence, skills, emotions, imagination, awareness, creativity, sense of humour, problems, purposes, dreams, hopes, aspirations, fears, memories, interests, blind spots, prejudices, habits, expectations, likes, dislikes, preferences, and everything else that goes with being a human being, including the ability to speak at least one language.

In all these ways, however, each learner is also individual and different. No two learners have the same knowledge, skills, or expectations, or any of the other things listed in the last paragraph. Learners are also influenced by their age, by their educational, social, and cultural backgrounds, and by their preferred LEARNING STYLES, which they may or may not share with their fellow students and teacher.

Age

It is often thought that children are more successful at learning languages than adults. According to the critical age hypothesis, for example, there is a period up to around 12–13 years of age when children learn a language most easily. After that period, it is said, success in language learning will be limited. However, that is not necessarily true if we are talking about learning a language formally, in a classroom. It also depends on what is meant by ‘successful’. While children may ACQUIRE a ‘native-like’ accent whereas older learners usually do not, that is obviously not the only measure of success. Success can also be measured in terms of how well a learner can communicate or make him or herself understood. If learners have very specific activities they need to carry out in English, such as giving a business presentation, success can also be measured in terms of how well they can do those specific things. (See Brown 2007 for a detailed discussion of these issues.)

Of course teachers have to take the age of their learners into account. Younger learners have shorter attention spans and need to be given more and shorter activities to hold

their interest. Teenagers, on the other hand, may be more likely to feel embarrassed if they think they are not very proficient in the language. They may feel inadequate and frustrated when they cannot say what they want to. So they may need activities which have a clear outcome and which give them a sense of achievement.

Younger learners are unlikely to learn through explanations of grammar rules and doing grammar exercises, but they will learn through stories and play. Older learners and adults especially may prefer the systematic structure that rules of grammar give.

Education

The educational background of the learners may also influence how they learn. Some education systems place emphasis on rote learning (memorizing) and input from the teacher. Learners who come from such a background are unlikely to find the sort of LEARNER INDEPENDENCE and AUTONOMY often encouraged in ELT helpful to their language learning, at least not without the time and support (or LEARNER TRAINING) necessary for them to see how such an approach might work for them.

Culture

Learners come from cultural backgrounds where the role of English is different, and bring with them differing attitudes to learning English. Some learners may be highly motivated and very happy to learn English. Others may feel that they have no alternative, because without English, they may be marginalized in today's global world. They may feel forced to learn English and feel resentful as a result; this will negatively affect their motivation. (See [Chapter 2](#) for a more detailed discussion of motivation.)

Learning styles

Individual learners prefer to learn things in different ways. In other words, they have different learning styles. For example, some people are essentially auditory learners, so they learn better when they hear things spoken aloud. They may prefer to learn through listening to dialogues or hearing the teacher MODEL new language. Others are basically visual learners, who learn better when they see things written down, or as pictures. They prefer to learn through reading or watching the teacher write on the board. Finally, some people are essentially kinaesthetic learners – they prefer to learn by doing things. They like to move around, carry out projects, or have the teacher demonstrate language through objects or physical movement. Individual learners have differing mixes of these three tendencies, so teachers need to try and cater for these different learning styles in their classrooms.

Whatever the variables, some learners are more successful than others. Good language learners often have the following learner characteristics in common, although no individual learner would have them all. Typically such learners:

- have a positive attitude to the language they want to learn and to speakers of that language

- have a strong personal motivation to learn the language
- are confident that they will be successful learners
- are prepared to risk making mistakes and learn from them
- like learning about the language
- organize their own practice of the language
- find ways to say things when they do not know how to express them correctly
- willingly get into situations where the language is being used, and use it as often as they can
- work directly in the language rather than translate from their first language (L1)
- think about their strategies for learning and remembering, and consciously try out new strategies.

As teachers, we try to teach all our students, but the successful learners are usually those who take on some responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers

What can teachers learn from what we have said so far about learners?

First, a sensitive teacher who takes into account the characteristics of different learners can create the conditions in the classroom where the greatest number of learners can be successful.

Second, therefore, learners should not be seen as language-learning machines, nor should language learning be seen only as an intellectual process. Learners, as whole human beings, may have many other things on their minds; all the similarities and differences between them listed above are frequently expressed through language and can all be used to enrich language learning. To learn a language is to learn to express oneself.

Third, teachers have to make an effort to inform themselves about their learners. If teachers share a cultural and linguistic background with their learners, this can be an advantage. If not, the teacher needs to show an explicit interest in gaining such knowledge. Teachers have to be sensitive to social and cultural distinctions among their learners and try to be open to the personal needs, learning styles, and reasons for learning of their individual students.

Fourth, classrooms should be places where the characteristics of good learners are discussed and encouraged. Individuals can then be helped to discover positive characteristics which suit their own personality, society and culture. Some learners, for instance, will learn better through EXPOSURE to natural language, while others will learn better through self-study and practice. You will need to work closely with your students to help them find the balance that suits them as individuals.

Teacher success can be measured most obviously by how much their students learn. Like learners, however, all teachers are different, and for just the same reason: they are

whole human beings with an individual mixture of all the elements listed above in relation to learners. Two important insights arise from this:

- 1 The best teacher that any one individual can be will in some ways be different from the best teacher that anyone else can be, as each teacher invests his or her strengths and develops his or her potential.
- 2 It is important to recognize from the start that no teacher is likely simply to be a 'good teacher' in a general sense. You may be a great teacher for some students, an average teacher for others, and nevertheless, despite all your skills and flexibility, be seen as a poor teacher by yet others. The challenge is to go on developing into the teacher you most want to be.

Teacher characteristics

The way teachers teach is profoundly influenced by what they believe about how languages are learnt and how they should be taught. For example, teachers who believe that learners learn best when they are engaged and interested in what they are doing may make more use of games and extended speaking activities, such as debates and role plays in the classroom. Teachers who believe that learners learn best when they are given clear explanations of rules may make more use of FOCUS ON FORM activities.

Beliefs about learning and teaching can be the result of past experiences:

- as a language learner
- of being taught by others
- of teacher education courses
- as a teacher in a particular educational context.

Whatever the reasons for your beliefs, it is always a good idea to reflect on what you believe about language teaching and learning, and how this affects the way you teach. Here is an example of a questionnaire that helps you to think about your beliefs: