Learning Teaching

The Essential Guide to English Language Teaching

THIRD EDITION

Jim Scrivener

MACMILLAN BOOKS FOR TEACHERS

Series Editor: Adrian Underhill

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About the author

Jim Scrivener has worked in many different countries, including Russia, Georgia and Hungary. He has been Head of Teacher Training for International House Hastings, Director of Education for IH Budapest and is currently Head of Teacher Development for Bell International, where he designed the Online Delta course. He was leader of the team that designed the Euro exams and has been actively involved with Cambridge ESOL exams including design of their online teacher portfolio. He is also the author of *Teaching English Grammar* which won the English Speaking Union Award for Best Entry for Teachers in 2010.

He is married to Noémi and has two adult sons, Alex and Ben, and a young daughter Maisie. He can be very boring about Bob Dylan if you give him half a chance.

Foreword to Third Edition

Learning Teaching has been one of the most popular and widely-used guides to ELT since it first appeared in 1994. It provides a complete training course in today's classroom practices and is rich in immediately-usable practical techniques and suggestions for classroom activities. It speaks in a uniquely reassuring and encouraging way to both novice and experienced teachers, offering clarity about the practices of good teaching while also supporting the teacher's own development of their craft through experience, common sense, self evaluation and reflection. Learning Teaching informs the reader succinctly without over informing, proposes rather than demands, offers choices rather than single all-purpose solutions, and above all instils the confidence that 'I can learn to do this well'.

This third edition adds a substantial and timely new element in the accompanying DVD which allows readers to watch ideas from the book being practised by teachers in real language classrooms. There is a complete one-hour lesson which provides insights into many small but crucial aspects of teaching technique as well as some of the bigger questions about how a whole lesson can be shaped and managed, what can be expected from learners and how they may progress during a single hour. And there are many short clips in which different teachers, including the author, demonstrate key techniques described in the text (such as learning names, board writing, eliciting, concept questions, using timelines, drawing out quieter students, working with errors and many others). The DVD includes a wide-ranging selection of printable worksheets, observation tasks, templates and resources.

There are also revised and updated sections on recent developments and changes in ELT including CLIL, young learners and teaching exam classes, and a new chapter on technology covering presentation software, Interactive Whiteboards and virtual learning environments.

As well as being of use to trainee teachers on initial and in-service courses, experienced teachers will be able to use it to review their repertoire of ideas and approaches, and trainers and managers involved in the professional development of others can also use the material here on their courses. This third edition of *Learning Teaching* will build on the reputation of its predecessors and remain the single-book-to-have for ELT professionals who want to develop and become the best teacher that they can be.

Adrian Underhill

Series Editor

Introduction to Third Edition

Teacher: One who carries on his education in public. (*Theodore Roethke*)

This is a book for language teachers. Mostly it's a guide to methodology – to what might work in the classroom.

Learning Teaching is a book that can help you learn to teach in more effective ways. It is also a book about a kind of teaching where you are also learning. However, it is not a book about the right way to teach. Indeed, there is no scientific basis yet for writing such a description of an ideal teaching methodology. Instead, we can observe teachers and learners at work and take note of strategies and approaches that seem to be more beneficial than others, not necessarily in order to copy them, but to become more aware of what is possible.

The act of teaching is essentially a constant processing of options. At every point in each lesson, a teacher has a number of options available; he or she can decide to do something, or to do something else, or not to do anything at all. In order to become a better teacher, it seems important to be aware of as many options as possible. This may enable you to generate your own rules and guidelines as to what works and what doesn't.

Language teaching happens in a wide variety of locations and contexts, with a wide variety of colleagues and learners, and whatever I describe in this book, I'm certain you'll find something different every day of your teaching career. For that reason, no book like this can definitively tell you **how** to do it. You can get ideas and step-by-step guidelines and a little inspiration, but bear in mind that everything you read also needs to go through the filter of your own understanding and be checked out in terms of the local context you work in.

Thus, rather than saying 'This is how to do it,' I've tried to say 'Here are some ways that seem to work.' You'll find lots of ideas and options in these pages, and it's largely up to you what you want to take away from them. I aim to give you a 'toolkit' of possibilities.

Situations and examples are mainly drawn from the world of English teaching, but the ideas and techniques may also be useful to teachers of other languages. The book is primarily aimed at teachers starting out on a training course or in their first year or two of work, but I hope that you will find something interesting in it wherever you are in your career.

The order of chapters in this book may partly reflect the order a new teacher finds topics of interest and importance when learning to teach. I aim to give you some essential background information and core survival techniques early on.

To encourage you to engage with the material in the book, there are many tasks. Sometimes these are questions to answer or think about; sometimes they are bigger problems or things to try out. Of course, if you prefer, you can simply read the tasks and go straight to the commentaries.

In this book, I use *he* and *she*, *him* and *her* largely at random.

Jim Scrivener

Chapter 1 Starting out

This chapter offers a general introduction to ways of working in a language classroom and to a range of teacher and learner roles. It also addresses some important questions about how people learn.

1 Classrooms at work

Task 1.1 Classroom snapshots

A friend who knows nothing about language teaching has asked you to describe a snapshot of a typical moment in a language classroom – a picture that captures the look, the atmosphere, the learners' mood, the teacher's attitude, etc. What would your instant snapshot show?

Commentary

Your image probably captures some assumptions you hold – about what a teacher's job is, what learners can do and how they should work, etc. If you are on a training course and haven't started teaching yet, your snapshot might be very different from, say, a teacher who has been working for twenty years. In this book, we will look in detail at lots of lesson ideas, activities, methods and techniques; but before that, it may be useful just to get a more general picture of what goes on in language teaching – to look round a few classroom doors and glimpse what's going on inside.

Watching different classes

In my own teaching career, I have found that one of the most useful things is simply to watch other people teach. I often take away tangible things from this observation, such as ideas for specific activities, the pace they work at or a particular 'something' that the teacher said or did. Over the years, I find that I have incorporated a lot from this into my own teaching.

Some aspects of lessons can be difficult to interpret. Sometimes I feel that the atmosphere in a room is excellent or that the class is particularly engaged or working in a distinctively autonomous manner. But it isn't always easy to work out how these apparently 'natural' things have been achieved.

One thing I have concluded over the years is that much of the 'magic' that makes a good lesson (often attributed purely to 'natural' skill or 'personality') is something that is almost always achieved by very specific actions, comments and attitudes – even when the teacher isn't aware of what he or she has done. And because of this, we can study these things and learn from them.

Task 1.2 Different lessons

Read the following brief snapshot descriptions of moments from different lessons in different locations.

Which one (if any) is most like how you see yourself as a teacher? Are there any characteristics or approaches you find interesting and would like to use yourself – or would reject?

Classroom 1: Andrea
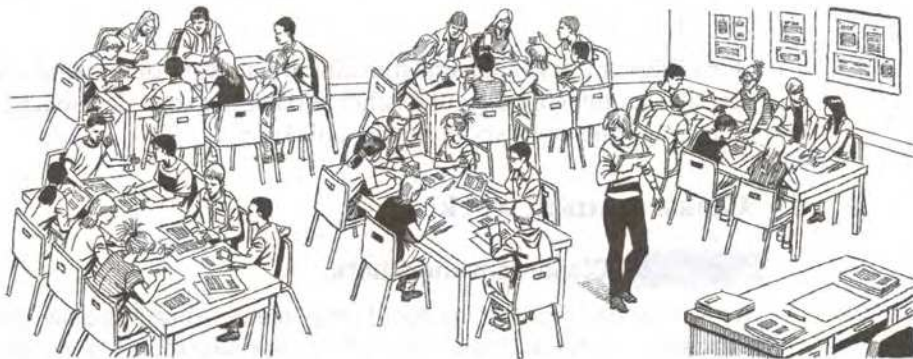
Andrea is working with 34 fourteen-year-old learners. Although the large desks are fixed in their places, she has asked the students to move so that they are sitting around both sides in ways that they can work in groups of six or seven. Each group has just finished discussing and designing a youth club on a sheet of A3 paper and is now working on agreeing a list of ten good arguments to persuade the other groups to choose its youth club design (rather than one of the others). Each group will have to make a presentation of its arguments in front of the class in about ten minutes' time.

There is a lot of noise in the classroom. Andrea is walking around listening in unobtrusively to what is going on in the groups. She smiles when she hears good ideas, but she isn't intervening or taking any active part in the conversations. She answers basic questions when a learner asks (eg if someone wants to know the word for something), but she avoids getting involved in working closely with a group, even with one group that is getting stuck – in this case, she makes a quick suggestion for moving forward and then walks away to another group.

Classroom 2: Maia

At a first glance, nothing much seems to be happening here. Maia is sitting down in a circle with her eight students, and they are chatting, fairly naturally, about some events from the previous day's news. Although Maia isn't doing much overt correction, after watching the lesson for a while it's possible to notice that she is doing some very discreet 'teaching', ie she is managing the conversation a little, bringing in quieter students by asking what they think and helping all learners to speak by encouraging, asking helpful questions, echoing what they have said, repeating one or two hard-to-understand sentences in corrected English, etc.

Classroom 3: Lee
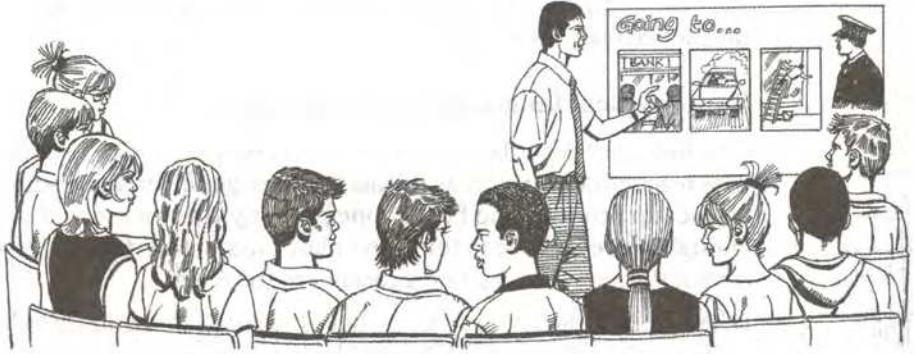
Lee is standing at the front of a class of eleven young adult students. He is introducing *going to* as a way of talking about predicted events in the future. He has put up a large wallchart picture on the board showing a policeman watching a number of things in the town centre. The picture seems to immediately suggest a number of *going to* sentences such as *They're going to rob the bank*, *He isn't going to stop* and *It's going to fall down*. Lee is pointing at parts of the picture and encouraging learners to risk trying to say a *going to* sentence. When they do, he gently corrects them and gets them to say it again better. Sometimes he gets the whole class to repeat an interesting sentence. It's interesting that he's actually saying very little himself; most of his interventions are nods, gestures, facial expressions and one- or two-word instructions or short corrections. Generally, the learners are talking rather more than the teacher.

Classroom 4: Paoli

Paoli's lesson is teaching some new vocabulary to an adult evening class of older learners; the current lesson stage is focused on learner practice of the new items. Everyone in class is sitting in a pair, face to face. They are using a handout designed by Paoli which gives the learners in each pair (known as A and B) slightly different information. The task requires them to use some of the new vocabulary in relatively natural ways to try and discover information from their partner. There is a lot of talking in the room, though it's clear that not everyone is participating to an equal degree. One or two pairs are almost silent, and one pair seems to be whispering in their own language rather than in English. Paoli is moving round the room trying to notice any such problems and encouraging students to complete the task in the intended way.

Commentary

We have glimpsed four different lessons. The descriptions below summarise some distinctive features of each.

Some typical language-teaching classes

The first class described above involved groups working cooperatively on a task. The teacher saw her role as primarily 'managerial', making sure that the activity was set up properly and being done properly. She took care that she allowed enough space (ie time to think and plan without interference or 'unhelpful help') so that learners could get on and achieve the result.

In the second class, we saw a teacher apparently doing fairly little that might be traditionally viewed as 'teaching'. However, even at this glimpse, we have noticed that something was going on and the teacher was 'managing' the conversation and the language more than might have been apparent at first glance. Is this a valid lesson? We'll look at possible aims for lessons like the first and second snapshots when we get to Chapter 9.

The third class involves a lesson type known as a 'presentation', ie the teacher is drawing everyone's attention to his focus on language. Interestingly, although the teacher is introducing new language, he is doing this without a great deal of overt explanation or a high quantity of teacher talk. We look at grammar presentations in Chapter 7.

In the fourth lesson, the learners are doing a pairwork vocabulary task. The teacher's role was initially to set up the activity, and at the end it will be to manage feedback and checking. At the moment, he can relax a little more, as nothing much requires to be done beyond monitoring if it is being done correctly.

Out of these four lessons (which I think may be fairly typical snapshots of modern language classroom life), we have seen relatively little overt 'teaching' in the traditional manner, although we have seen a number of instances of the teacher 'managing' the seating and groupings, 'managing' the activities (starting, monitoring, closing them), 'managing' the learners and their participation levels, and 'managing' the flow of the conversation and work.

I think it's reasonable to argue that much of modern language teaching involves this classroom management as much or more than it involves the upfront explanations and testing that many people imagine as the core of a teacher's job. This is partly to do with the peculiar subject matter we work with, ie the language we are using to teach with is also the thing we are teaching.

Although there is a body of 'content' in language teaching, the main thing we want our students to do is use the language themselves – and therefore there are many reasons why we mainly want our students to do more and therefore for us to do (and talk) less.

You could now use:

- Observation Task 1 on the DVD to make 'snapshot' observations of teachers at work in your school;
- Observation Task 2 to get a more detailed picture of classroom management in their lessons.

2   What is a teacher?

Language learners don't always need teachers. They can set about learning in a variety of ways. Some learn by studying on their own at home with books, CDs, DVDs, e-workbooks, computer programs and so on; others seem to 'pick up' a language just by living and communicating in a place where the language is used (this is known as **immersion**).

Of course, many students do learn in classes with other students and a teacher – whether that's a class they chose to come to (for example, at a language school) or maybe a class they were required to attend (such as in a high school). And much language learning will involve elements of all three ways: self-study, 'picking it up' and classroom work.

But, if it's possible to learn successfully without a teacher, then what difference does having a teacher make to the learning process? Why do some people pay to have a teacher? What do students expect from them? To put it bluntly, what on earth are teachers for? If you are (or are planning to be) a teacher, it's important to consider such basic questions.

Task 1.3   Remembering teachers you have known

1 Think back to some teachers (of any subject) you have had in your life. What do you remember about them and their lessons? The teacher's manner? How you felt in their presence? Can you recall any specific lessons? Specific teaching techniques? What it was like to be a student in that room? What words or phrases characterise the atmosphere of the classes (eg *positive, encouraging, boring, friendly, like an interrogation, sarcastic, humorous, respectful, scary, quiet*)?

2 To what extent do you think your personal style as a teacher is based to some degree on these role models?

Commentary

When I started teaching, I found that my basic image of what a teacher's job was and how a teacher should behave were drawn largely from what I had seen my own teachers doing. These internal images were quite deeply held and quite hard to challenge. Any teacher starting out needs to check if they have inbuilt assumptions about teaching from this exposure to hours and hours of observing your own teachers at work.

If you think about it, you have watched and experienced an awful lot of teaching being done to you – and this can often remain a subtle and deep-seated influence. Whether we acknowledge it or not, much of our view of what a teacher is and what a teacher should do can often be traced back to these many years of lesson observation from the pupil's seat. Sadly, a lot of the teaching that has left a deep impression on us was not necessarily very good teaching. As well as some excellent teachers, most of us have probably seen examples of teachers who were boring, unkind, incompetent, sarcastic or inept.

'Entertainer' teaching

Learners come to class to learn a language rather than to be amused by a great show. Certainly no one would wish their lessons to be boring, but it's important to check out if the classes of an 'entertainer' style of teacher are genuinely leading to any real learning. It's easy to get swept up in the sheer panache of one's own performance; the teacher who constantly talks a lot, tells stories and jokes, amuses the class with their antics, etc can provide a diverting hour, but it may simply cover up the fact that very little has been taken in and used by the students. The monologue may provide useful exposure to one way of using language, but this isn't sufficient to justify regular lessons of this kind. I've found that quite a number of teachers suspect that this 'performer' style is a goal they should aim for, partly maybe because of an influence from Hollywood films about teaching. But there is a fine line between creating a good atmosphere and good rapport in class and becoming an entertainer. I hope that I can persuade you that rapport is crucial but entertainment is much less so.

Traditional teaching

For many of us, school teaching was in a style we could characterise as 'traditional'. While the details may vary considerably from school to school and between different countries and cultures, there will still be many aspects of 'traditional' teaching that are familiar to many.

Task 1.4   Traditional teaching

List some of these characteristic features of traditional teaching (eg Where does the teacher stand / sit? How are students seated? How is the class managed?). What do you think are the disadvantages of a traditional teaching approach for language teaching and learning?

Commentary

'Traditional' teaching comes in many varieties, but is often characterised by the teacher spending quite a lot of class time using the board to explain things – as if 'transmitting' knowledge to the class – with occasional questions to or from the learners. After these explanations, the students will often do some practice exercises to test whether they have understood what they have been told. Throughout the lesson, the teacher keeps control of the subject matter, makes decisions about what work is needed and orchestrates what the students do. In this classroom, the teacher probably does most of the talking and is by far the most active person. The students' role is primarily to listen and concentrate and, perhaps, take notes with a view to taking in the information. Often the teacher takes as if by right (usually, but not always, benignly) permission to direct, give orders, tell off, rebuke, criticise, etc, possibly with limited or no consultation.

This 'transmission' view of the role of a teacher is relatively widespread, and in many cultures represents the predominant mode of education. Students will expect that a teacher will teach in this way, and fellow teachers may be critical or suspicious of teachers who do not. In such cases, it's important to remember that