## 4   Getting feedback from learners

Teaching is primarily an act of alert 'tuning in'. By that, I mean that the more you are able to understand the group, the more successful the lesson is likely to be.
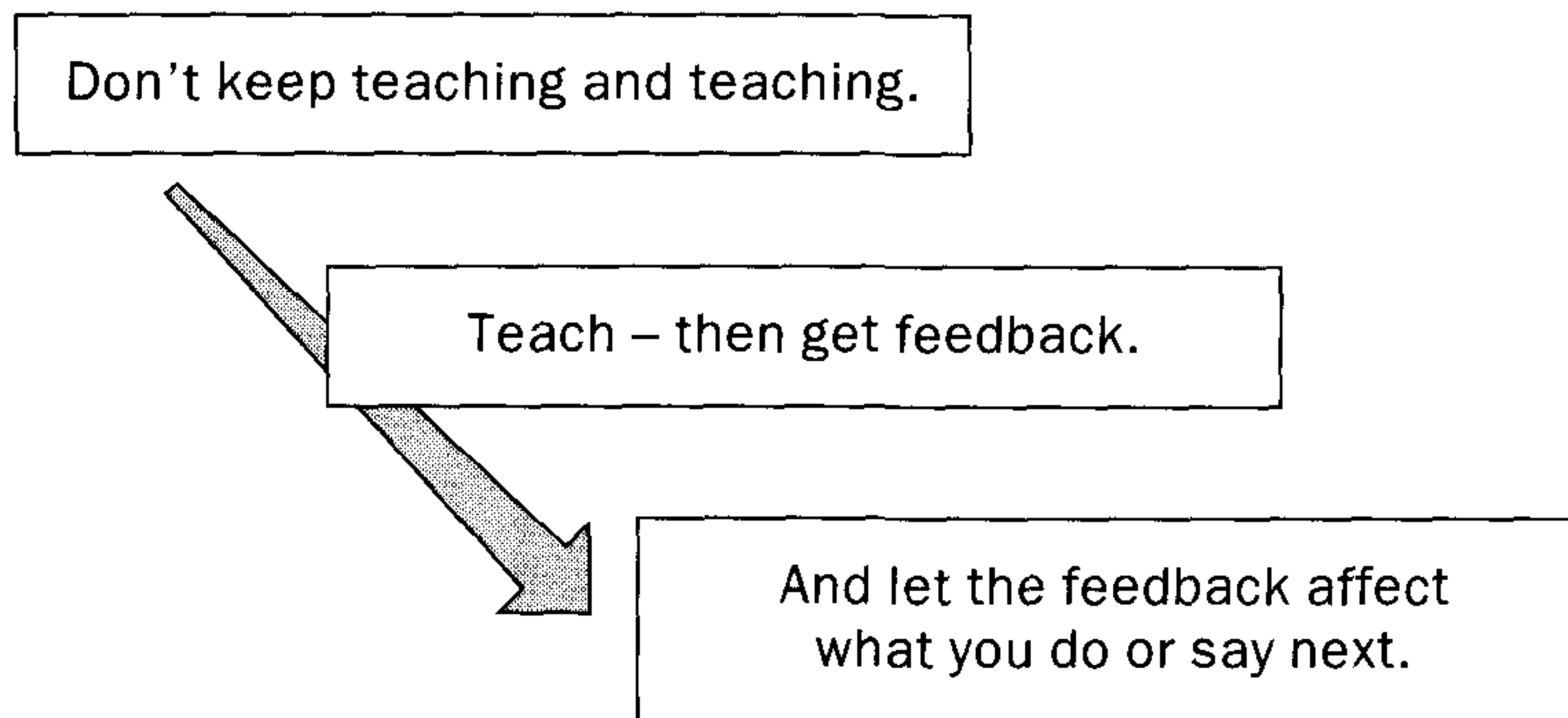
### The classroom you create

Many teachers operate their lessons as if the class were a machine into which raw materials can be fed and which, when used with certain techniques, will produce predictable outputs. This can lead to classes that move forward through a coursebook or syllabus, but may not lead to much learning that is significant or useful for many of the individuals in the class. It is at this level that many teachers operate on a day-by-day basis. Materials and techniques on their own are sufficient to run a course in a superficially successful way, but although authorities may be satisfied at recordable data (pages turned, books finished, syllabus covered, exams passed, etc.), the learning that has been achieved may be largely illusory. It is all too easy to spend one's entire teaching carreer in this kind of teaching and never to risk the breakthrough through the invisible ceiling into another kind of class, where you approach the class as a living being rather than as a machine. It is this second kind of class that this book encourages you towards.

In observing lessons, it often seems to me that the least successful teachers are those who:

- work 'at right angles' to the class (i.e. they do not notice and take into account the needs and wishes of the learners, but work to their own priorities and in their own choice of ways);
- create a physical and psychological distance between learners and teacher;
- do not pick up (sometimes subtle) signals from learners about what they think, what they want;
- do not elicit feedback about opinions on course, content, methods, working styles, etc.;
- do not deviate from their own plan/agenda;
- keep up their own 'radio babble' (i.e. a constant stream of space-filling, though often low-quality, talk) to block out the incoming signals from the class;
- find time-filling activities (such as writing at length on the board) to save them from having to communicate more with learners.

Ineffective, unhelpful teaching is teaching that proceeds forward (perhaps according to a plan, according to what you wanted to do, according to what the book says, according to a syllabus, according to whatever) without reference to what impact this is having on the learners in class.

The essential engine of a richer, more productive learning environment is communication, two-way feedback from learners to teachers and vice versa.

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Don't keep teaching and teaching.   │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
          ╲
           ╲        ┌──────────────────────────┐
            ╲       │  Teach – then get feedback. │
             ╲      └──────────────────────────┘
              ╲
               ╲          ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                ╲         │  And let the feedback affect  │
                 ▼        │   what you do or say next.    │
                          └─────────────────────────────┘
```

## Why is it hard to tune in?

When you start teaching, it's hard to think very much about anyone other than yourself. If you're anything like I was, you might have a tape recorder of worries echoing in your head, even more so if you are being observed. When I watch new trainee teachers in the classroom, I often notice how they have so many concerns about their own actions and words as a teacher that they find it very hard to tune in to the other people in the room.

These are a few of the worries you may feel:

- I hope I don't say anything silly.
- What on earth can I do next?
- Do they like me?
- That activity only lasted three minutes, and I thought it'd last 45.
- This is lasting forever, and I thought it would take three minutes.
- I feel so confused.
- I don't really understand this thing I'm teaching.
- Is the observer going to catch me out? What's she writing?
- This is so boring.

Finding a way to turn off this internal noise and start listening to the genuine voice of feedback from outside is often a difficult, slowly acquired but important teaching skill. In gaining feedback information from learners, we learn to adjust and fine-tune our intuitive responses.

## Avoiding feedback

Many teachers never ask for feedback from learners. Some teachers ask for feedback occasionally, often in a way that elicits what they want to hear. Some teachers get feedback that they allow to affect and alter what they are doing.

Teachers may avoid feedback because they fear hearing comments about their work. The more they avoid it, the more dangerous it becomes, because ungiven feedback piles up like floodwater behind a dam. When they do request feedback, it can be mostly 'token', to feel as if they have 'done some feedback' and found out what they wanted to hear.
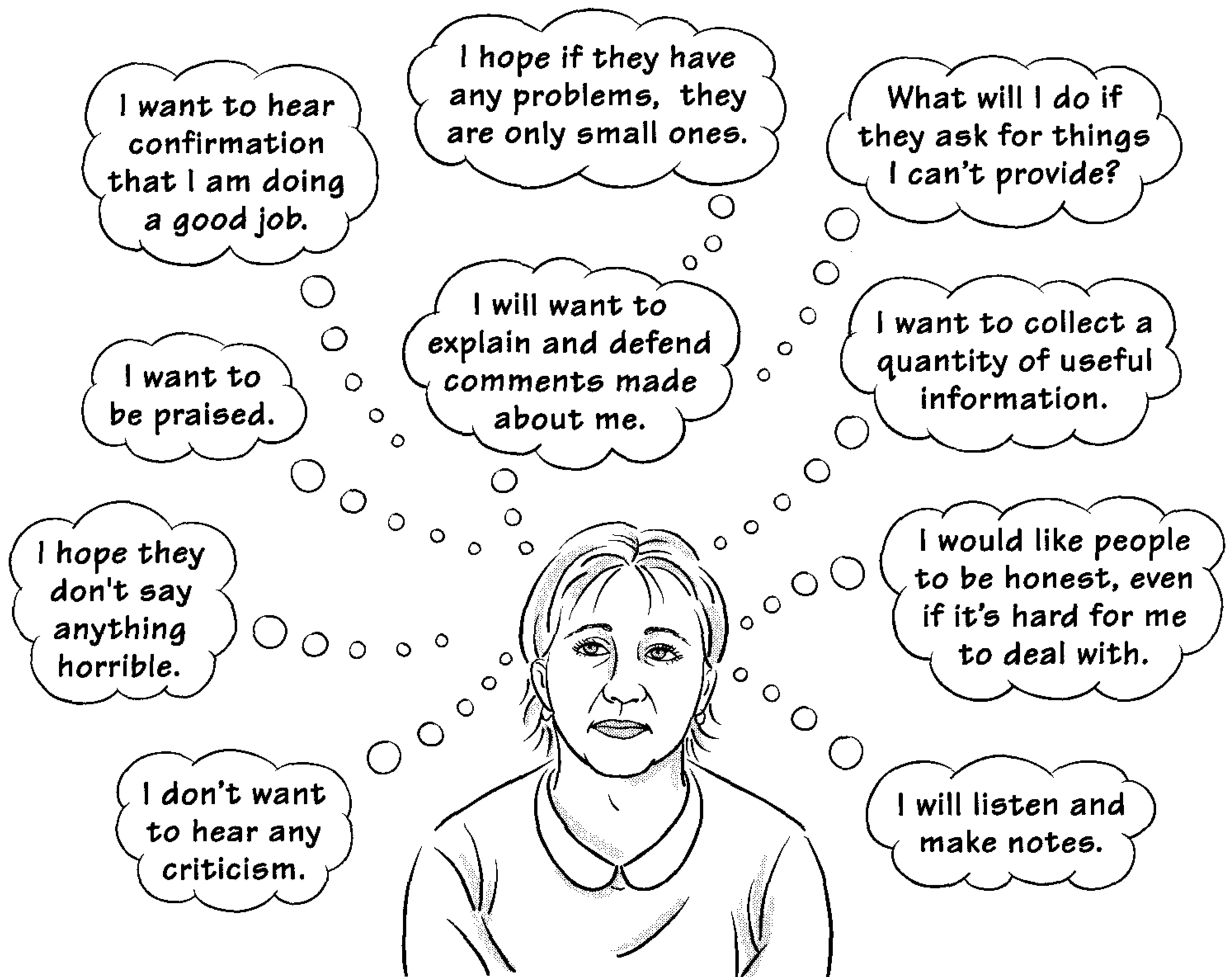
Of course, there may be many reasons why learners don't give useful, honest feedback.



Feedback is probably only really useful when the channels are open all the time, which suggests a different way of working from many traditional teaching situations – and a different relationship. Can you imagine a course in which the students genuinely direct or influence or affect the programme on a consistent basis and with positive outcomes? How could this come about?

### Getting useful feedback – some starting points

- Don't think of feedback as a once-a-term thing or just as a formal requirement from your school. Visualise it as moment-by-moment need to find out whether you and the class are on track.
- Clearly, you can overdo it – you don't want the class to groan at being asked 'How useful was that activity?' again and again – but don't let this worry prevent you from even starting to explore their reactions and responses.
- Whether you go for oral or written feedback, vary it. Don't turn it into a ritual.
- Some common feedback opportunities: feedback at the start of a lesson, at the end of a lesson, at the end of a week, at the start of a new coursebook unit, at the end of a unit, before the class does an activity, after an activity, as the core topic of an activity, written at home.
- Ask small questions (e.g. 'Which activity today was most difficult for you?') as well as big ones (e.g. 'How useful is the course for you?'). They are easier to answer.
- Ask simple, factual questions as well as evaluative questions, e.g. 'How many words today were new for you?' as well as 'Which activity did you enjoy most?'
- Design a simple feedback form. Photocopy and hand it out it (or dictate it to students). You could allow them class time to discuss the questions before they write, or ask them to fill it out at home.
- Ask students to write you a letter about the course. Specify exactly what you'd like them to discuss, or leave it open for students to raise any issues that they want to.
- Set aside some time, ask open questions that enable them to say what they want to say, and gear yourself simply to listen and learn (rather than to defend yourself, argue or contradict). Ask them what they really think. If your intention is only to hear 'nice things', then that is probably all you will get.

Doing feedback of any sort may be difficult for you the first time, but the end result of increased honesty, openness and mutual respect will almost certainly have a great long-term benefit, the more so if you implement changes in yourself, the class or the course that are responses to the feedback.

## 5 Learner training

For me, learner training means 'Raise student awareness about how they are learning and, as a result, help them to find more effective ways of working, so that they can continue working efficiently and usefully, even when away from their teacher and the classroom'. More simply, it means 'Work on teaching learning as well as teaching English'.

Learner training, therefore, includes:

- work on study skills, e.g. use of dictionaries, reference material, workbooks, notebooks, filed material;
- student examination of the process of learning and reflection on what is happening, e.g. of teaching strategies you use (and the reasons why you use them).

In both cases, it seems important to include these as strands throughout a course.

## Three ideas

### 1  Integrate study-skills work

Include study-skills work as an integrated feature of your lessons, e.g. when working on vocabulary, include a short exercise that involves efficiently looking up information in a dictionary. Similarly, when the students have found some new words to learn, you could make them aware of the variety of ways of recording vocabulary in their notebooks. (See Chapter 11, Section 6.)

### 2  Let them into the secret

Teachers sometimes prefer the 'surprise' approach to teaching methodology; often students don't really know why they followed a particular procedure or did a particular activity. Teachers often assume that their own reasoning will be transparently obvious to their students, but it rarely is. So it can be very useful to tell students before a lesson what's going to happen and why. At the end of the lesson, you can review not only the content, but also the way that it was studied. For example, after a listening skills lesson, talk through the procedure with the students: 'Why did I set a task first? Was it necessary to understand every word? What did we do next? What helped you learn? What didn't help?'

In this way, they will also be learning a methodology that they can repeat for their own use when they listen to a cassette at home or in a language laboratory.

### 3  Discuss process as well as content and procedure

The content of your lessons is the English language. The 'procedures' are your methodology (which, as I suggested above, is worth talking about with students). The third area is 'process'. By this, I mean the lesson as viewed from the learner's point of view. You're doing certain things as a teacher, but what is going on for each individual student?

It can be very valuable to set aside time in class simply to discuss the subject of 'learning on this course' in order to recall what's happening and reflect on it. This 'process review' will allow you and the learners to clarify what is happening. Simply talking about what is going on seems to have a very beneficial effect, quite apart from any new ideas or solutions that arise from it.