

Chapter 4 **Who are the learners?**

This chapter looks at ways that learners (and classes) differ, and asks what you can do to work with such differences.

1 Individuals and groups

Task 29: First meeting with a class

You walk into the room, and there in front of you is your new class.

- 1 What can you learn about a class at first glance?
- 2 How can you learn more about them and what they might be thinking about you?
- 3 What kind of relationship do you hope to achieve with them?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

At first glance, we can discover some basic facts, such as:

What is the apparent age of learners? How many are there? What is the male/female ratio? Do they have books, materials, pens, etc.? How they are seated? Are they silent? Talking? Actively doing something? Restless? What do they do in reaction to your presence? etc.

Beyond this, we can gain a number of more intangible, intuitive impressions based on our interpretation of eye contact, body posture, comments overheard, etc.

Do they know each other? How do they relate to each other? Are they happy and positive? Do they seem to be ready for a language lesson? Is the atmosphere welcoming to me? Do they seem to like me? Does their reaction feel challenging to me in a positive way or threatening in a negative way? Are the learners waiting for me to say or do something? Is there a 'good buzz' about the room?

Of all these, teachers are often initially most concerned with their perception of what the learners think of them. 'Do they like me?' and 'What do they expect from me?' seem to be fundamental issues for many teachers – and until they have been positively resolved, teachers often feel unable to work successfully. Meeting a class is an important moment. It involves meeting a number of people at once, and many initial impressions may be formed in those first few seconds. ■

Task 30: 'I wanted them to love me'

Here is Yvette – an experienced teacher – talking about what she used to worry about when she first met a class. Do you relate to her feelings at all?

'When I started teaching, I seemed to spend a lot of my time worrying about whether the class liked me or not – well, I could almost say I was desperate that they should love me. I felt as if I couldn't do anything unless they were on my side, as it were. I think this got me spending too much time trying to entertain the class – which led to some funny lessons and we all had a good laugh – but I'm not sure they got what they really needed from me. I think nowadays I still want to have a good relationship with my students, but somehow I've come to terms with the fact that whatever I do, some people probably won't adore me or what I do. That sort of

sets me free to worry about the lessons and the students and what they are learning – more than worrying too much about my own feelings.'

Task 31: The character of groups

Do groups have a character distinct from that of the individuals in it?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Groups do have characters and moods. I'm sure you've heard fellow teachers in a staff room saying things like 'Oh, they're a lovely group' or 'The group seems to have gelled' or 'They are so open – happy to do anything'. Of course, you might also hear negative interpretations of group character as well: 'It's like stirring mud in there today' or 'They're very negative'.

It is interesting to notice how different teachers may evoke a markedly different response from the same group. Such variation can be particularly noticeable on training courses when maybe two or three teachers teach the same class, one after the other. You can sometimes watch the class that has just been active and engaged 'close down' when a new teacher starts – speaking less and looking down all the time as if some switch had been turned off inside them. ■

Task 32: Changes in class mood

List some possible factors that might explain a change in class mood from one teacher to the next.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

This is clearly a basic, essential question – and is probably more to do with teacher attitude than with the tasks, games, methodology, etc. used. Students respond to the way you respond to them. If they find you unhelpful or not listening to them, then no amount of jolly games will put back the sparkle.

Whatever you find when you enter class, remember that part of what you see and understand is related to what you yourself bring into the room, i.e. you often find what you expect to find. Teachers who go in thinking that a group of students will be 'keen' or 'motivated' or 'dull' or 'unhelpful' may tend to find exactly what they look for. ■

Task 33: Similarities of people in a group

- 1 In what ways are people in a language class similar to each other?
- 2 How might a teacher's description of a 'homogenous group' be a simplification?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

It's tempting for a teacher (or a school) to view a class as a fairly homogenous group with a single 'level' and similar behaviour, preferences, interests and ways of working.

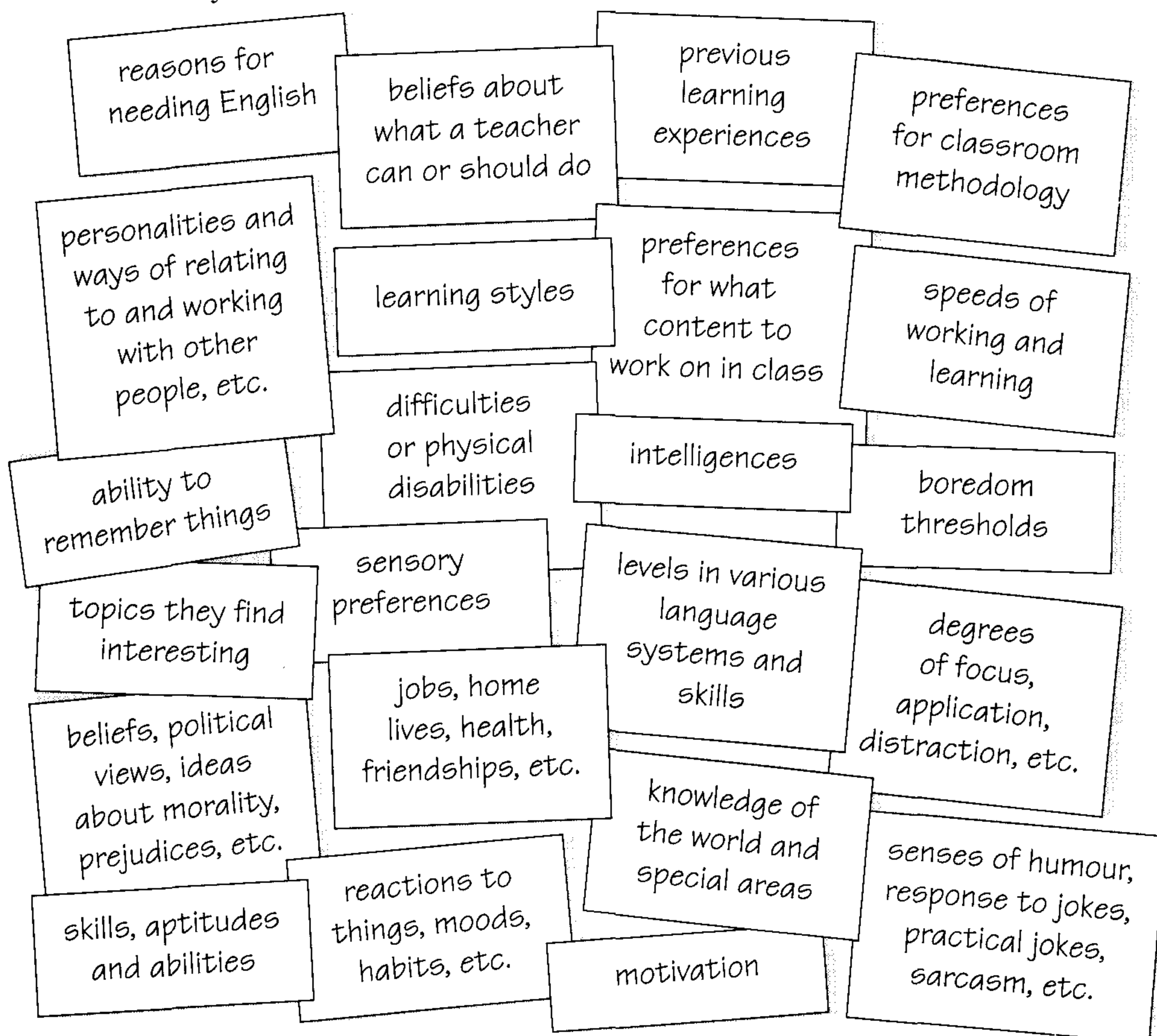
The individuals in a class may have a number of things in common with each other. Some may be friends with others; they may come from the same geographical district or work in the same place. The one thing that everyone has in common is that they are in a language-learning class (though of course they

may not have chosen to be there). Often these people are in the same room at the same time with strangers only because they have been placed there by the school.

Beyond any common features, there will be significant differences between people; it's not only age or level that differs in learners – they may also have:

Individual differences

Learners may have different ...



Motivation

Many learners have strong external reasons why they want to study (to get an exam pass, to enter university, to get promotion, to please their parents, etc). Others may be studying just for rewards within the work itself (the fun of learning, setting oneself a personal challenge, etc). In either case, the strength of their motivation will be a factor in determining how seriously they approach the work, how much time they set aside for it, how hard they push themselves, etc. You may see this reflected in things such as how often homework is done, how thoroughly new items are revised between classes, how 'tuned in' students are during lesson times. A frequent cause of difficulties within classes is when there is a significant mismatch of motivation levels amongst the course participants, e.g. some students who desperately need to pass an exam next month alongside others who want a relaxed chance to chat and play games in their new language.

Multiple intelligences

The traditional idea of humans having a single, unified 'intelligence' may be rather limiting. Howard Gardener has suggested that people could have seven 'intelligences' (maybe more!):

- 1 linguistic
- 2 visual
- 3 musical
- 4 logical/mathematical
- 5 bodily/feeling,
- 6 interpersonal (contact with other people)
- 7 intrapersonal (understanding oneself)

Gardener suggests that we probably all have these seven intelligences but in different proportions. So one person might be strong in musical and bodily intelligence, while another may be stronger in language and understanding other people. Traditional education systems may have tended to focus on some intelligences over others, especially on language and logical intelligences.

Sensory preferences

Writers in the field of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programing) have noted that humans tend to have different sensory preferences, i.e. some people respond best to hearing things (auditory), others to seeing them (visual), while others learn best when they can touch and feel tangible, physical objects (kinaesthetic). When planning classes, you may naturally bias lesson ideas towards your own sensory preferences, so it's worth remembering to ensure that, over time, there is a range of working modes appealing to visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners.

Task 34: Working with individual differences

What implications does the list of individual differences above have for the teacher? Here are three different teachers' views. As a generalisation, do you feel more in common with György, Tibor or Edit?

György



You can't really take all these individual differences into account. The important thing is to 'teach the class'.

Tibor



I teach very little to the class as a whole – but my class has lots of individual tasks and small-group work. I think the classroom is always a set of private lessons – as many as there are individuals.

Edit



You can adapt class lessons to respond to many individual needs and differences within the group.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

There is no right answer. The section below compares the views of the three teachers. ■

Teach the class or teach the individuals?

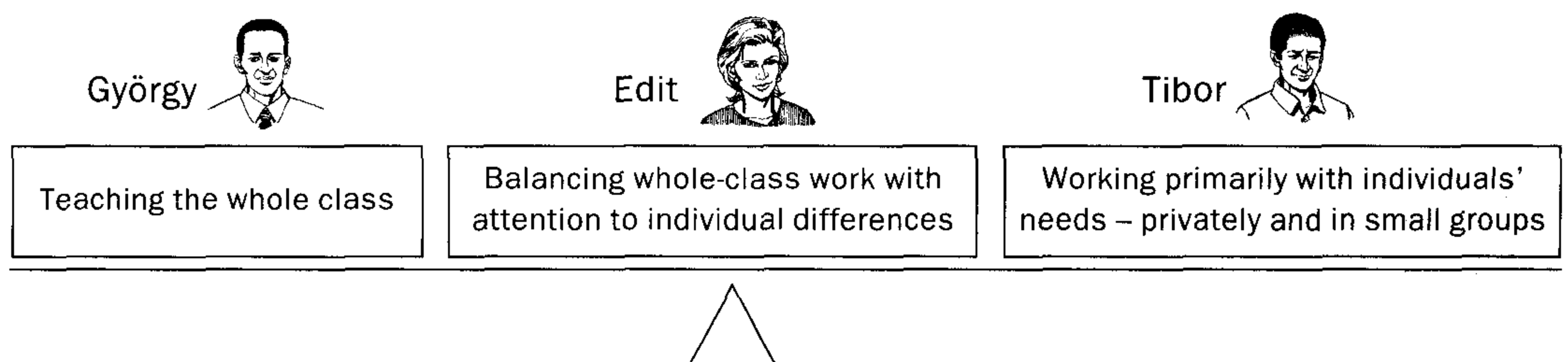
Classes certainly seem to have their own character – one often surprisingly different from the sum total of individuals in it. Many teachers (like György) pitch their lessons at the perceived character, level, needs and likes of a generalised feeling of this group identity. They may not be concerned with any individual differences and feel their primary task is to work with the class ‘as a whole’, maybe using a supplied syllabus or coursebook and interpreting their job as aiming ‘to cover’ the required material in a certain period of time. Such teachers may be responsive to some kinds of feedback from the class as a whole, mainly tending to pick up on whether the majority of students are keeping up or not. They expect and accept that some of what is done will be unsuitable or uninteresting or impossible to follow for some members of the class, but they feel that that is ‘the price to pay’. Especially with large classes, the priority seems to be to maintain the sense of progress and to hope that as many people can keep up as possible. Such an approach may be problematic, as there is a danger in ‘teaching’ without close reference to the individuals that are doing (or not doing) the learning.

Tibor takes the opposite position – that whole-class lessons generally won’t work because of the variety of people in a class. If he can pull it off, such an ‘individualised’ approach would probably be a very valuable class to be a part of. Many other teachers might find that his goal of trying to respond to the range of different individuals in a room quite demanding for a teacher, requiring a greater quantity of planning beforehand and, in class, perhaps a constant moving around, with some careful listening and focused individual help.

Edit’s solution is a compromise position that involves working with the class as a whole while attempting to also take individuals into account.

Teachers such as Edit may aim to teach the class by pitching the lessons to what they perceive as the majority of the group, but ‘keeping in touch’ with the others – by asking questions, adding extra comments and explanations, offering special tasks for some students, dividing the class to work on different things at some points, choosing topics that appeal to different groups of learners, designing tasks that appeal to different learning styles and preferences, etc.

Edit’s position is one of the classic balancing acts of teaching – to maximise working at every individual’s level, fulfilling as many wishes and needs as possible while also keeping the entire group engaged.



How can we pull off this balancing act? There are no easy answers, but it probably involves a combination of gathering useful feedback from learners (see Chapter 4, Section 4) and using your intuition (see Chapter 17, Section 4).

It is hard to know how best to work with individuals if you know nothing at all about them. However, even to find out a little basic information (say even about one tenth of the items in the 'individual differences' list above) for each person in our class may seem an overwhelming, unrealistic, unachievable task. It might still take the whole school year to just do that! And even if we did know the answers for the entire list, there might seem to be no way we could effectively apply this knowledge.

However, many impossible things turn out to be all right when I try them! Despite the apparently daunting nature of the task, it's still worth a go – as even learning one new thing about a learner can dramatically affect future classes. And the more I manage to find out, the better tuned my lessons become.

If you would like to quiz your students about their differences, try using the questionnaire in Resource 9 (Appendix 2).