

## Part I *The teaching process*

The process of teaching a foreign language is a complex one: as with most other subjects, it has necessarily to be broken down into components for purposes of study. Part I presents three such components: the teaching of (1) presenting and explaining new material; (2) providing practice; and (3) testing. Note that the first two concepts are understood here rather differently from the way they are usually used within the conventional 'presentation-practice-production' paradigm.

In principle, the teaching processes of presenting, practising and testing correspond to strategies used by many good learners trying to acquire a language on their own. They make sure they perceive and understand the language (by paying attention, by constructing meanings, by formulating or hypotheses that account for it, and so on); they make conscious efforts to learn it thoroughly (by mental rehearsal of items, for example, or by finding opportunities to practise); and they check themselves (get feedback on performance, ask to be corrected). (For a thorough discussion of the cognitive processes and strategies of language learners, see O'Malley and Chamot, 1990.)

In the classroom, it is the teacher's job to promote these three learning processes by the use of appropriate teaching acts. Thus, he or she: presents new material in order to make it clear, comprehensible and available for learning; gives practice to consolidate knowledge; and tests, in order to check what has been mastered and what still needs to be learned or reviewed. These acts may not occur in this order, and may sometimes be combined in one activity; nevertheless good teachers are usually aware which is their primary objective at any point in a lesson.

This is not, of course, the only way people learn a language in the classroom. They may absorb new material unconsciously, or semi-consciously, through exposure to comprehensible and personally meaningful speech or writing, or through their own engagement with it, without any purposeful teacher mediation as proposed here. Through such mediation, however, the teacher provides a framework for organized, conscious learning, while simultaneously being aware of – and providing opportunities for – further, more intuitive acquisition.

Thus, the three topics of presentation, practice and testing are presented in the following units not as the exclusive source of student learning, nor as representing a rigid linear classroom routine, but rather as simplified but comprehensive categories that enable useful study of basic teaching acts.

### Reference

O'Malley, J. M. and Chamot, A. U. (1990) *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

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## odule 1: Presentations and explanations

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### ► Unit One: Effective presentation

#### *The necessity for presentation*

It would seem fairly obvious that in order for our students to learn something new (a text, a new word, how to perform a task) they need to be first able to perceive and understand it. One of the teacher's jobs is to mediate such new material so that it appears in a form that is most accessible for initial learning.

This kind of mediation may be called 'presentation'; the term is applied here not only to the kind of limited and controlled modelling of a target item that we do when we introduce a new word or grammatical structure, but also to the initial encounter with comprehensible input in the form of spoken or written texts, as well as various kinds of explanations, instructions and discussion of new language items or tasks.

People may, it is true, perceive and even acquire new language without conscious presentation on the part of a teacher. We learn our first language mostly like this, and there are some who would argue for teaching a foreign language in the same way – by exposing learners to the language phenomena without instructional intervention and letting them absorb it intuitively.

However, raw, unmediated new input is often incomprehensible to learners; it does not function as 'intake', and therefore does not result in learning. In an immersion situation this does not matter: learners have plenty of time for repeated and different exposures to such input and will eventually absorb it. But given the limited time and resources of conventional foreign language courses, as much as possible of this input has to become also 'intake' at first encounter. Hence the necessity for presenting it in such a way that it can be perceived and understood.

Another contribution of effective teacher presentations of new material in formal courses is that they can help to activate and harness learners' attention, effort, intelligence and conscious ('metacognitive') learning strategies in order to enhance learning – again, something that does not necessarily happen in an immersion situation. For instance, you might point out how a new item is linked to something they already know, or contrast a new bit of grammar with a parallel structure in their own language.

This does not necessarily mean that every single new bit of language – every sound, word, structure, text, and so on – needs to be consciously introduced; or that every new unit in the syllabus has to start with a clearly directed presentation. Moreover, presentations may often not occur at the first stage of learning: they may be given after learners have already engaged with the

language in question, as when we clarify the meaning of a word during a discussion, or read aloud a text learners have previously read to themselves. The ability to mediate new material or instruct effectively is an essential teaching skill; it enables the teacher to facilitate learners' entry into and understanding of new material, and thus promotes further learning.

**Question** If you have learned a foreign language in a course, can you recall a particular teacher presentation or explanation that facilitated your understanding of some aspect of this language? How did it help?

### *What happens in an effective presentation?*

#### **Attention**

The learners are alert, focussing their attention on the teacher and/or the material to be learnt, and aware that something is coming that they need to attend to. You need to make sure that learners are in fact attending; it helps if the material is perceived as interesting in itself.

#### **Perception**

The learners see or hear the target material clearly. This means not only to ensure that the material is clearly visible and/or audible in the first place; it usually means repeating it in order to give added opportunities for, or reinforce, perception. Finally, it helps to get some kind of response from the learners in order to check that they have in fact perceived the material accurately: repetition, for example, or writing.

#### **Understanding**

The learners understand the meaning of the material being introduced, and its connection with other things they already know (how it fits into their existing perceptions of reality, or 'schemata'). So you may need to illustrate, make connections with previously learnt material, explain (for further discussion of what is involved in **explaining**, see Unit Three). A response from the learners, again, can give you valuable feedback on how well they have understood: a restatement of concepts in their own words, for example.

#### **Short-term memory**

The learners need to take the material into short-term memory: to remember it, that is, until later in the lesson, when you and they have an opportunity to do further work to consolidate learning (see Module 2: *Practice activities*). So the more 'impact' the original presentation has – for example, if it is colourful, dramatic, unusual in any way – the better. Note that some learners remember better if the material is seen, others if it is heard, yet others if it is associated with physical movement (visual, aural and kinaesthetic input): these should ideally all be utilized within a good presentation. If a lengthy explanation has taken place, it helps also to finish with a brief restatement of the main points.

## Part II Teaching the language (1): The 'what'

Just as teaching activities need to be broken down into components for convenient study, so does language itself. In a natural 'immersion' situation learners may be exposed to stretches of naturally-occurring unsimplified language data, and gradually learn the language this way. But in such a situation they may be able to use most of their waking hours engaging with the language, and the ratio of 'teachers' to learners is often one-to-one – luxuries which students on foreign-language courses usually do not have. In any case, even in 'immersion' situations there is some evidence that people speaking to foreigners slow down their speech, simplify and explain more, so that perhaps even here there is a rudimentary selection and grading of language items to be taught and learnt.

In the classroom it is simply more efficient to select and grade the language to be learnt so that learners waste a minimum of time on frustrating incomprehension and have plenty of opportunities to practise what they know and use it as a jump-off point for the learning of new language. But such selection and grading demand first some kind of segmenting of language into 'bits' to be organized into a systematic syllabus (see Module 12: *The syllabus*).

Conventionally, linguists have broken language down into three main components: the phonology, or sound system of the language; the lexis, or the words or phrases which express concepts; the structure, or the way words or bits of words are strung together to make acceptable sentences or phrases. Language teachers define these more conveniently as **pronunciation**, **vocabulary** and **grammar**, and it is the teaching of these three that forms the subject of the first three modules of Part II.

The fourth module describes a different type of language 'segment', but one which is also important and complements the first three. This type of segment may be called 'holistic': language used in a certain context to communicate meanings. Such segments may include the language used to express a certain **topic**, or within a certain **situation**; or that used to express a concept (**notion**) or perform a communicative act (**function**).

A language course may be based on pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, or on the more 'communicative' categories of topic, situation, notion and function. Probably, however, the most effective teaching and learning result from a combination of them all, in a systematic but flexible programme in which, for example, topics and situations provide a context for the teaching of new words, and structures are learned in order to express notions or functions.

## ► Unit One: What does a lesson involve?

The lesson is a type of organized social event that occurs in virtually all cultures. Lessons in different places may vary in topic, time, place, atmosphere, methodology and materials, but they all, essentially, are concerned with learning as their main objective, involve the participation of learner(s) and teacher(s), and are limited and pre-scheduled as regards time, place and membership.

There are additional characteristics or perspectives to a lesson which may be less obvious, but which are also significant. One way to become aware of them is to look at metaphors that highlight one or another of them.

### BOX 15.1: METAPHORS FOR A LESSON

a variety show	a conversation
climbing a mountain	doing the shopping
eating a meal	a football game
a wedding	a symphony
a menu	consulting a doctor

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### Group task Exploring metaphors

#### Stage 1: Choosing a metaphor

Which of the metaphors shown in Box 15.1 expresses best, in your opinion as a teacher, the essence of a lesson? There is, of course, no 'right' answer but your choice will reflect your own conception. If you can find no metaphor here which suits you, invent your own.

#### Stage 2: Comparing choices

If you are working in a group, get together in pairs or threes and share your selections and reasons for making them. Since any one choice is as valid as any other, there is no need to try to reach any kind of group consensus as to which is the 'best'; the aim of the discussion is simply to become more aware of the different attributes different people feel are significant. If you are on your own, go straight to Stage 3 below.

#### Stage 3: Analysis

Some of the main elements that may have come up in your thinking and discussion about the various metaphors are discussed in the section

Aspects of the lesson below. Have a look at this section and try to relate it to your own choice(s).

#### Stage 4: Optional follow-up

In the Notes, (1) you will find analyses of each metaphor in terms of the interpretation of the concept of a lesson which it seems to embody. These are not necessarily the only possible interpretations, but you may be interested in looking up 'your' metaphor, and seeing if the analysis fits your own approach.

#### Aspects of the lesson

1. **Transaction**, or series of transactions. This is expressed in the metaphors of shopping, a wedding and a meal, with the emphasis on some kind of purposeful give-and-take which results in a product: an acquisition or a definable mental or physical change in the participants. If you care about the transactional element, then what is important to you is the actual learning which takes place in the lesson.
2. **Interaction**. This is most obvious in the metaphor of conversation, but is also expressed in the wedding, the variety show, and, in perhaps a rather different way, in the football game. Here what is important are the social relationships between learners, or between learners and teacher; a lesson is seen as something which involves relaxed, warm interaction that protects and promotes the confidence and happiness of all participants.  
For a more detailed discussion of the transactional and interactional aspects of a lesson, see Prabhu (1992).
3. **Goal-oriented effort**, involving hard work (climbing a mountain, a football game). This implies awareness of a clear, worthwhile objective, the necessity of effort to attain it and a resulting sense of satisfaction and triumph if it is achieved, or of failure and disappointment if it is not.
4. **A satisfying, enjoyable experience** (a variety show, a symphony, eating a meal). This experience may be based on such things as aesthetic pleasure, fun, interest, challenge or entertainment; the main point is that participants should enjoy it and therefore be motivated to attend while it is going on (as distinct from feeling satisfied with the results).
5. **A role-based culture**, where certain roles (the teacher) involve responsibility and activity, others (the learners) responsiveness and receptivity (consultation with a doctor, a wedding, eating a meal). All participants know and accept in advance the demands that will be made on them, and their expected behaviours. This often implies:
6. **A conventional construct**, with elements of ritual (a wedding, a variety show, a performance of a symphony). Certain set behaviours occur every time (for example, a certain kind of introduction or ending), and the other components of the overall event are selected by an authority from a limited set of possibilities. In contrast, there is:
7. **A series of free choices** (a menu, a conversation). Participants are free to 'do their own thing' within a fairly loose structure, and construct the event as it progresses, through their own decision-making. There is no obvious authority figure who imposes choices.