

CHAPTER 3

Addressing Difference: Considering Individual Contexts, Students, and Teachers

English language teaching (ELT) varies a great deal for a great variety of reasons: different contexts and cultures, learner differences (even when contexts and cultures are similar), and teacher differences (because of individual characteristics and because of context and culture). Different contexts and cultures encourage different teacher roles in the classroom and different approaches to teaching a English.

Context Differences

Some traditional ways of distinguishing English learning contexts have to do with the location in which English is being learned (this distinction is reflected in the terms “English as a second language” and “English as a foreign language”), the type of instruction, and the purpose of learning English. Here are some commonly acknowledged English-learning contexts:

Place-Based Contexts

- **English as a foreign language (EFL):** This refers to English learning in countries that do not use English as a primary language. For example, Germany’s national language is German, and Japan’s national language is Japanese. In these countries, English is taught and learned as a foreign language in many primary, secondary, and university contexts.
- **English as a second language (ESL):** This term is often used in countries where English is a primary language. For example, English is the dominant language in Australia. Those learning English in Australia acquire it as a second language. In these contexts, the term *ESL* is often used even when English is actually a student’s third or fourth language.

Instruction-Based Contexts

- **English-medium general education:** Bilingual, multilingual, or immersion school settings can be found across the globe at all levels of schooling: preschool, primary, secondary, and university. When English is being acquired as an additional language through academic instruction, specific strategies and techniques are needed that are different from those used for language-specific teaching.
- **Language schools and programs:** There are schools and programs that only teach language. Some may teach multiple languages, and others might only teach one. Many of these are private schools, though some language programs are government supported. Language schools might have evening and weekend classes for adults; after-school programs for children; and short, intensive programs during vacation periods.
- **Online instruction:** The teaching of English remotely has seen tremendous growth over the past decade. It truly is “borderless” language instruction, as teachers and students can connect from anywhere around the globe. Remote English instruction can be real time (through live video) or

asynchronous (occurring through recorded video and a discussion board, messaging platform, or email).

Purpose-Based Contexts

- **English for specific purposes (ESP):** Some fields of study or work have specialized language, and programs and courses are sometimes designed to teach this language specifically. For example, a course called Business English might focus on the language of international trade, commerce, or finance, and a course called English for Hospitality might focus on concepts of importance in the hotel and tourism industries.
- **English in the workplace:** Sometimes, employers provide English classes at the place of employment. These classes can have a variety of purposes. They might be providing specialized language, as in ESP programs. However, they may be providing basic English instruction to help workers communicate and to help them understand responsibilities and benefits. For example, an ESL program in a Levi Jeans factory in Canada helps students understand their employee benefits. And a basic English program in Bali is provided by a restaurant owner for his workers to help them as they interact with tourists.
- **English for academic purposes (EAP):** English is often learned for the purpose of academic study. In primary through high school education in English-medium schools, for example, a main goal of acquiring English is for the learning of content. Likewise, intensive English programs in universities teach academic English to equip students with the English skills they will need throughout their university coursework.

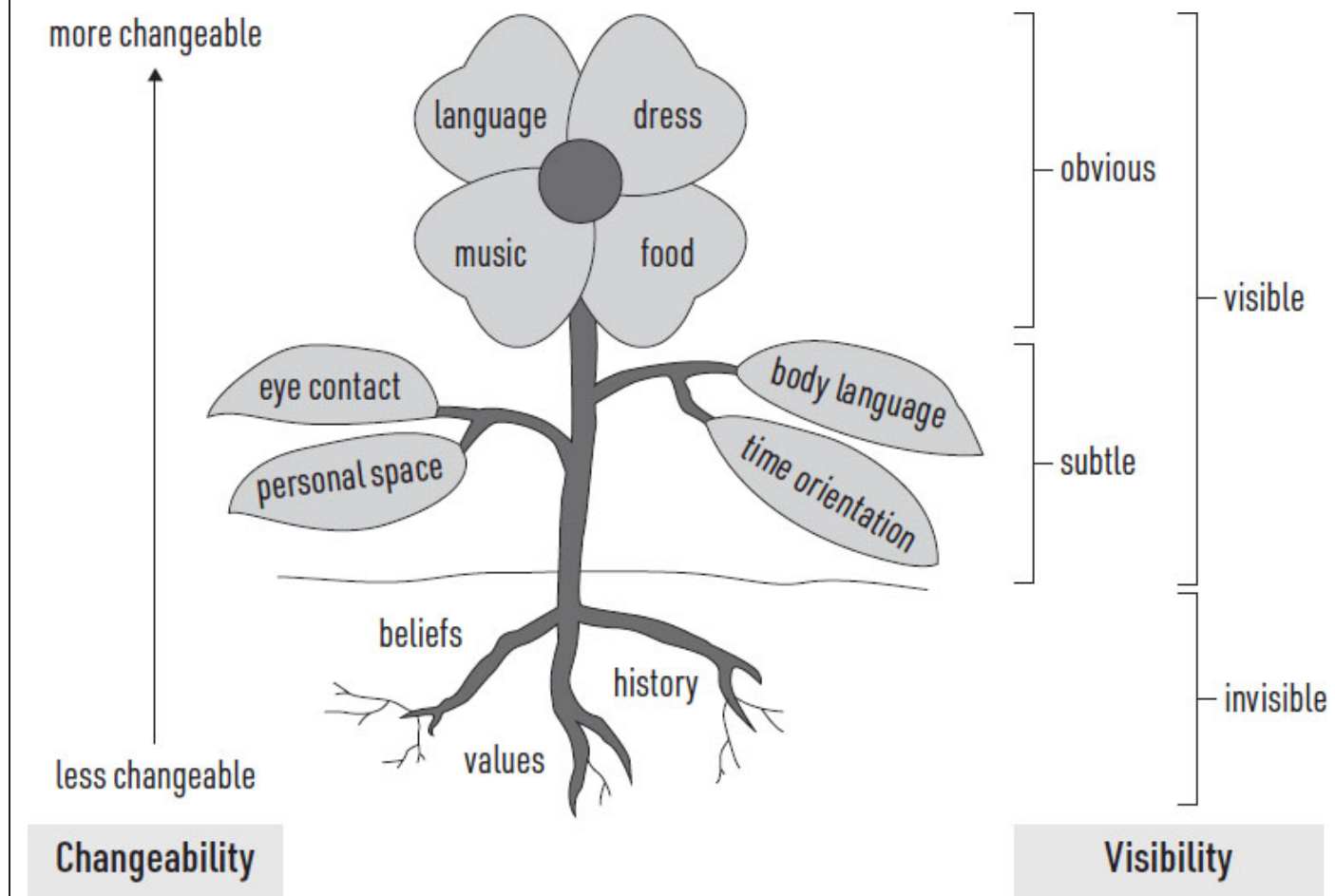
These diverse contexts stem from different learning goals, and they each result in differences in the roles of teachers and students in the classroom, and different kinds of assessment and measurements of success.

Cultural Differences

In many language acquisition contexts, language and culture are intertwined. Aspects of culture are acquired along with language, and communication skills are enhanced through focused attention to culture learning. For example, when a person moves to a new country and learns the language of that country, they will also be learning the cultural norms governing the use of the words and phrases that they are learning. Often, word to word translation isn't accurate or useful. Cultural knowledge is needed to translate ideas, not just words. For example, the English question "How are you?" is a typical greeting, and often not a request for information about one's health. If directly translated into Indonesian, however, this would be an inquiry about one's health, not a greeting. Furthermore, an Indonesian greeting comparable to "How are you" in English is "Where are you going?" If this is directly translated into English, it becomes not a greeting, but a question about one's destination. Language can provide a way to express culture, and culture often affects how people use language.

The relative importance of culture-learning within ELT depends on context. Sometimes, the impact of culture will be minimal. For example, a person learning English in an EFL setting to communicate with others who are also using it as a foreign language may have little need to understand the culture of English speakers in a distant country. Additionally, it may be fine for these learners to use English in ways that reflect their own cultures, even if those ways are different from that of English-speaking cultures.

FIGURE 1: Flower model of culture.



However, in many ELT contexts, culture learning is an important component of language learning. For example, a multilingual learner of English (MLE) in English-speaking Canada is living in the new culture and therefore needs to learn about such things as holidays, typical types of dialogues, and common gestures. A student in Brazil might envision traveling to Great Britain for studies, and might have a British teacher at their English school in Brazil. A student in Morocco might be in an English program to prepare them for working in the hospitality industry. In each of these situations, it can be helpful for learners to acquire an understanding of some elements of the English-speaking culture whose English they are learning.

When culture is identified as a necessary learning goal alongside the learning of language, it's important to understand the complex nature of culture, as illustrated in the Flower Model of Culture (Figure 1). It's easy to identify visible signs of culture, such as food and dress (illustrated by the petals of the flower). It's much harder to grasp the different belief systems (illustrated by the roots) that can impact how people communicate. For example, when an English student doesn't ask questions even though they have sufficient English to do so, and they have legitimate questions to ask, it could be because of a belief that asking a question implies the teacher has not explained something well. Their failure to ask questions communicates respect in their own culture, but lack of engagement in the teacher's culture.

This illustrates the importance of viewing culture as two-way learning. The student does need to learn the cultural norms that are typically followed by speakers of the new language. In the example, that is looking the speaker in the eyes to show attention. However, the teacher also needs to learn about the student's culture, and what the student is intending to communicate by not looking the teacher in the eyes.

Table 1 provides examples of differing cultural norms. On the companion website (www.tesol.org/ELTBasics) there is a worksheet version of this chart, which teachers may want to use in their own contexts

to engage learners in understanding how cultures that they interact with may differ.

TABLE 1. Two Examples of Differing Cultural Norms

Context	Cultural Norm		
	Noon Meal (Petal)*	Body Language (Leaf)*	Communication Values (Roots)*
United States	Sandwich, salad, soup, or other lighter foods.	Shake hands upon first meeting; stand at a distance in conversation.	Written communication is valued; it provides a record of communication.
Brazil	Biggest meal of the day, often with rice, beans, and meat.	May embrace or "air kiss" on first meeting; stand close for conversation.	Oral communication is valued; it provides more interaction and room for negotiation.

Note: Petal, leaf, and roots refer to the visibility levels of the signs of culture in [Figure 1](#).

All ELT contexts can provide opportunities for learning about other cultures. Certainly, when students represent diverse cultures, or when students and teacher are from different cultures, the ELT classroom should be characterized by respect, value, and support for all cultures in the classroom. Even when students and teacher share the same culture, learning a new language often provides opportunities for learning about cultures associated with that language. Language study may also bring in readings and other materials from other cultures. In short, the ELT classroom can be rich with culture-learning opportunities for teachers and students, and teachers would do well to foster this kind of learning through course materials and activities.

Learner Differences

All learners are unique, and their individual combination of differences impacts language acquisition. Some learners may have exceptional needs. For example, they may experience learning difficulties or may have physical needs requiring accommodations in the classroom. Exceptionalities should be acknowledged and addressed in appropriate ways to facilitate learning.

Learners also may vary considerably in their prior schooling. Immigrant language learners may be highly trained professionals or they might not have learned to read and write in their home language. When literacy needs to be developed, that affects ELT goals considerably. An ideal program would include the development of home language literacy alongside the development of literacy in English.

All language learners need the experiences and conditions discussed in [Chapter 2](#). However, how learners interact with and process these experiences and conditions can vary widely. Here are some of the learner differences that most affect second language acquisition (SLA):

- motivation
- risk-taking
- willingness to communicate
- tolerance of ambiguity
- learning and memory
- sound discrimination

Motivation

Motivation is essential for a task as long and complex as acquiring a new language. Motivation can stem from a desire to integrate into a new culture and build relationships through a new language, or it can be more practical, such as the need to use a new language for work or study. For a few individuals, a love of languages, or of the specific language being learned, provides enough motivation for language acquisition. Some believe that if a person is sufficiently motivated, not much else is needed. Time and again this belief is proven false when highly motivated individuals lose their motivation because of poor language instruction. Motivation is important, but it alone is far from sufficient for SLA.

Risk-Taking

Learning a new language involves using basic and rudimentary language at first, and it involves making mistakes. Many people find it uncomfortable to repeatedly make mistakes, and this feeling may lower their willingness to take risks using the language. When a person is unwilling to take risks, they won't use the language as much, and language acquisition may suffer. A person who perhaps is naturally easygoing and not too concerned about how they sound may acquire English more easily because they are not afraid to use the new language, even in a very basic and imperfect way.

If a person isn't a natural risk-taker, pushing them to take risks beyond their comfort level isn't likely to be helpful and may do nothing more than increase stress, which raises their affective filter (see "[Stress](#)" under "[Eight Key Concepts](#)" in Chapter 2). If the classroom remains a low-stress, supportive environment, a student may grow in their ability to take more risks as language proficiency increases.

Willingness to Communicate

A person who is eager to communicate an idea will use multiple means of communication, including gestures, reformulations, writing out words, translanguaging, and more. This willingness to communicate can result in the listener providing the language that is needed, or filling in the gaps, resulting in increased language learning. When success is measured by effective communication rather than metrics related to accuracy, an MLE may also be more willing to take risks, because it's easier to be successful.

Willingness to communicate is affected by personality and culture. Just as people differ in introversion and extroversion, cultures also differ in the types and quality of communication that are acceptable in different contexts. In some circumstances, using gestures and a note pad for written words might be not only acceptable but also entertaining. In others, it might be seen as inappropriate.

Tolerance of Ambiguity

Tolerance of ambiguity refers to language that is heard or read. Some learners find it difficult to move past an unfamiliar word in a reading. Tolerance of ambiguity can change, depending on the context. Precise understanding may be needed in some conversations and readings, and not in others. If an MLE is studying to take their driver's license exam, for example, a low tolerance of ambiguity can serve them well, as they will need to fully understand all the language on the exam. However, in general, high tolerance of ambiguity is a helpful quality in learning a new language.

When the topic of a conversation or reading is one that is familiar, a person may be more tolerant of ambiguity because they are more able to predict and understand the content. For someone with low tolerance of ambiguity, even if they might be able to get the gist of a reading without knowing a specific word, they are bothered by the unknown word and feel compelled to look it up, disrupting their reading. In listening, this lack of tolerance for ambiguity has an even more disruptive effect. When we listen to someone speak and get stuck on a single word or phrase, the person continues speaking, but our listening stops. Building tolerance of ambiguity can help a language learner continue to listen, even with partial understanding.

Learning and Memory

Language acquisition occurs mainly through the exposure to and meaningful use of language, not memorization of words and grammar rules. However, there are times when memory tasks can be useful. Most people need to actively and conscientiously work on learning and remembering many new words when they begin to learn a new language. Whether one labels items around the house, uses flash cards, or invents chants and games to aid memorization, this active and focused learning is usually a part of the early language acquisition process. At later stages, learners may need to memorize verb conjugations or noun endings.

The important thing to remember is that though the ability to commit words and grammar rules to memory can be a helpful part of the language acquisition process, memorized language still must be transferred into active language use to have real value. If this occurs, then the memorized language can lead to real communication, and the memorization of grammar rules can provide the ability to self-monitor language use during real interactions, resulting in greater accuracy.

Sound Discrimination

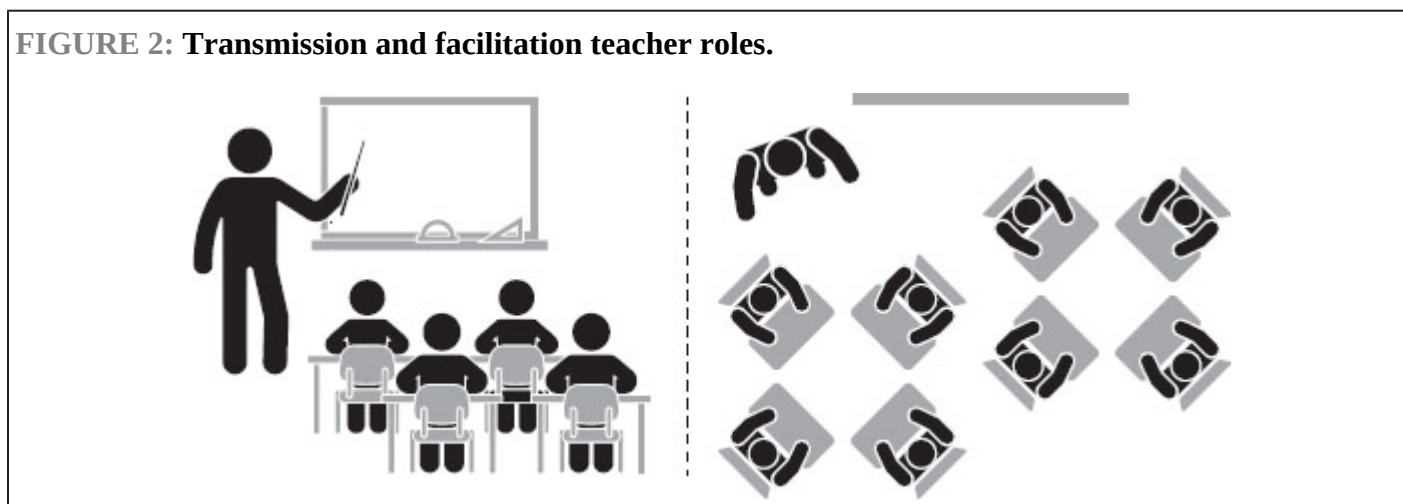
A final learner characteristic that can contribute to language acquisition is the ability to hear, produce, and remember new sounds. This characteristic might not have great significance if English and the home language share similar phonology, but it can be a very important one when the two languages sound very different from each other. Because the effect of sound discrimination on SLA is so different depending on the similarities between the native and target languages, it's dangerous to use this characteristic as a predictor of language acquisition success. Language aptitude tests that focus on sound discrimination don't take into account the fact that sounds are more easily heard and understood in context than in isolation, and when spoken by a real person versus heard on a recording. So, while sound discrimination can be a significant factor in SLA, it must be considered alongside other factors.

Teaching Differences

Teacher roles

Teachers assume different roles in the classroom. What kind of role a teacher adopts can depend on many different factors, including culture, teacher education, type of content, student needs, and personal choice. Two opposing but general teacher roles are sometimes called “transmission” and “facilitation” (see [Figure 2](#)).

FIGURE 2: Transmission and facilitation teacher roles.



Transmission role

The transmission role casts the teacher as the source of information. In this type of teaching, it's the teacher's

job to know the content and transmit it to the students. It's the students' job to learn the content and recite it back on tests. Teachers often transmit the content through lectures. They might also provide content through textbooks and worksheets. This style of teaching is also known as "teacher centered" and is sometimes called a "traditional" way of teaching.

Facilitation role

The facilitation role, in contrast, focuses on students' learning. Though the teacher still needs to know the content, their main role isn't transmitting that content, but, rather, helping students to learn it. This is sometimes called a "student-centered" approach to teaching. When the teacher is acting in a facilitative role, they design learning activities that they believe will result in students learning the content. Such activities might include pair and small group work and interactive classroom activities, such as games, simulation of real-world activities, and project-based learning.

Because students of the English language need to actively use English for real communication, a facilitative role is often the most helpful in ELT. However, it's important to recognize that ELT contexts are diverse, and numerous factors impact the role that the teacher adopts. For example, when considering the local culture (including student expectations) and national exams, a transmission approach might be needed for some of the instruction. Well-equipped teachers are those who can be flexible in their approach, changing teaching roles as needed to both respect culture and also provide instruction that will result in student learning.

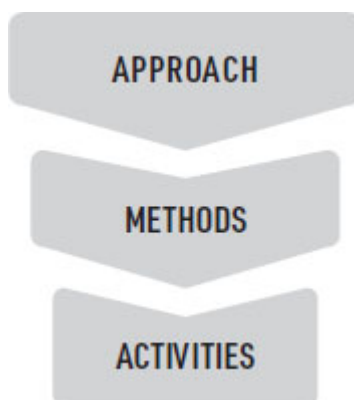
Language Teaching Approaches

Different words are used to talk about the ways that teachers teach and the activities through which students are expected to learn. An overarching term that is often used in such discussions is *methodology*. However, methods are chosen based on the approach that is taken. An approach is a perspective, or a set of beliefs, about how students will best learn or acquire a new language. This perspective then drives the selection of methods, which then leads to the use of specific activities in which students will engage (see [Figure 3](#)).

Approaches to language teaching can fall under three broad categories:

- Language based
- Communication based
- Content based

FIGURE 3: Hierarchy of macro to micro methodology terms.



Language-based approaches

Language-based approaches are the most traditional, and often go hand-in-hand with a transmission teaching role. In this type of approach, the main goal is to learn *about* the language. The oldest of this type of

approach is called grammar translation and focuses primarily on the written language. Lessons involve learning grammar, memorizing vocabulary, reading and translating texts, and filling out worksheets. There is relatively little focus on what is being communicated through the language.

Historically, when the grammar translation approach proved to be insufficient for real-world communication, the audiolingual method was born. Unlike the grammar-translation method, the audiolingual method focused on oral language. However, the emphasis was still on the language itself. Though real-world communication was a stated goal, its methodology of memorization of dialogues and an emphasis on work done in language labs, listening and repeating, did not always result in the real-world communicative ability that was desired.

Communication-based approaches

Dissatisfaction with the results of language-focused approaches led to an emphasis on communication in language classrooms. Communication-based approaches focus less on perfection in grammar, pronunciation, and other elements of language and more on meaning and achieving success in a communication task. Communicative classrooms are designed to provide opportunities for real, meaningful, and authentic communication, typically through all four domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

In this type of approach, teachers often take a facilitative role. They design classroom activities that provide students with opportunities to use the language for real and purposeful communication. This approach has often been called communicative language teaching. One way in which communicative language teaching has been envisioned in curriculum is through **task-based language teaching**. In this type of curriculum, language acquisition occurs through tasks that students need to accomplish through the language. For example, a student might be tasked with engaging in dialogue to open a bank account through a classroom simulation.

Content-based approaches

A content-based approach shifts the emphasis yet again. The emphasis isn't on the language or the communication but on the content learned through the language. This approach is used in bilingual and language immersion school settings, when language acquisition occurs through content instruction in a new language. For example, when a child in Malaysia speaks Malay at home but goes to an English-medium school where all subjects are taught in English, the child experiences content-based language learning. When her math, science, and history classes are taught in English, she is acquiring English as she is learning those subjects. Similarly, a fluent-English-speaking adult living in France might choose to take a cooking class in French as a way of learning French. The focus would be on the content of cooking, but a byproduct would be learning French.

Some of the labels given to this type of approach include **content and language integrated learning**, **content-based instruction**, and content-based language teaching. Language is sometimes acquired through content instruction in classrooms that provide sheltered instruction. A sheltered classroom is one in which content is delivered in more accessible English, using strategies that help students both learn content and acquire language. One well-known method of planning for such sheltered instruction is SIOP: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol.

There are other approaches that are not limited to language teaching, which can also be very useful in developing language through content instruction. Project-based learning is an approach in which students work in groups to complete a project. To complete the project, they must both learn the necessary content and utilize the target language. Problem-based learning is similar, but the students' collaborative goal is to solve a problem. To solve the problem, they must learn content and use language.

Utilizing Multiple Approaches

In many ELT contexts, different approaches are needed at different times and for different purposes. Imagine

an EFL secondary classroom in Colombia in which the teacher is teaching a unit on robotics, which she hopes will pique students’ interest (Table 2).

TABLE 2. EFL Classroom Teaching Scenario Using Varied Approaches

Classroom Teaching	Teaching Approach
The teacher uses the English language as she teaches about robotics.	Content-based approach
Students are interacting in English in small groups to process their learning and design a robot.	Communication-based approach
From time to time, the teacher addresses errors she hears as students work in groups. (E.g., she notices students’ misuse of the pronouns for and to, and so provides a mini-lesson on this topic.)	Language-focused approach

Well-trained teachers are able to select, use, and integrate approaches to meet the language learning needs.

Chapter Summary

ELT varies around the globe. English teaching and learning is done in many different kinds of schools, within diverse country contexts.

- › The cultures of the students, teacher, and the type of English being taught can impact ELT endeavors in various ways.
- › Probably the most important type of diversity in the classroom is that of the students. Each student has unique strengths and challenges in the language acquisition process.
- › Teachers can take on different roles in the classroom. A facilitative role is most likely to result in students being able to communicate in the new language.
- › There are many different approaches, methods, and strategies that can be used in language classrooms. Teachers should know many of these to best meet the needs of their students through diverse classroom experiences.

The more teachers understand the diversity of the ELT classroom and are able to tailor their teaching to their ELT context and learners, the more successful they will be.

CHAPTER 4

Planning and Teaching English Language Lessons

This chapter gets to the heart of English language teaching (ELT): what happens in the classroom. It begins with an introduction to planning lessons. Core lesson components are introduced, along with some sample lesson outlines. The second half of the chapter addresses teaching lessons, and the essential skills that teachers need to create effective language acquisition experiences for their students.

A Note on This Chapter: Special Cases

The assumption in this chapter is that teachers are in a context where students want to learn to speak English, and where it is also appropriate to integrate all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) into the lesson.

There are some contexts in which lessons might need to be designed differently because of students' needs and goals. For example, an English class in which the students do not yet have literacy even in their home language might only use visual supports, and might not use written English words and sentences. A class that is focused on preparing students for a college entrance exam might consist mostly of individual reading, writing, and grammar activities, and might not have much emphasis on communication or interaction.

There are many resources for teaching classes focused on specific language skills, such as reading or listening, or specific goals, such as test preparation. A list of resources can be found on the companion website for this book (www.tesol.org/ELTBasics).

Planning Lessons: Lesson Components

Classroom instruction normally begins with planning a lesson. Though it may seem that veteran teachers are able to enter a classroom with little preparation, engaging students in rich activities that foster language learning, these teachers have usually developed their teaching skills over years of conscientious lesson planning. For effective ELT that results in students being able to communicate in their new language, a teacher cannot simply open a workbook and go through the exercises with the students. New teachers need to plan lessons well in order to achieve the goal of student language acquisition.

There are many different lesson planning models. Teacher training programs or schools often have required templates for planning lessons. Sometimes, these templates require many different components, all of which can be helpful in learning to plan a lesson. However, the goal in this chapter is to focus on only the essential elements that are needed to plan a lesson that will result in language acquisition. These are the three essential components of a lesson plan for language acquisition (or “Triple A” Lesson Planning):

1. Aims
2. Activities
3. Assessment