

Reading Homework due Week 5

Task:

The reading has four sections:

1. Individuals and groups
2. What levels are my students
3. Learners and their needs
4. Getting feedback from learners

In class you will choose one of the sections to summarize in week 5 to your group.

You can choose to summarize by doing one of these things:

- A. Read it and highlight/underline the key terms and important information. You can also add notes and questions to the margins.
- B. Create a new summary with main details and bullet points.

Next week you will verbally summarize your section in groups, so be prepared for that.

Bring a copy of the reading to next class.

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.

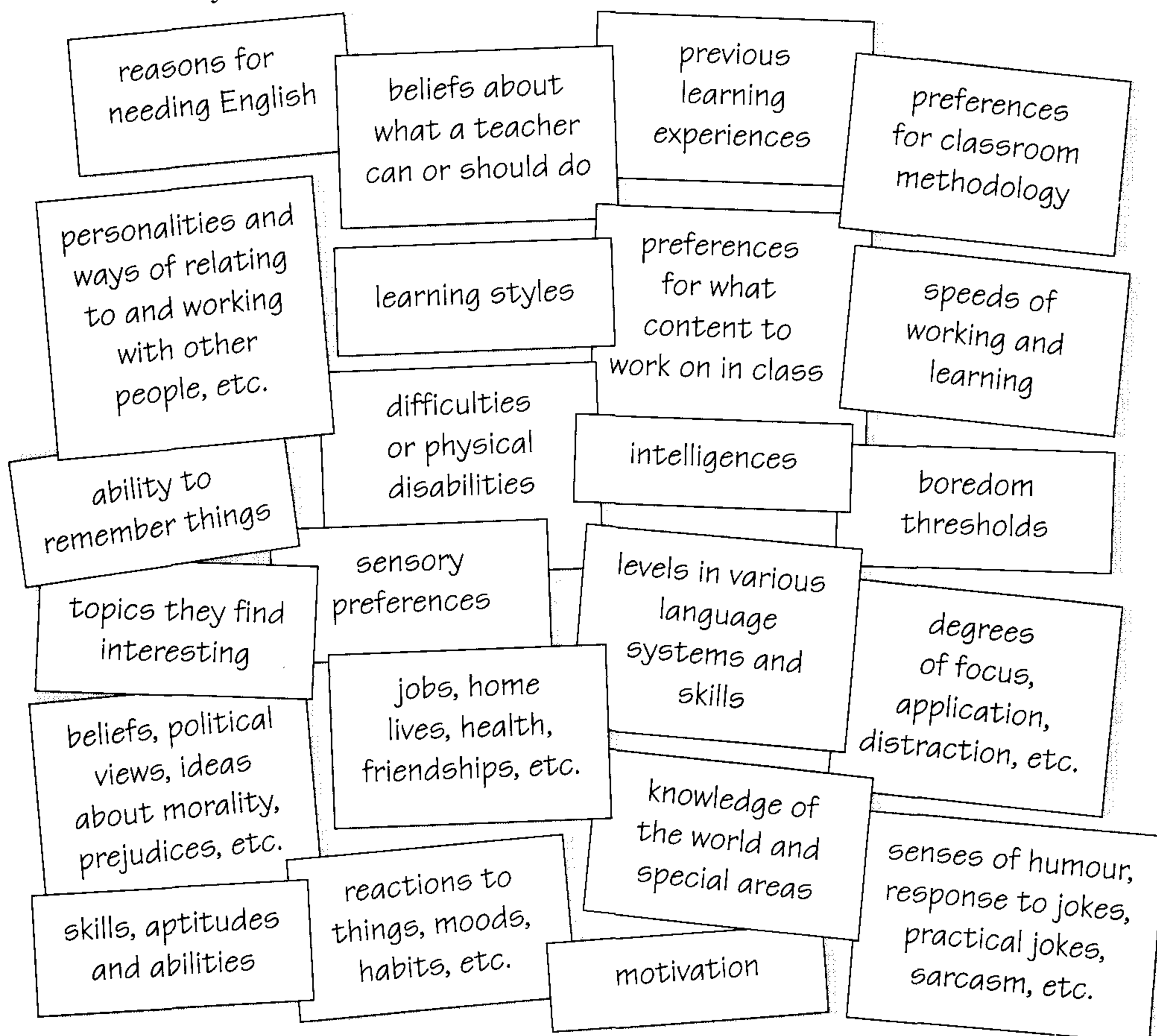
The individuals in a class may have a number of things in common with each other. Some may be friends with others; they may come from the same geographical district or work in the same place. The one thing that everyone has in common is that they are in a language-learning class (though of course they

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?

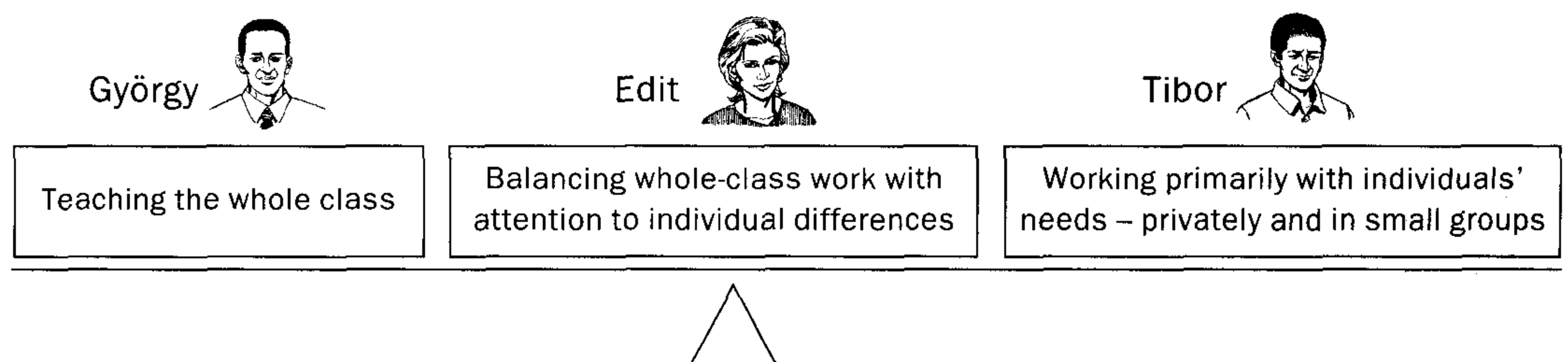
Classes certainly seem to have their own character – one often surprisingly different from the sum total of individuals in it. Many teachers (like György) pitch their lessons at the perceived character, level, needs and likes of a generalised feeling of this group identity. They may not be concerned 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).

2 What level are my students?

Task 35: Organising students into levels

What is your school's structure of class levels?

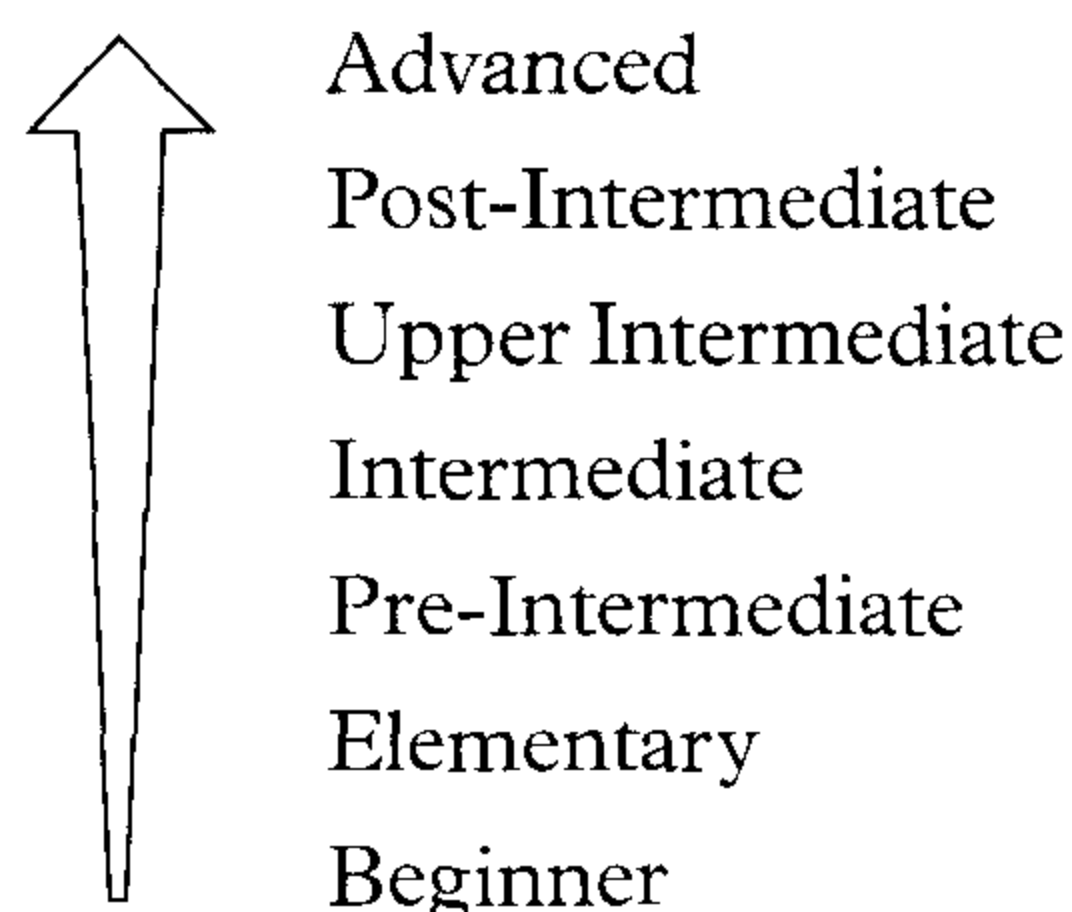
Do you know of any other ways of organising students into classes?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The section below describes some typical ways of organising levels. ■

Common level structures in schools

Many schools divide learners into classes at named language levels, often using coursebooks labelled for those levels. A common structure is:



Each of these levels may be subdivided, e.g. into Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, etc. Schools often plan progress on an assumption that it will take the average learner a certain period of time to move from one level to the next, e.g. 45–60 hours of classroom time (plus homework) to move through a third of one of the named levels. (Just to add to the confusion, an 'hour' may mean different things in different places: for example, a 'period' of 45–50 minutes is referred to as an 'hour' in many countries.)

There are other level systems you may come across. An influential one from the Council of Europe categorises learners as follows (with approximate indications of their correlation with the earlier level scheme):

C2	Mastery	(= Nearly native-speaker level)
C1	Operational proficiency	(= Advanced)
B2	Vantage	(= Upper Intermediate/Post-Intermediate)
B1	Threshold	(= Intermediate)
A2	Waystage	(= Pre-Intermediate)
A1	Breakthrough	(= Beginner/Elementary)

Other educational institutions may structure class levels around exams that students take, naming classes after the exam they are preparing for, e.g. using the Cambridge ESOL exam suite of KET, PET, FCE, CAE, CPE, etc.

Whereas, with adults, class make-up is typically organised on the basis of their perceived language level, in children's courses classes are more often based on students' ages.

Of course, all of these concepts of level are quite broadly painted. We now need to look more closely at the idea of 'level'.

Task 36: Mixed-level classes

- 1 Have you ever said 'This class is very mixed level'? What are some cause of mixed-level classes?
- 2 Do students in your school automatically move up from level to level at the end of a period of time?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Keep thinking about the questions while you read the following sections. ■

What is a learner's level?

It is tempting to see all learners in one class as at a certain named level, e.g. Pre-Intermediate. Yet teachers often come out of class complaining that the students seem to be very mixed in level, and they may blame teachers who designed the placement tests or the school policy of class creation. The most common reasons are:

- **Grouping by age:** In secondary schools, students are often grouped by age, and this seems very likely to lead to problems if some learners are significantly stronger or weaker than others.
- **Keeping groups together:** A typical problem in many schools is caused by the fact that it is often less troublesome for school administration to keep learners together as a class, course after course, rather than to keep separating them and mixing them up. Because learners will progress at different speeds, this means that, even if a group was similar in level at the start of a course, there may be very different 'exit levels' at the end. If that class now continues en masse to the next course level, the differences between participants will become more and more pronounced.
- **Placement testing:** Placement procedures are another cause of 'mixed-level' problems. Placement by language level sounds sensible, but even this can be

problematic, because an overall ‘level’ only gives a very general idea as to how good someone will be at, say, listening to a university lecture or how much vocabulary they can use. Placement testers sometimes give priority to friendship or personal requirements rather than level when creating classes.

- **Insufficient levels:** Learners may be together in the same class because the school doesn’t have sufficient levels to fine-tune the classes more.

‘What level is the class?’

When I hear a teacher asking about the level of a class, I am reminded of the question ‘How long is the coastline of Britain?’, to which the answer is ‘It depends how long your ruler is’. The more closely and carefully you measure, the more complex the answer becomes.

So, concerning level, how close are you looking? If you look from a kilometre away, maybe seeing the class as a group of people when we can’t make out any of the individuals, then calling a class ‘Pre-Intermediate’ can make sense – it’s a useful general classification that gives a reasonable overall picture of what they might know and what they might be able to do. It suggests material we can use and activities we can plan, and will probably allow us to teach (and survive) at least until we have a more accurate picture to guide us.

However, as soon as we move in a bit closer, say, to stand a few metres away from them, we notice that this group of people is made up of some very different-looking individuals. If we check the overall abilities of each person, we find that some are ‘weak Pre-Intermediate’, some ‘mid-Pre-Intermediate’ and some ‘strong Pre-Intermediate’. Maybe there are even some people who seem to belong to another level classification, say ‘Elementary’ or ‘Intermediate’.

If we move in even closer and stand next to one of these people (and talk to her), we might find out even more. We might discover that this person’s general ‘level’ masks the fact that she has a range of levels over the different language systems and skills, e.g. perhaps her knowledge of grammar is very good, her vocabulary is a little weaker and her speaking and listening are very much poorer.

We could look even closer than this, of course, and find the specific kinds of tasks that she is competent in or weak in, e.g. she can fill in an application form, but uses an inappropriate style for writing a formal letter requesting information.

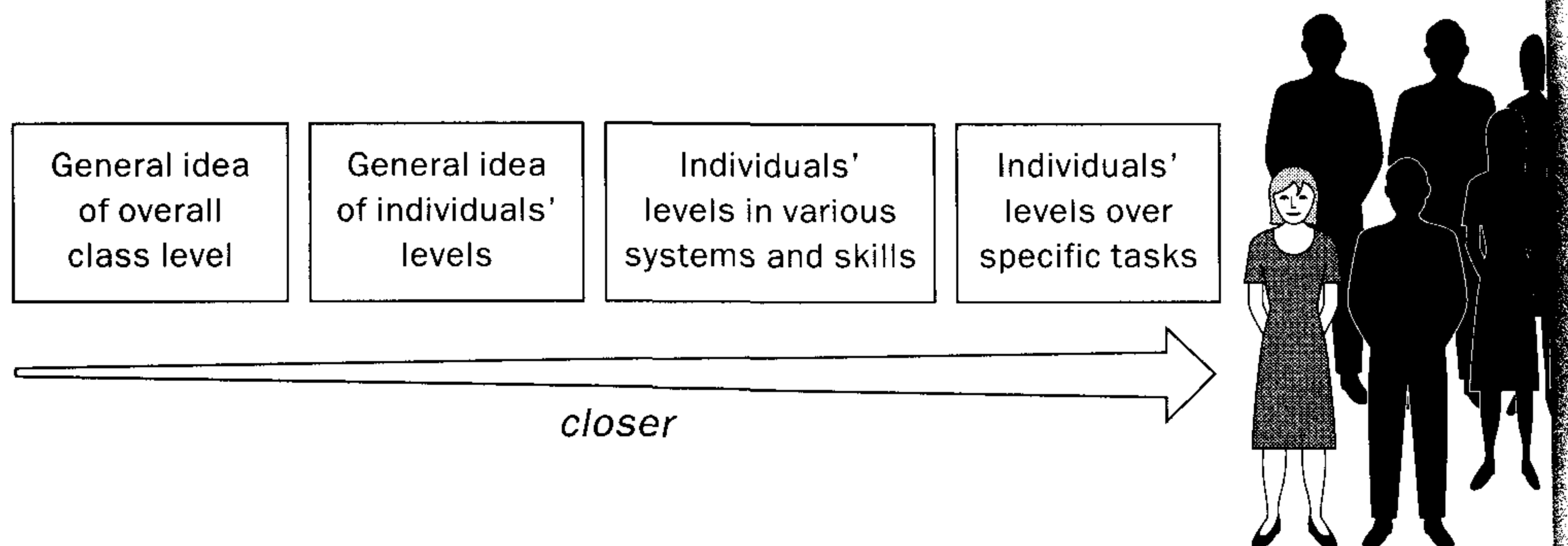


Figure 4.1 Level: how close are you standing?

Conclusions about level

What conclusions can we draw?

- Every learner has an individual range of levels.
- Every class is a mixed-level class.

When we plan lessons, we need to remember that we are planning something that may not be appropriate for some and may be easy or difficult for others, etc. Which is why the planning is only one part of structuring a lesson. In the act of teaching, we need to constantly notice and respond to feedback in order to adjust and redirect work moment by moment to make it as effective for each individual as possible.

3 Learners and their needs

Learners have distinct, individual reasons for being in a class and learning English – even when these are not consciously known or recognised. We can teach better if we know more about these.

Task 37: Ways to find out about learners' needs

What are some practical ways that we could find out useful data about learners' needs for learning a language?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The various tools, procedures and materials used for finding out about learner needs usually come under the heading of 'Needs analysis'. Often a Needs analysis includes not only information about why learners might need language in the future, but also information about:

- where learners are starting from: their present language level, current problems, etc.;
- what learners would like to learn (which may be different from what they need);
- how they want to study it (people have very different preferences about how they learn things).

We might use formal gathering procedures (e.g. setting questionnaires, tests, etc.) or approach it more informally (e.g. gleaning information from chats and activities over a period of time).

Some key tools would be:

- writing: the learner writes comments, information, answers to questions, etc.;
- speaking: the learner speaks with you or with other students;
- observing: you observe the learner at work (in class or at the workplace).

If we expand on those general headings, we can generate ideas for creating a variety of Needs analyses (NB you're likely to want to combine a few ideas, rather than use one exclusively). ■

Needs analysis

Writing

The learners are asked to:

- fill in a questionnaire (e.g. about their work, interests, previous study, etc.);
- choose the best answer from a selection (e.g. 'I like doing written work for homework,' 'I like to do reading for homework,' 'I like to go over classwork for homework,' 'I don't like homework');
- gap-fill (or complete) sentences (e.g. 'In class, I particularly enjoy working on ...');
- delete the things that are not true for you (e.g. *I never / sometimes / often* have to write in English);
- take a language test;
- tick the picture/diagrams that represent their use of English (e.g. pictures of office telephoning, greeting customers, etc.);
- write a paragraph about topics set by teacher (e.g. 'Your successes and difficulties with speaking English');
- write a letter/an e-mail/a note to your teacher (e.g. 'Your hopes for this course');
- write a homework essay about what you want to learn and why.

Speaking

You can:

- interview learners individually or in pairs;
- plan activities to focus learners on specific issues, leading to discussion;
- ask learners to select (and reject) items from a menu or a set of cards, discussing their reasons with each other;
- ask informally for advice about what would be useful to work on next lesson;
- collect oral (or written) feedback comments (e.g. about the usefulness of work you are doing) at the end of lessons;
- show the intended coursebook for the course and discuss it together with the class (e.g. 'Shall we use it?' 'How?' 'How much?' 'Pace?' etc.);
- get learners to help plan the course, the week or the next lesson;
- organise a social event at which informal discussions on needs arise;
- ask learners to describe/draw/make a model of their workplace or a diagram of their company structure, etc.

Observation

- Set the students tasks to do in class that will allow you to observe them working, speaking and using language. This will give you a chance to diagnose their language/skills problems and discover more about what they need.
- If you have a one-to-one student, it may be possible to observe him at his workplace and get a realistic idea of what he needs to do with English.
- Ask each learner to bring in samples of material they work with (or expect to work with in the future): leaflets, letters, tasks, professional magazines, etc.

NB If the learners' language level is low, many of the Needs analysis ideas could be used in their mother tongue.

Or here's a quick answer! Copy the Needs analysis cards or the questionnaires in Appendix 2 (Resources 10–12) to help you find out more about your learners.

Task 38: Using data from a Needs analysis

You've done a Needs analysis with your learners, using a few of the ideas from the list above. You're hoping that the data will be useful to you, but you are also aware that Needs analyses can be problematic.

- 1 Think of some reasons why the information you have obtained might be unhelpful or even untrue.
- 2 If the information is useful, what could you do with it now you've got it?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Needs analyses are not always as useful as teachers hope they might be. This may be because learners (for some reason) have not taken their task seriously enough and have produced little information, or information they have not thought very carefully about, or even untrue information. This suggests that it is essential to carefully introduce a Needs-analysis task so that learners understand the importance and value of what they are doing and take an appropriate amount of time to complete it.

One useful purpose in doing a Needs analysis (even if you entirely ignore the resulting data!) is to allow learners to discover that other people in the room have different views, expectations and needs than themselves. It's natural that a student might imagine that everyone in class has approximately similar ideas to his own; to discover the breadth of different views can be an important 'light-bulb' moment, and thus a Needs analysis can be a vital awareness-raising activity, quite apart from any data that comes out of it. ■

'But, teacher – you know best'

Students may find the concept and practice of Needs analysis difficult. They may greet a Needs analysis with comments such as 'You are the teacher – you know best,' 'You decide. I trust you.' This may be because the learner genuinely doesn't know what he wants or needs, or it may be because he can't be bothered or doesn't think that it is a student's job to think about things like this.

Many students may have spent their whole educational career being told what to do all the time, constantly presented with work that has included minimal elements of choice. They may never have stopped to realise that what they learn and how they do it involves their own personal choice, and that it is their own time and energy they are investing. It may be a real surprise to be asked what they want or need, and not surprisingly they might need a clear explanation as to the purpose of it – and guidance as to how to start thinking about and conveying their ideas.

Humans don't necessarily think first and then write down their ideas. Often I don't know what I think about something until I start writing my ideas down; then I find during the process of writing that my thoughts are becoming clearer and more structured. Maybe then I have to cross out the first two paragraphs, but I needed to write them to get me to paragraph 3 (which is a cracker!). Your students may find that the same thing happens to them when they start to wonder

what their needs are. The process of writing (or talking) about things helps to give some form to thoughts that maybe didn't exist in any clarity until then. (I often find myself saying something like the content of this paragraph to suspicious learners; it sometimes helps!)

You may still come across the 100% 'abdicating' student – one who gives up a right to make any decision about his own future. It's worth pointing out to such a student that he is crediting me, the teacher, with magical, wizard-like 'mind-reading' abilities. My response will probably be to state that, yes, I do know something about language and teaching, but I am not an expert on him and have no insight into the inside of his head, his past life and learning, his preferences or his future plans.

I hope – by means of explaining why it is important – to encourage this learner to realise that 'learning' is not another product that one buys ready-made off the shelf, but is something that has to be adjusted and remade every time. It is a 'living' thing, not a piece of dead meat. I don't always manage to persuade every learner, but it's worth trying! Curiously, the hard-line abdicator is often the very same student who complains at the end of courses, saying how unsuitable and useless the course was, and how the teacher knows nothing about what students need.

Other problems with Needs analyses

Other problems with Needs analyses may arise when the learners have not themselves chosen to do the course (e.g. because the students have to attend secondary school or because a course has been chosen and paid for by an employee's company). Of course, in these circumstances, a Needs analysis may serve an additional purpose: encouraging the course participants to start taking ownership of their course, making choices about what they want or need (rather than assuming that everything has already been decided and is cut and dried). When people feel they have some power or responsibility over what happens to them, it can really change their attitude to it.

Of course, with any Needs analysis, there might be a danger that, in asking people what they want or hope for, you might lead them to expect that everything they ask for will happen. Having said that, I guess it's much better to find out rather than to pretend that the differences don't exist.

What can you do with the data?

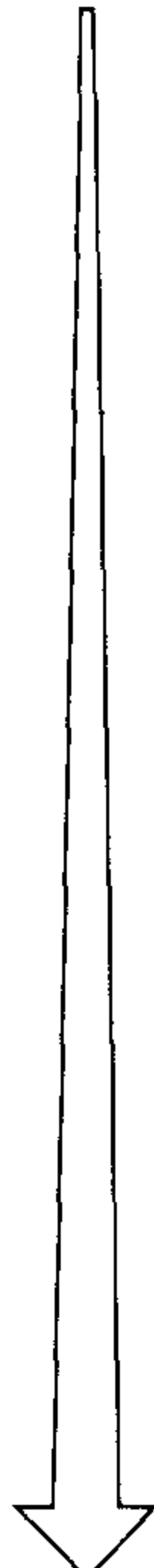
Anyway, let's assume the information you get is true and useful. There are still potential problems. What can you do with it? Maybe you consider the learners' wishes are inappropriate or not realistic or not possible, or that the range of needs stated are too wide-ranging within the group. What are the options for making use of this data?

Task 39: Balancing course plans and needs

Imagine a situation where you're a class teacher and you've already devised (or been presented with) a course plan before the course starts. How could you let the data obtained from a Needs analysis influence or change that plan?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

This largely depends on your own attitude as a teacher: how much do you want the course plan to be changed? There are a range of possibilities, some of which are listed below in an approximate order from 'taking least account of the data' to 'taking most account'.

 <p>Least</p> <p>Most</p>	Take no account of the Needs analysis data. Continue with the course as if the data hadn't been collected.
	Review the data, but decide that your original course plan is likely to achieve something very close to the desired outcomes, so continue using the original plan.
	Continue with the course as before, but allow the data to influence small aspects of how you help or deal with individuals in class.
	Continue with the course as before but add in a limited number of extra activities, lessons or variations to satisfy some stated needs or for certain individuals to do for homework (or in class).
	Replan the course, much as before, but aiming to cover the material in faster time (or drop elements) in order to add in a larger number of extra activities or lessons to satisfy some stated needs.
	Replan the course to incorporate substantial elements of the needs alongside relevant elements from the original plan.
	Put the original course plan to one side and base a new course plan entirely on the stated needs.

Of course, your original Needs analysis may itself have incorporated an element in which learners themselves helped replan the course, in which case, your best option is probably to try using that!

The options towards the top of the list will probably seem to be (initially, at least) less 'troublesome' to you. In many cases, you will consider it simpler and more straightforward to teach directly from a 'ready-made' course plan or a coursebook with only minimal (or no) reference to learner needs. And it is quite possible that a satisfactory course will ensue, achieving the intended aims for a number of learners.

But, although there is this chance of success, this type of course is also likely to produce learner feedback at the end along the lines of 'It was OK, but it wasn't really what I wanted'. You will only be able to offer learners what they really want or need if you find out what this is (even if they don't think they know what that is themselves) and by doing coursework that directly addresses this.

That's not to say that addressing needs won't be tricky – it may mean seeking out new materials, varying cherished routines and activities, finding ways to satisfy apparently conflicting wishes of different people, etc. – but, in the long run,

learners will probably notice and appreciate the way that the course is addressing what they need, rather than simply offering up some 'off-the-peg' solution. ■

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

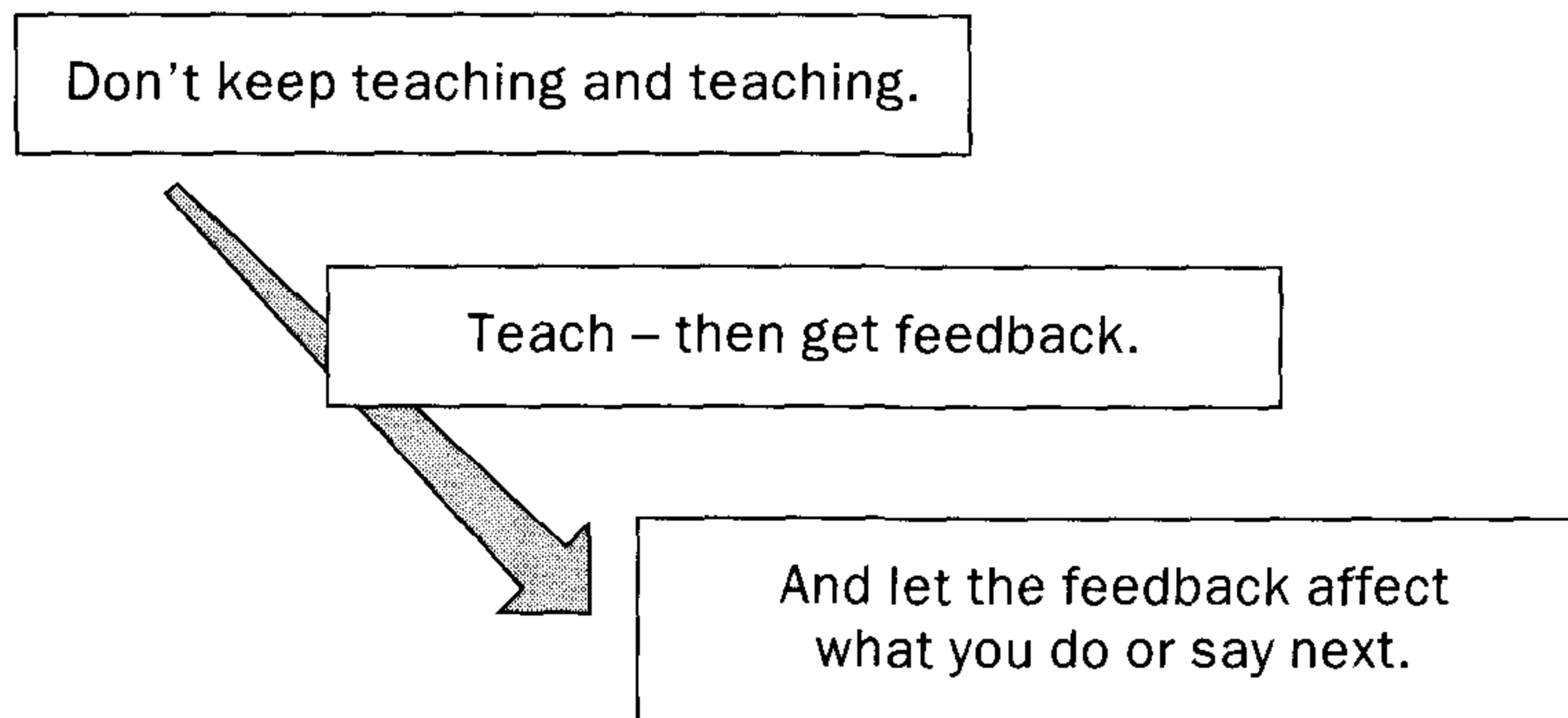
Many teachers operate their lessons as if the class were a machine into which raw materials can be fed and which, when used with certain techniques, will produce predictable outputs. This can lead to classes that move forward through a coursebook or syllabus, but may not lead to much learning that is 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 career 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.



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:

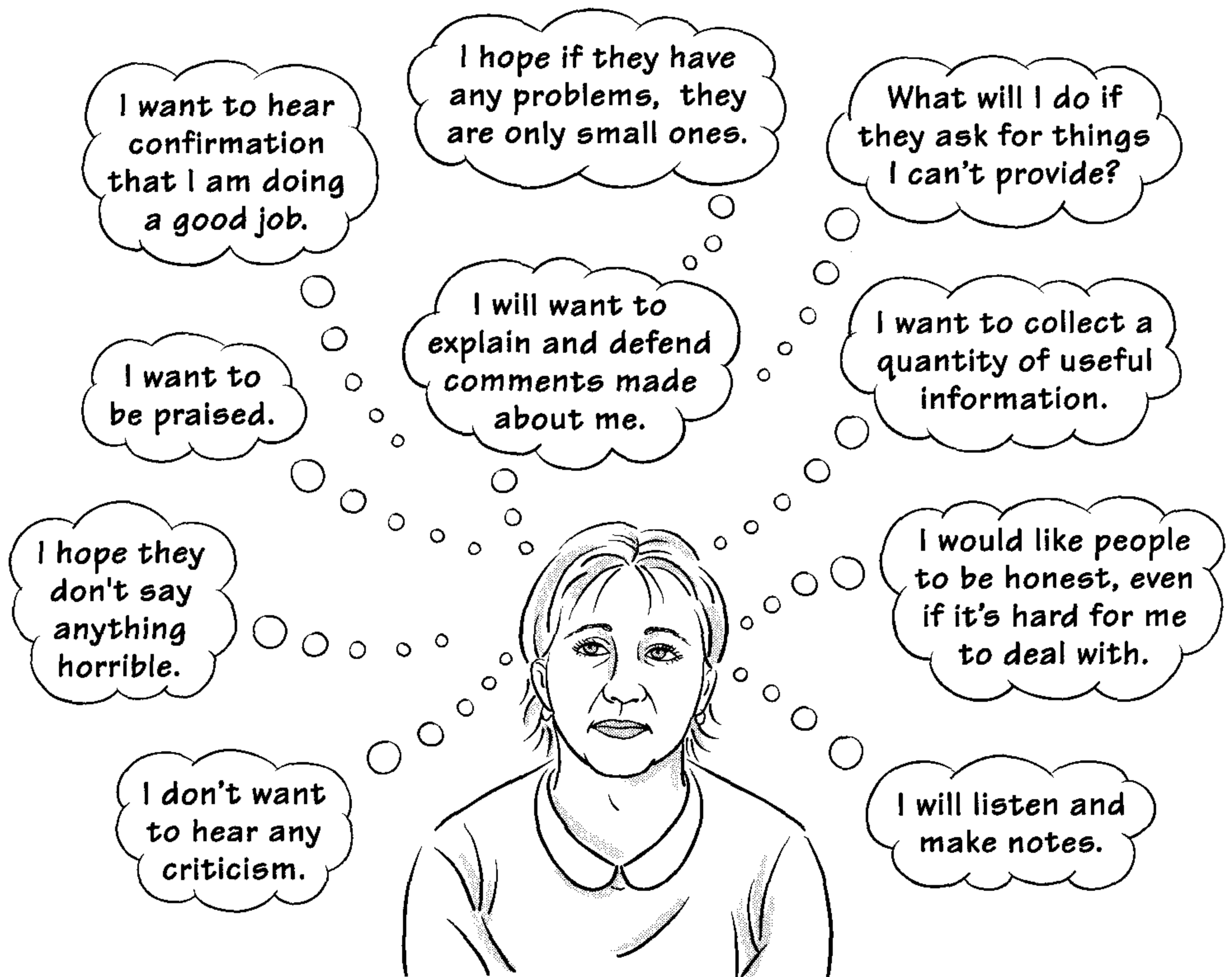
- I hope I don't say anything silly.
- What on earth can I do next?
- Do they like me?
- That activity only lasted three minutes, and I thought it'd last 45.
- This is lasting forever, and I thought it would take three minutes.
- I feel so confused.
- I don't really understand this thing I'm teaching.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