

Reading Homework due Week 6

Task:

Read chapter 5 of Learning Teaching by Jim Scrivener starting on the next page.

There are a range of tips and suggestions given, for example:

2. Classroom Interaction (p.84~)
3. Seating
4. Giving instructions
5. Participate, monitor or vanish?
6. Gestures
7. Using the board well
8. Board drawing
9. Eliciting
10. Students using their own language
11. Intuition

Choose **two** suggestions that you most agree with and explain why. You can take notes below or type and print. This is for classroom discussion not submission.

Bring a copy of the reading to next class.

1. _____

2. _____

Chapter 5 **Toolkit 1: classroom management**

1 What is classroom management?

Your most important job is perhaps to 'create the conditions in which learning can take place'. The skills of creating and managing a successful class may be the key to the whole success of a course. An important part of this is to do with your attitude, intentions and personality and your relationships with the learners.

However, you also need certain organisational skills and techniques. Such items are often grouped together under the heading of 'classroom management'.

Common classroom management areas include:

Grouping and seating

- Forming groupings (singles, pairs, groups, mingle, plenary)
- Arranging and rearranging seating
- Deciding where you will stand or sit
- Reforming class as a whole group after activities

Activities

- Sequencing activities
- Setting up activities
- Giving instructions
- Monitoring activities
- Timing activities (and the lesson as a whole)
- Bringing activities to an end

Authority

- Gathering and holding attention
- Deciding who does what (i.e. answer a question, make a decision, etc.)
- Establishing or relinquishing authority as appropriate
- Getting someone to do something

Critical moments

- Starting the lesson
- Dealing with unexpected problems
- Maintaining appropriate discipline
- Finishing the lesson

Tools and techniques

- Using the board and other classroom equipment or aids
- Using gestures to help clarity of instructions and explanations
- Speaking clearly at an appropriate volume and speed
- Use of silence
- Grading complexity of language
- Grading quantity of language

Working with people

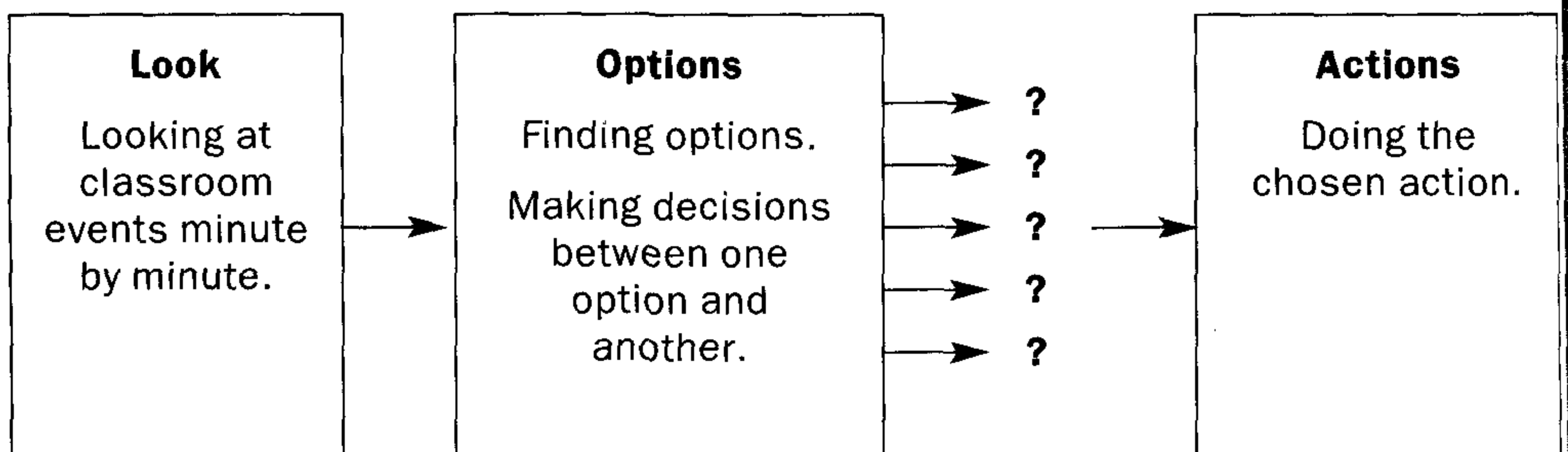
- Spreading your attention evenly and appropriately
- Using intuition to gauge what students are feeling
- Eliciting honest feedback from students
- Really listening to students

Classroom management involves both **decisions** and **actions**. The actions are what is done in the classroom, e.g. rearranging the chairs. The decisions are about whether to do these actions, when to do them, how to do them, who will do them, etc.

At any classroom moment, there will be a range of options as to possible actions. To say one thing or to say something different. To stop an activity or to let it continue for a few more minutes. To take three minutes to deal with a difficult question or to move on with what you had previously planned. To tell off a latecomer or to welcome him. To do something or to do nothing. These options continue throughout the lesson; at every step, your decision will take you forward on your particular route. No one can tell you the 'right' way to do something. There is no single correct answer, no single route through a lesson, though some routes may in the end prove to be much more effective than others. Different people or different situations create different solutions. Your total lesson is created by your choices.

The essential basic skill for classroom management is therefore to be able to look at and read classroom events as they occur and think of possible options available to you, to make appropriate decisions between these options, and to turn them into effective and efficient actions. As you grow in experience, your awareness of possible options will grow.

Thus the basic skills of classroom management can be summarised as follows:



Task 40: Choosing classroom management options

Write two or more options for each of the following situations:

- 1 A student says 'I don't want to do this exercise'.
- 2 You expected an activity to take five minutes. It has taken twenty so far, and the students still seem to be very involved. There is something else you would like to do before the lesson ends in ten minutes.
- 3 The next activity involves students working in groups of five. At the moment, all the desks (which take two people) are facing forward in rows. They are movable, but it takes a few minutes of chaos to do it.

- 4 The students are working in groups of three. Two groups have finished the task you set them and are now sitting looking bored. The other groups still seem to have a long way to go before they finish.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here are a few possible options:

- 1 You could say 'Fine.'

You could say loudly 'Do it!'

You could ask why the student doesn't want to do it.

You could offer an alternative exercise or activity.

You could say 'Choose something you'd like to do.'

You could explain the point of the exercise.

You could ask other students for their opinion.

Note that in all the above options, you also have further options regarding your attitude and behaviour: you could be patient or impatient, defensive or open, sound as if you mean it or sound as if you don't, etc.

- 2 You could stop the activity.

You could let it continue (postponing the next activity).

You could announce a time for finishing (e.g. 'Two more minutes').

You could ask the students how much longer they need.

You could offer the students the option of stopping and doing something else.

- 3 All the students could move the desks.

A small number of students could move the desks while you give instructions to the others.

You could do the activity without moving the desks.

You could ask the students whether it is a good idea to move the desks.

- 4 You could tell the groups which have finished that they can chat or do something else while the other groups finish.

You could give the groups which have finished a short extra task to keep them busy until the rest finish.

You could set a time limit (say two minutes) for the others to finish.

You could bring the groups which have finished together to compare their answers with each other.

You could invite the finishers to join other groups and help them or listen to them. ■

Increasing your options

Some options come at key moments – the beginning of the lesson, the start of an activity, the end of an activity, when a discipline problem occurs in the lesson, etc. – and your decision at such critical moments has a greater knock-on effect. After a lesson, it may be useful to recall what happened and reflect on (or talk through with a colleague) why certain critical options were taken and to hypothesise about what the outcomes might have been if other things had been done.

Becoming a more effective teacher is partly a matter of increasing your awareness of what options are available. It is also about the skilful selection of the most appropriate option at each point and the ability to efficiently, effectively turn

these into actions. Reading books like this, talking to other teachers, observing other teachers at work, getting feedback from observers of your lesson – these are all ways of increasing your range of options and your skill at deciding and acting on decisions appropriately.

Task 41: Selecting alternative options

Read this description of a classroom situation and consider any alternative options available to you at points (a) and (b).

You come into the classroom at the start of the lesson. There are 25 teenage students in the room. About half of them seem very involved in a loud discussion (in their own language, not English) about a current political situation. (a) You shout out 'OK, OK, let's start the lesson; you can continue that later.' The room quietens down a bit; some people continue whispering animatedly to each other. 'Now, today we are going to look at ways of talking about the future,' you continue. One student asks, 'But this subject is very interesting. Could we continue the conversation if we use English?' (b) You say, 'I'm sorry, but we have to get through Unit 9 of the book today. Perhaps we can have a discussion next week. Open your books at page 47.'

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The following are a few of the many possible options for (a):

- You sit down and wait for the class to conclude the discussion in its own time, waiting until they indicate that they are ready for you to start.
- You join in the conversation, but using English.
- You join in the conversation using English and subtly manipulate the discussion so that the students are involved in using the language items you were planning to work on in the first place.
- You stand in front of the class in a way that indicates that you want their attention (making eye contact with as many people as possible, looking authoritative, etc.) and wait for silence. Having established silence, you put to the class the decision about what to do: 'We can either continue the discussion or do what I have planned to do. Which would you prefer?'

Here are some options for (b):

- You say 'OK'.
- As in the fourth option above, you ask the class to make the decision about what to do.
- You explain your aim for the lesson and then offer the possibility of continuing the discussion after some other work. You suggest allowing ten minutes at the end of the lesson and ask the students for their opinion. ■

How can you decide what's best to do?

What influences and informs your decisions between different options? The following are some factors to bear in mind:

- What is the aim of this activity?
- What is the aim of the whole lesson?
- Is what learners are doing useful?

- What is hindering the effectiveness of what we are doing?
- What have I planned to do?
- What would be the best thing to do now?
- Is it time for a change of mood or pace?
- Are we using time efficiently?
- How do the students feel?
- How do I feel?
- What are the possible outcomes of my doing something?

I could add two further factors that are frequently involved in teacher decisions and actions:

- I don't know any other options;
- I know some other options, but I'm avoiding them because they are difficult or troublesome or nerve-wracking.

Classroom decisions and actions are also greatly determined by your own attitudes, intentions, beliefs and values. What do you believe about learning? What is important for you in learning? What is your genuine feeling towards your students? For example, you may ask a student to write on the board (rather than doing it himself). This decision may have grown from your intention to involve students more in the routine duties of the class. This may itself have grown from your belief that trusting your students more and sharing some responsibility with them is a useful way of increasing their involvement in the learning process.

Task 42: Teacher beliefs and attitudes

What teacher beliefs or attitudes might underlie the following classroom actions?

- 1 The teacher includes a lot of student-to-student communication activities in her lessons.
- 2 The teacher uses recordings of authentic, natural conversations.
- 3 In every lesson, the teacher includes at least one activity that involves students moving around the classroom.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

She might believe that ...

- 1 it is useful to give students opportunities to speak to one another;
people learn by trying to do things themselves;
activities like this promote more fluent use of English;
the students will get to know one another better;
it will give more students time to speak than if the whole class did something together;
it gives them a chance to listen to someone other than the teacher.
- 2 listening work is important;
students need practice in listening to real, conversational English;
they need to hear a variety of voices and accents.
- 3 a lesson needs changes of pace and mood;
a game is a good way of adding variety to a lesson;
sitting still in one place for a long time can be difficult;
getting people to do physical things can be a good way of waking up their mental powers. ■

2 Classroom interaction

In Chapter 3, Section 1, I listed some common types of student grouping in the classroom:

- whole class working together with you;
- whole class moving around and mixing together as individuals (a 'mingle');
- small groups (three to eight people);
- pairs;
- individual work.

In any one lesson, you may include work that involves a number of these different arrangements. Varying groupings is one way of enabling a variety of experiences for the learners.

In this section, we examine the rationale for making use of pairs and small groups as well as whole-class work. There are some suggestions and guidelines for maximising useful interaction in class.

Task 43: Classroom interaction

In the list of statements below about classroom interaction, tick any that you feel you can agree with.

- 1 a It is more important for learners to listen and speak to you than for learners to listen and speak to each other.
b Students should get most conversation practice in interacting with other learners rather than with you.
- 2 a People usually learn best by listening to people explaining things.
b People usually learn best by trying things out and finding out what works.
- 3 a The teacher should speak as much as possible in classroom time.
b The teacher should speak as little as possible in classroom time.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The following section addresses these questions. ■

Teacher talk and student talk

The language classroom is rich in language for learners, quite apart from the language that learners and teacher may suppose they are focusing on in the subject matter of the lesson. Students learn a lot of their language from what they hear you say: the instructions, the discussions, the asides, the jokes, the chit-chat, the comments, etc. Having said that, it would be unsatisfactory if your talk dominated the lesson to the exclusion of participation from as many learners as possible.

The arguments for statement 1a usually grow from the idea that you know more of the target language and that by listening to you, the learner is somehow absorbing a correct picture of the language; that by interacting with you, the learner is learning to interact with a competent user of the language; that this is far more useful than talking to a poor user. Thus, by this argument, time spent talking to another learner is not particularly useful time. This is OK as far as it goes, but there are a number of challenges to the statements. Some are to do with available time: if you talk most of the time, how much time will learners get to

speak? If the only conversation practice learners get is one-to-one with you, they will get very little time to speak at all. In a class of 25 learners, how much time will you have available to speak to individuals? Divide a one-hour lesson by 25 and you get just over two minutes each. That doesn't sound very much.

Statement 1b suggests that we could maximise learner speaking time at certain points of the lesson by putting them into pairs or small groups and getting them to talk to each other. Thus, instead of two minutes' speaking time in a whole lesson, they all get a lot of speaking practice within a short space of time. You could use this time effectively by discreetly monitoring what the students are saying and using the information collected as a source of material for future feedback or other work. (I am, of course, making other assumptions; I'm assuming that it is important to give learners opportunities to have useful interaction with others.)

Statements 2a and 2b are about different ways of learning. I believe, from my own learning experiences and from observing teachers at work, that the most efficient way of learning is for a student to be really involved in a lesson. Explanations, especially long ones, tend to leave me cold; I get bored; I switch off. (A learner might also have real problems in following what is being said.) But challenge me, give me a problem to do or a task I want to complete, and I will learn far more – by experimenting, by practising, by taking risks.

I think you can guess my views on statements 3a and 3b by now. (Neither the extremes of a nor b, but closer to b than a.) Observers who watch new teachers at work often comment that they talk too much. An essential lesson that every new teacher needs to learn is that 'talking at' the learners does not necessarily mean that learning is taking place; in many cases, TTT (Teacher Talking Time) is actually time when the learners are not doing very much and are not very involved. Working on ways to become aware of unnecessary TTT is something to add to your list of priorities (see Observation Task 4 in Appendix 1).

Task 44: Increasing student–student interaction

When working in a whole-class stage, a large amount of interaction tends to go from teacher to student and student to teacher, as shown in Figure 5.1. How could you get more student–student interaction?

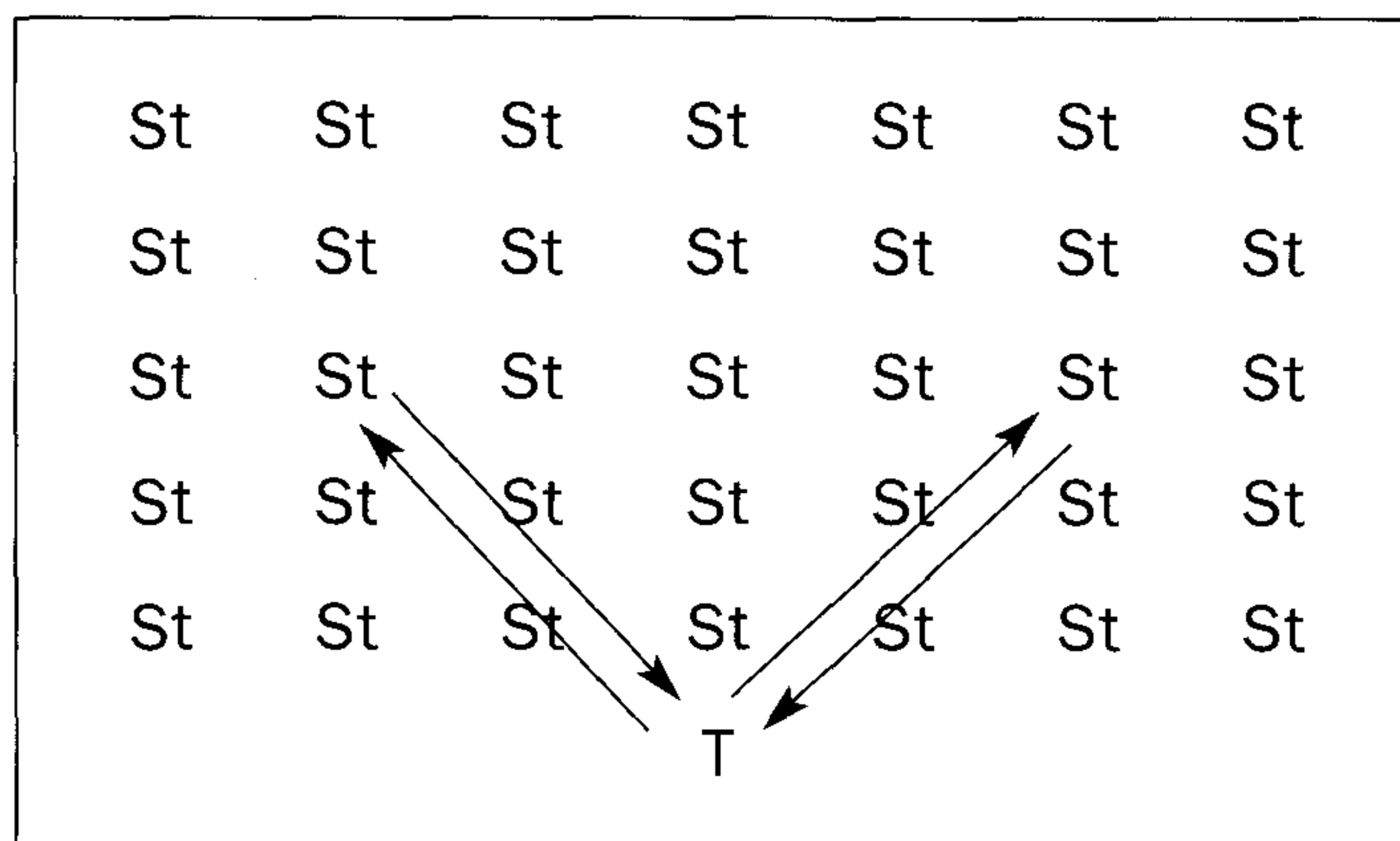


Figure 5.1 Interaction between teacher and students

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Maximising student interaction in class: some ideas

- Encourage a friendly, relaxed learning environment. If there is a trusting, positive, supportive rapport amongst the learners and between learners and you, then there is a much better chance of useful interaction happening.
- Ask questions rather than giving explanations.
- Allow time for students to listen, think, process their answer and speak.
- Really listen to what they say. Let what they say really affect what you do next. Work on listening to the person and the meaning, as well as to the language and the mistakes.
- Allow thinking time without talking over it. Allow silence.
- Increase opportunities for STT (Student Talking Time).
- Use gestures to replace unnecessary teacher talk.
- Allow students to finish their own sentences.
- Make use of pairs and small groups to maximise opportunities for students to speak. Do this even in the middle of longer whole-class stages, e.g. ask students to break off for 30 seconds and talk in pairs about their reactions to what you've just been discussing.
- If possible, arrange seating so that students can all see each other and talk to each other (i.e. circles, squares and horseshoes rather than parallel rows). (See Section 3 on seating.)
- Remember that you don't always need to be at the front of the class. Try out seating arrangements that allow the whole class to be the focus (e.g. you take one seat in a circle).
- If a student is speaking too quietly for you to hear, walk further away, rather than closer to them! (This sounds illogical, but if you can't hear them, then it's likely that the other students can't either. Encourage the quiet speaker to speak louder so that the others can hear.)
- Encourage interaction between students rather than only between student and you, and you and student. Get students to ask questions, give explanations, etc. to each other, rather than always to you. Use gestures and facial expressions to encourage them to speak and listen to each other.
- Keep a diagram like the one in Figure 5.2 in your head as a possible alternative to the one in Figure 5.1. Think 'How can I get students speaking and listening to each other as well as to me?' ■

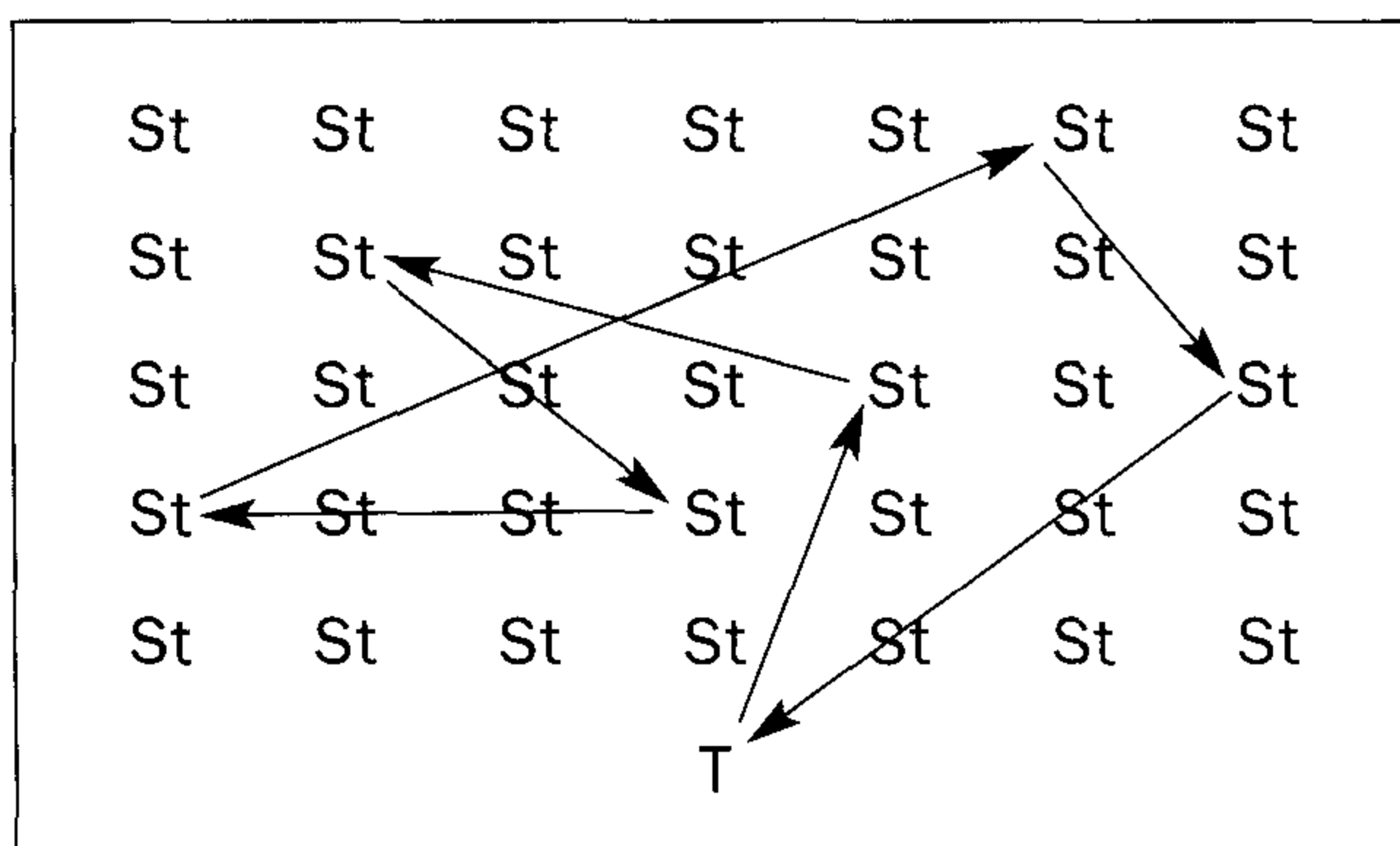


Figure 5.2 Interaction between students

Task 45: Your skills in enabling interaction

Carry out a self-assessment, comparing yourself against some of the guidelines on these pages. What skills do you have in enabling effective classroom interaction? What do you intend to work on?

3 Seating

However your classroom is laid out and whatever kind of fixed or moveable seating you have, it is worth taking time to consider the best ways to make use of it.

- What different seating positions are possible without moving anything?
- Are any rearrangements of seats possible?
- Which areas of the room are suitable for learners to stand and interact in?
- Is there any possibility that the room could be completely rearranged on a semi-permanent basis to make a better language classroom space?

Important considerations are:

- Can learners comfortably work in pairs with a range of different partners?
- Can learners comfortably work in small groups with a range of other learners?

For each activity you do in class, consider what grouping, seating, standing arrangements are most appropriate. Changing seating arrangements can help students interact with different people, change the focus from you when appropriate and allow a range of different situations to be recreated within the classroom, as well as simply adding variety to the predictability of sitting in the same place every time. It's difficult to sit still for a long time; it's worth including activities that involve some movement, even if only to give people the chance to stretch their legs. Students might not like it if there is a constant movement every five minutes, but some variety of working arrangements is often helpful.

In some cultures, students may have clear expectations as to what is acceptable. For example, asking students to sit on their desks may be taboo; a teacher who sits on the corner of his desk may be considered unprofessional. Respect cultural constraints, but don't let them put you off experimenting a little. Be clear about what is genuinely unacceptable and what is merely unknown or unexpected.

Remain aware of the possibilities of using the space you are in; sometimes a complete change in the room can make all the difference. Even with the most immovable of fixed seating, it is often possible to be creative in some way.

Fixed, semi-fixed and large seating

You could ask students to:

- turn around and sit backwards, working with the people behind them;
- sit on the ends of their row and work with people in the next row;
- sit on their desks and talk with people nearby;
- stand up, move around and return to a different seat;
- stand in the aisle space between rows;
- all come to the front (or another open space) to talk.

In the long term, if you have exclusive use of a classroom, or share it with other language teachers, it's worth considering whether a longer-term rearrangement might be useful.

Figure 5.3 shows a school I worked in that had large, one-piece seats/desks for three people fixed in every classroom. They were always used in rows because, although only lightly fixed, there seemed to be no other way to arrange them.

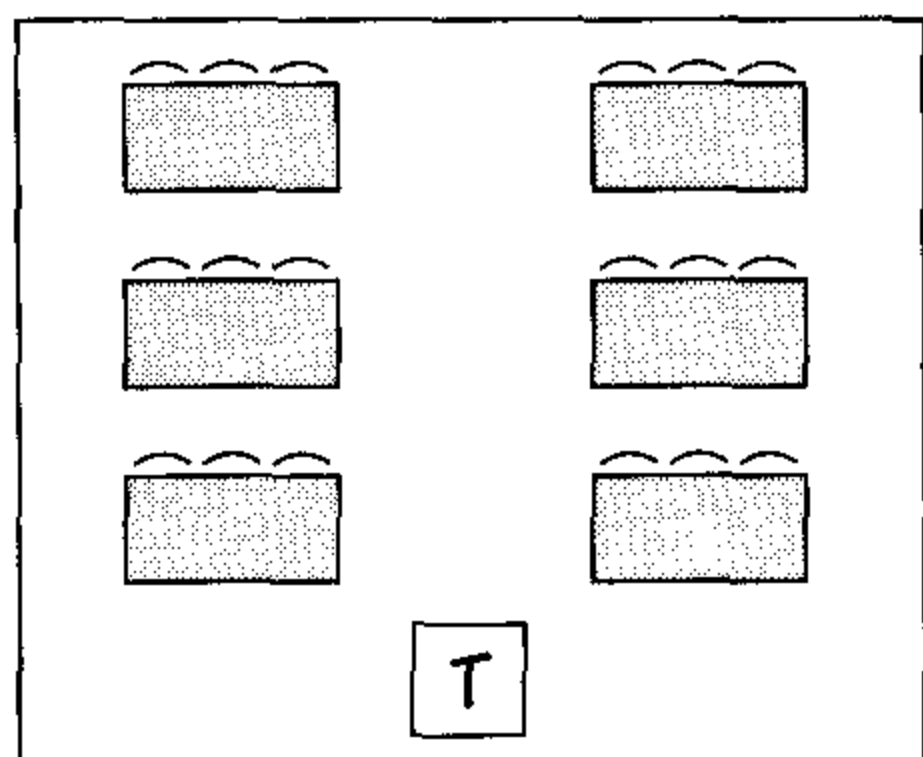


Figure 5.3 Original seating plan

However, when we started thinking about it, we found a number of other arrangements were possible (see Figure 5.4). The horseshoe arrangement, particularly, proved very suitable for the English classes.

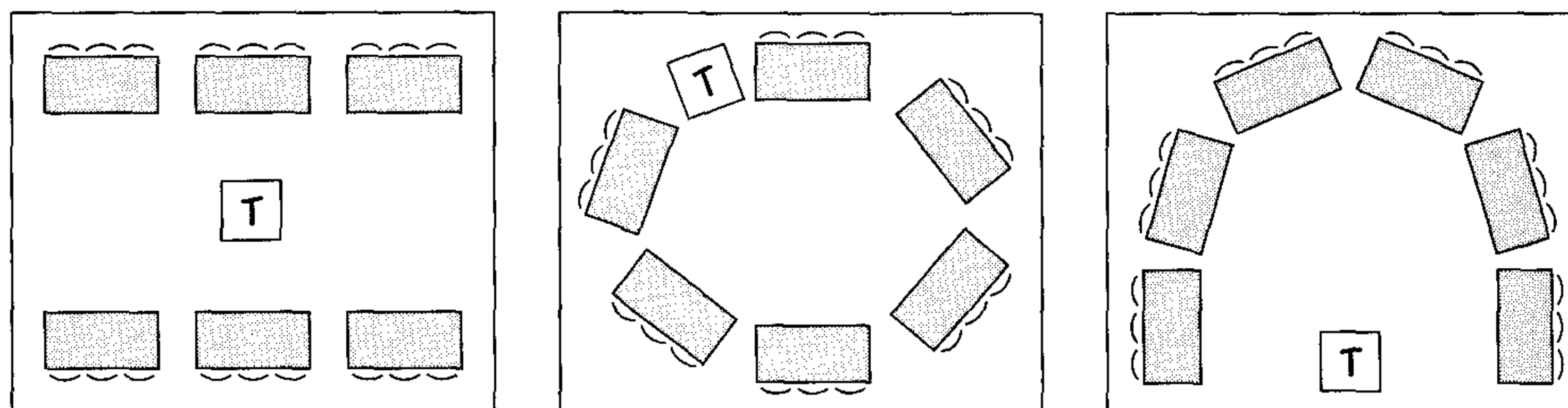


Figure 5.4 Alternative seating arrangements

Task 46: Standing and sitting

- 1 Why might a circle or horseshoe shape be more effective for language teaching than straight rows?
- 2 What difference does it make if you sit in a circle with the students rather than standing in front of them?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

- 1 In a circle or horseshoe, learners can make eye contact with everyone else in the group and thus interact much more naturally. There is also a much greater sense of equality. Weaker students tend to hide away less and stronger students to dominate less.
- 2 Having you in the circle helps to clarify your role as an equal rather than as someone separate and different. ■

Moveable seating

Some ideas for investigating and exploring the possibilities of moveable seating:

- Ask students to move seats when you create pairs or small groups. Don't let students get stuck in unsuitable seating arrangements when a move is preferable.

- If it's really too noisy, make the discussion of that (and the finding of a solution) part of the lesson as well.
- Figure 5.5 shows some patterns to think about.
- If the students normally sit in rows try forming a circle.
- Turn the classroom around so that the focus is on a different wall from normal.
- Make seating arrangements that reflect specific contexts, e.g. a train carriage, an aeroplane, a town centre or whatever.
- Push all seats up against the wall and make a large, open forum space in the middle of the room.
- Deliberately place your seat off-centre (i.e. not at the front). This is an interesting subversion of expectations and immediately challenges expectations about who a teacher is and what a teacher should do.
- Divide the class into separate groups at far corners of the room.
- Ask 'How can we reorganise this classroom to make it a nicer place to be?' Let the class discuss it, and agree then do it.
- Push the seats or desks up against the wall. Sit on the floor (only if it's a clean classroom!)

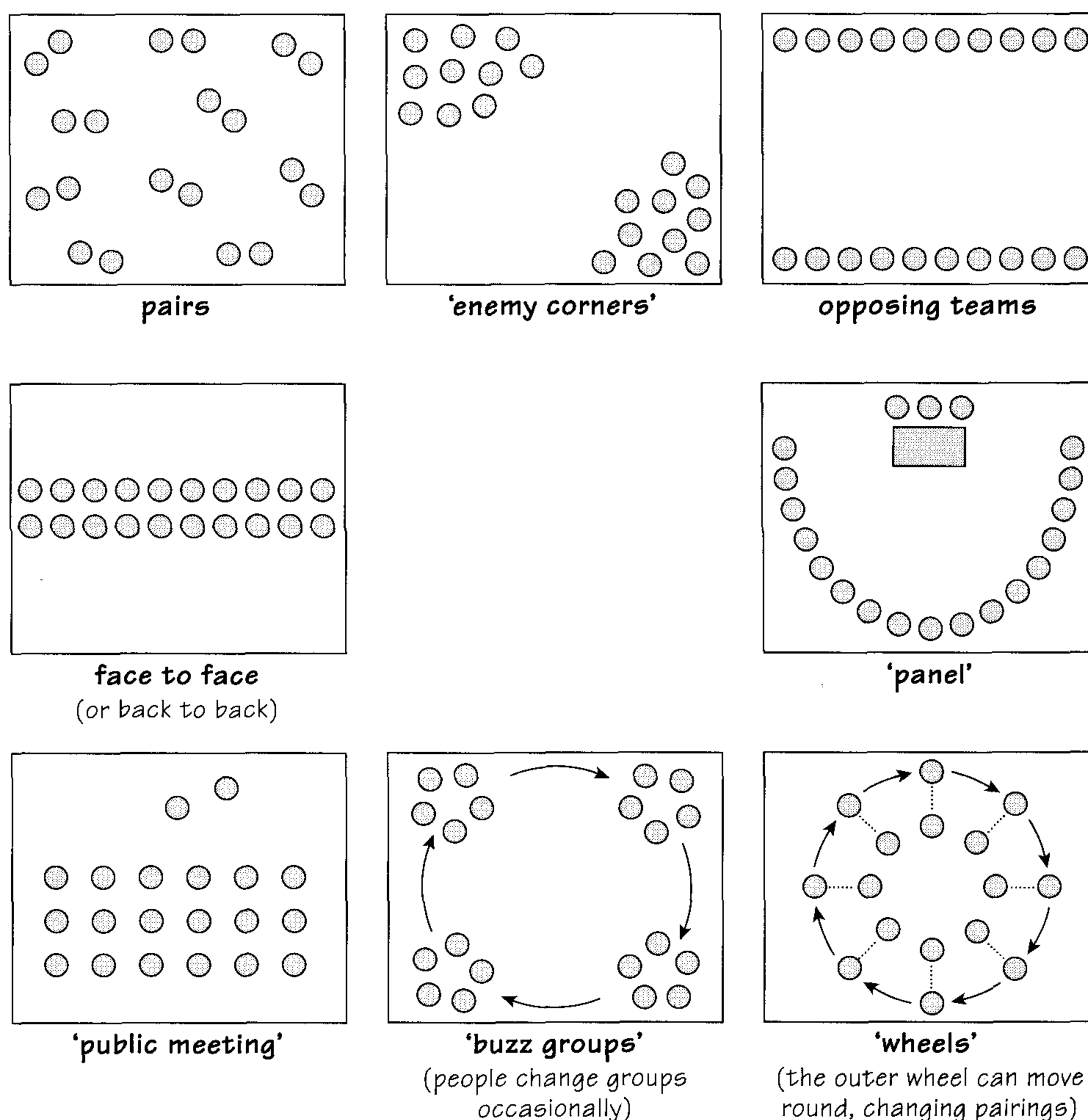


Figure 5.5 Seating possibilities in a standard classroom

Task 47: Seating options in the classroom

What ideas for arranging seating have you not tried? Which would be worth trying? Draw a simple sketch of your classroom. Mark in seats for one new arrangement. When might you use such an arrangement? How can you organise it in class? What might be the benefits? The problems?

4 Giving instructions

I have met a number of teachers who say that they would like to give instructions for activities in English (rather than their students' own language), but find that there are often so many problems with comprehension that it seems impossible. I think it is possible to use only English (and it's often really helpful in creating an 'English' atmosphere in the classroom), but it's often problematic because of the quantity and over-complexity of language used.

Task 48: Complex instructions

Why did the class have problems with the following instruction?

'OK, everybody, would you, Maria, sit down. Now what you have to do is, when you, you take this sheet of paper that I'm handing out now and keep it secret, and some of you are 'A', it's written at the top, and some are labelled 'B'. OK, can you see that? Don't show your paper to anyone and then you have to describe to your partner; sit face to face. Could you move your chairs around and describe what's on your paper so that your partner can find out what's different, and you must agree; when you find something, draw it on your paper? OK. Do you understand?'

Commentary ■ ■ ■

This may sound like a joke, but in fact it's quite typical of an unplanned instruction. Teachers are often unaware that they are talking in this way until they stop and try to listen to what they are saying. A video (or audio) recording of them in action can be very helpful here.

It is clear that this type of instruction is very hard for students to follow. The essential information about what to do is embedded in confusing and unnecessary babble. An essentially simple activity can become impossible, not because the students couldn't do it, but because they didn't understand what to do. Often students are judged to have failed when it is actually the teacher who failed to clarify what was required. ■

How can I give clearer instructions?

I propose five steps towards better instructions:

- 1 Become aware of your own instruction-giving (listen to yourself; record yourself; ask others to watch you and give feedback).
- 2 For a while, preplan essential instructions. Analyse the instructions beforehand so as to include only the essential information in simple, clear language, and sequence it in a sensible order. Use short sentences – one sentence for each key piece of information. Don't say things that are visible or obvious (e.g. 'I'm giving you a piece of paper'). Don't give instructions that they don't need to know at this point (e.g. what they'll do after this activity is finished).

- 3 In class, separate instructions clearly from the other chit-chat, telling off, joking, etc. that goes on. Create a silence beforehand, make eye contact with as many students as possible, find an authoritative tone, make sure they are listening before you start. Use silence and gestures to pace the instructions and clarify their meaning.
- 4 Demonstrate rather than explain wherever possible.
- 5 Check that students have understood what to do. Don't assume that everyone will automatically understand what you have said. Get concrete evidence from the students that they know what is required. Getting one or two students to tell you what they are going to do is one very simple way of achieving this.

Task 49: Planning simpler instructions

Look back at the example instruction given in Task 48.

- 1 Identify the essential instructions the teacher wanted to give.
- 2 Delete unnecessary language.
- 3 Write out the instructions in the right order.

Commentary, ■ ■ ■

Here is a preplanned version of the instruction in Task 48.

- Say 'Sit opposite your partner'.
- Wait while they move.
- 'Some of you are "A"' (gesture to letter A on the handouts).
- 'Some are "B"' (gesture).
- 'Don't show your paper to anyone' (mime hiding).
- Distribute the handout.
- 'Some things in picture A are different from picture B.'
- 'Describe your picture.'
- 'When you find something different draw it.' (mime)
- Check understanding of instruction: 'What are you going to do?' Students answer with brief explanation.

Here is another version of the same instruction. This time, it involves demonstration rather than instruction:

- Ask one student to come out in front of the class and sit opposite you.
- Give the handout to the student and take one yourself, making a big show of keeping the handouts secret from each other.
- Pretend to be student A and do one complete example with student B so that the whole class can hear (e.g. A: 'Have you got a tree in your picture?' B: 'Yes.' A: 'Is there a bird on top of the tree?' B: 'No.' A: 'Oh, so that's one difference in my picture: there is a bird on the tree.')
- Distribute handouts to the class: 'Now you do the same. A and B. Find ten differences.' ■

Task 50: Improving instructions

Simplify the following instructions using less confusing language or a gesture.

- 1 Now, actually, I would really like you, if you could, now stand up, yes everyone, please.

- 2 It's the unit on, er, travel, somewhere – it's near the middle, pages 35 and 36, can you find that? Have you got it? No, not that one, the next unit, and take a look at the introduction, read it through quickly and jot down your answers to the questions at the top of the page over there, above the illustration.
- 3 If I were to ask you for your opinion on smoking, what do you think you might say to me in your reply?
- 4 Would you like to tell everyone the answer you were thinking of again because I don't think they heard it when you spoke so quietly, and I'm sure we'd all be interested in hearing it if you could, please?
- 5 Well, that wasn't really what I was hoping you'd say when I asked that question. I was actually looking for the name of the verb tense not an example sentence, but what you gave me was fine, only does anyone I wonder have the answer I'm looking for?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

- 1 Gesture (or 'Stand up').
- 2 'Page 35.' (Wait quietly till they have found page.)
'Read these questions.' (Show questions.)
'Read this.' (Show text.)
'Write your answers.'
- 3 'What do you think about smoking?'
- 4 'Louder.'
- 5 'What's the name of the tense?' ■

How to get the learners' attention

One important reason why learners may not successfully follow activity instructions (or understand your explanations of something) is that they didn't actually hear them, perhaps because they weren't fully paying attention when they were given. Whereas teachers often invest energy into finding better ways to word their instructions, they may overlook the need to win attention before the instruction is given. It's a vital step. An instruction given over student chatter, or when students are looking the other way, stands little chance of working.

If this has been a problem for you, here is one strategy for getting learners' attention that you might wish to experiment with.

Getting attention before giving an instruction, giving an explanation, etc.

- Start making eye contact with as many people as possible.
- Establish a gesture that means you want to speak (e.g. cupped hand to your ear or holding your hand up).
- Just wait.
- Don't look impatient or anxious. Keep moving your eyes around the room from person to person, patiently.
- Think of this as 'gathering attention'. Enjoy it.
- Wait as long as necessary until there is silence and people are looking your way.
- If this doesn't work, don't alter it dramatically. Just add in a clear attention-drawing word such as 'OK'. Say it once and then go back to the waiting.

In general, you need to establish your authority and use it appropriately. Project your voice clearly, but speak rather than shout. Control the quantity and complexity of what you say. Say what you need to as simply and clearly as possible.

5 Participate, monitor or vanish?

Task 51: Your role in pair and group activities

What is your role once you have set up an activity in which students will mainly work on their own in pairs or groups?

- Sit down and read a book?
- Go out of the room and have a coffee?
- Wander round and look at what students are doing?
- Sit down and work with separate groups one by one, joining in the tasks as a participant?
- Listen carefully to as many students as possible, going over and correcting mistake when you catch them, offering ideas when students get stuck, etc.?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Well, I think all of these answers are possible, even the first two (which you may have dismissed as unlikely). It all depends, of course, on the nature of the specific activity and on its aims. The next section suggests a general strategy for making decisions about what to do. ■

Deciding on your role while students do an activity

Let's distinguish two steps.

Step 1: The first 30 seconds: are they doing the task set?

Immediately after you have given the instructions for a task and students start doing it, there is often an immediate need to check to make sure that students are doing the activity that you asked them to do and have understood the basic instructions and the mechanics of the activity.

You could do this by quietly and relatively inconspicuously wandering around the room, listening in briefly to snatches from many groups and assuring yourself that students are doing what they are supposed to. We could call this monitoring to check the mechanics.

Step 2: The task itself

In many activities, the prime aim is for learners to get a chance to work on their own, speaking fluently and trying out things without too much interference and correction. If they are doing the task correctly, then possibly they don't need you any more once the task is under way. Your presence might actually be an interference. If you are around and very visible, they might look to you for language items and help whenever they hit a problem, whereas it might be more useful for them to struggle a little and learn to make use of their own resources. So once an activity is safely under way, your options often boil down to the following choices: **monitor discreetly** or **vanish**.

In some tasks – especially those in which students might not move forward quickly, but need ongoing advice, support, input and encouragement – you may find that some kind of more active role is called for. In these cases, your best options are probably **monitor actively** or **participate**.

A Monitor discreetly

Discreet monitoring is when you maintain a presence in the room, but do not overtly offer help, interfere, correct, etc. Your aim is that the students know you are there, but your watching and listening does not in any way disturb them. They will not feel tempted to call on you unless there is a significant problem – and when they do ask for help, do this swiftly and effectively, then return to the discreet monitoring role. You are sending a message that you are interested, but that the main task is for them to do using their own resources as much as possible.

B Vanish

There are cases when any teacher presence can actually interfere with and diminish the usefulness of work being done. Sometimes the best option for you is to vanish, i.e. get out of immediate eyeshot. You could go into a corner of the room and sit quietly.

It is often an idea to have something concrete to do (e.g. read something) in order to prevent yourself from constantly worrying about how students are doing and getting drawn back into it. You need to keep a small percentage of attention on the room, in order to know when the activity is reaching an end or a crisis point, but otherwise restrain yourself from doing too much. Relax and stop being a teacher for a while.

In a few specific cases, you might want to emphasise the point that students need to work without your help, and in such cases even leaving the room for a few minutes may be an option. (Whenever I have done this, I have been interested to learn that most students do not even notice that I have been out of the room!)

C Monitor actively

You can monitor as described above, but be more visible and allow students to be more aware of your presence and of the possibility of calling on you for help and advice. A teacher who is actively monitoring will be walking around, viewing and listening in to many different groups and frequently offering spontaneous advice and corrections, as well as responding to requests and questions from students.

D Participate

You may sit down and join a group (temporarily or for the whole task) and take part as if you were one of the group, offering ideas, helping with questions, joining in discussions. You could quietly move on to another group. By the end of the task, you might have worked with a number of groups.

Task 52: Your choice of role in pair and group activities

Do you recognise one of these four strategies as your own most common choice? Which one?

Is there a choice that you don't use? Would it be interesting to experiment with it in a future lesson?

6 Gestures

Try to develop a range of gestures (and facial expressions) to save yourself repeating basic instructions and increase opportunities for learner talk. For example, I have seen many teachers using a set of gestures to indicate 'time'. This helps them quickly correct learners who use tenses inaccurately. Pointing to the ground indicates the present; pointing ahead is the future; pointing behind, over the shoulder, indicates the past.

Remember that learners will need to learn the meanings of your gestures; they will not magically know that your pointing means 'Use the past tense', but if you give the oral instruction a few times while also gesturing, they will soon associate the gesture alone with that instruction.

Bear in mind that gestures can mean different things in different countries. If you are teaching away from your own culture, learn which gestures to avoid! And always keep alert to the possibility that you might be giving offence!

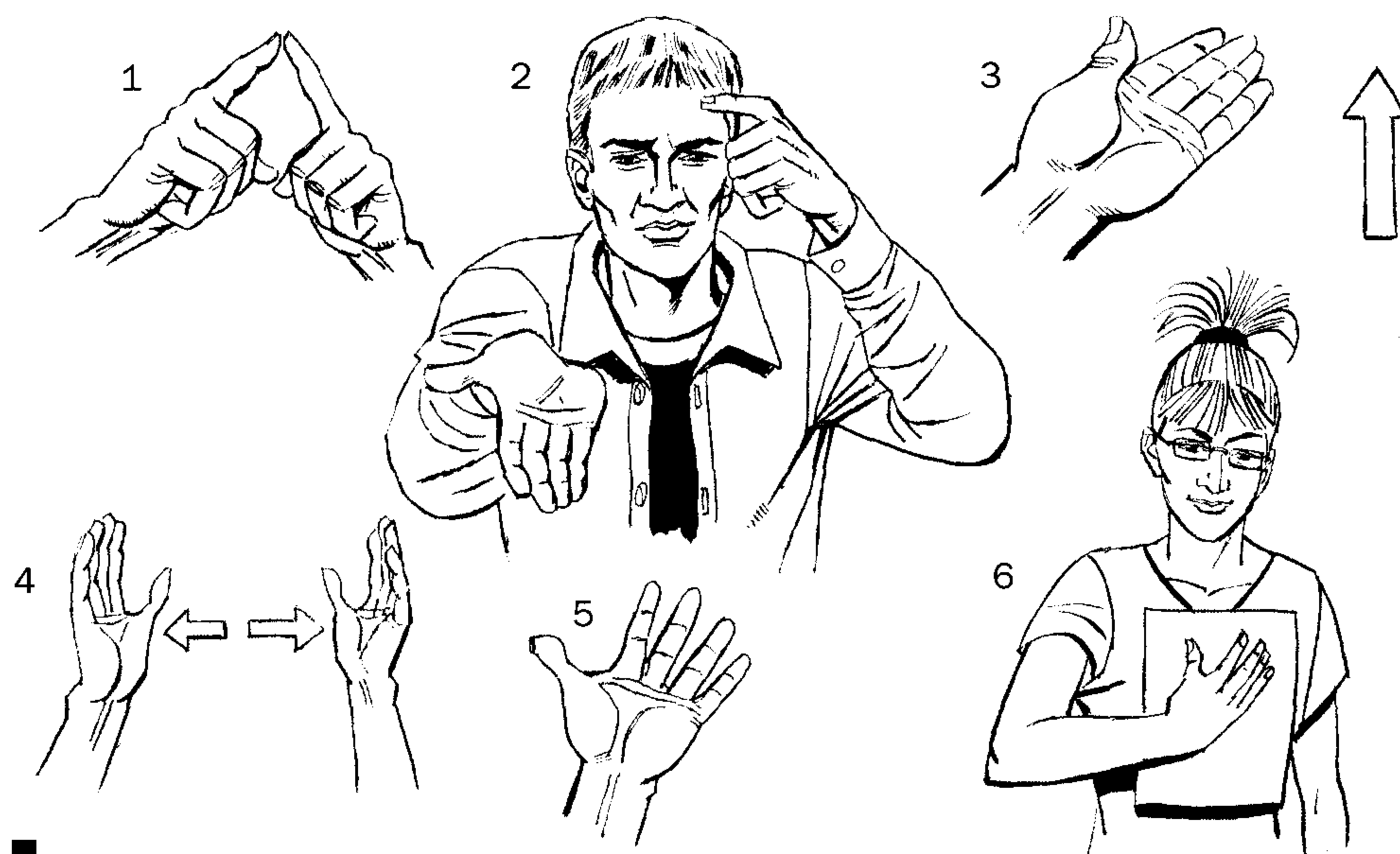
Task 53: Gestures

Think of gestures you could use for the following instructions:

- 1 Work in pairs.
- 2 What do you think?
- 3 Stand up.
- 4 Give a longer answer.
- 5 Five minutes left.
- 6 Don't show your information sheet to your partner.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here are some possible ideas.



Task 54: Creating new gestures

Now decide on some personal gestures for each of the following:

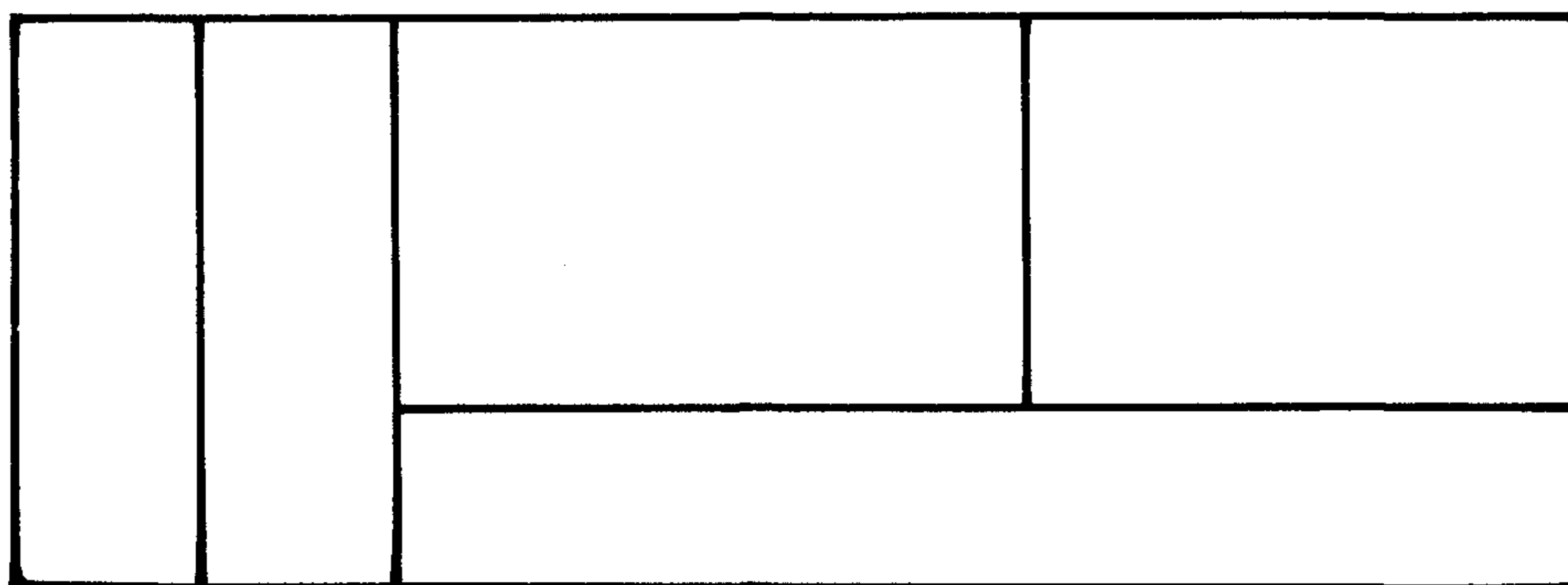
- Ask the other learners.
- Repeat.
- The intonation was very dull.
- Please stop talking now.
- Listen to me.
- Come here! (polite)
- Listen to each other.

A lot of teachers also develop and use gestures quite spontaneously, even without noticing. Do you? If so, which?

7 Using the board well

One resource that almost every teacher has is a board, whether it is a small board on an easel, a wide chalk board, a pen board or even an interactive computer board. Although it is possible to write randomly on the board as things occur in class, you'll often find that it's worth paying a little attention to organising items. I'm not naturally a very tidy board user, but I've found that the following idea does make a difference.

At the start of the lesson, draw a few dividing lines on the board, e.g. to form two columns and three larger working areas, like this:



Use these areas to help you organise different content as you write it up, keeping different kinds of things to separate sections of the board, for example:

- a vocabulary column for new words, with a second column for example sentences and notes;
- a substitution table for a new grammar item;
- a space to stick up sketch pictures to help when telling a story;
- questions for students to think about when listening to a recording.

Here are a few more board thoughts:

- Try to avoid long teacher-writing times while students are just watching and waiting.
- Whenever possible, find opportunities to write things up on the board while students are working on other things, so that you are ready when they finish.

- It seems natural enough to write standing in front of the board. Unfortunately, this blocks the view of what you're writing for the class and they can't read it till you've finished (Figure 5.6a). You also can't talk to them easily. When you get a chance in an empty classroom, practise writing on the board in a way that your body doesn't block the view for everyone and you can make eye contact with the class (Figure 5.6b). This requires a slightly sideways position, which will feel odd at first, but it allows you to talk to students, ask questions and look around, all of which can be very helpful in maintaining a good working atmosphere.

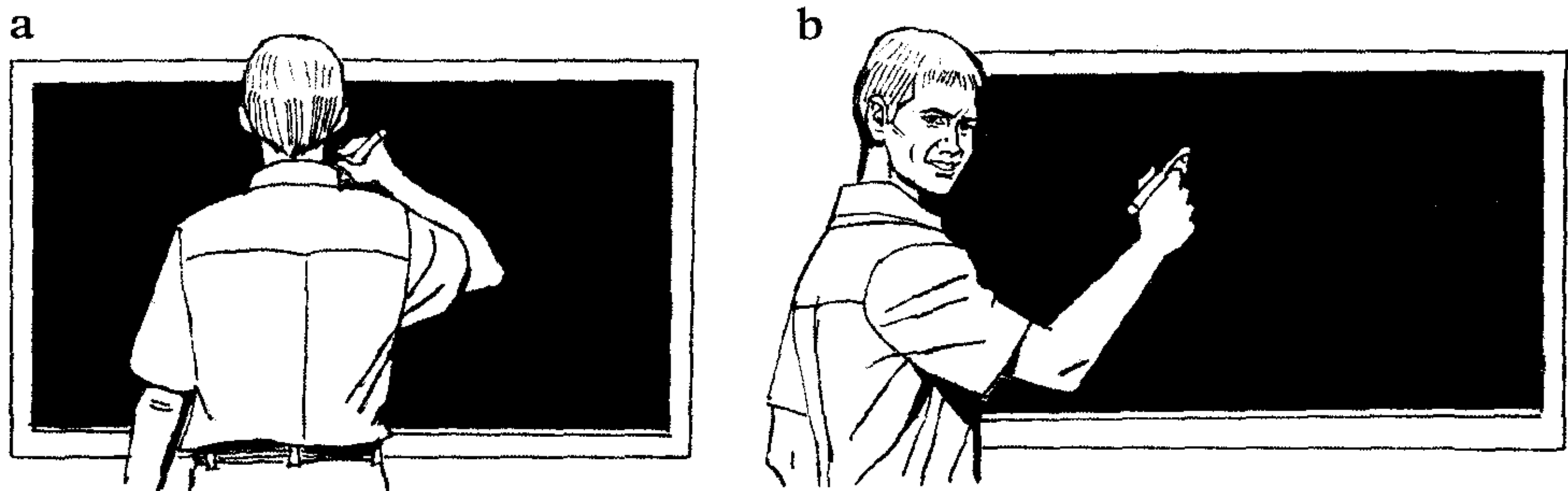


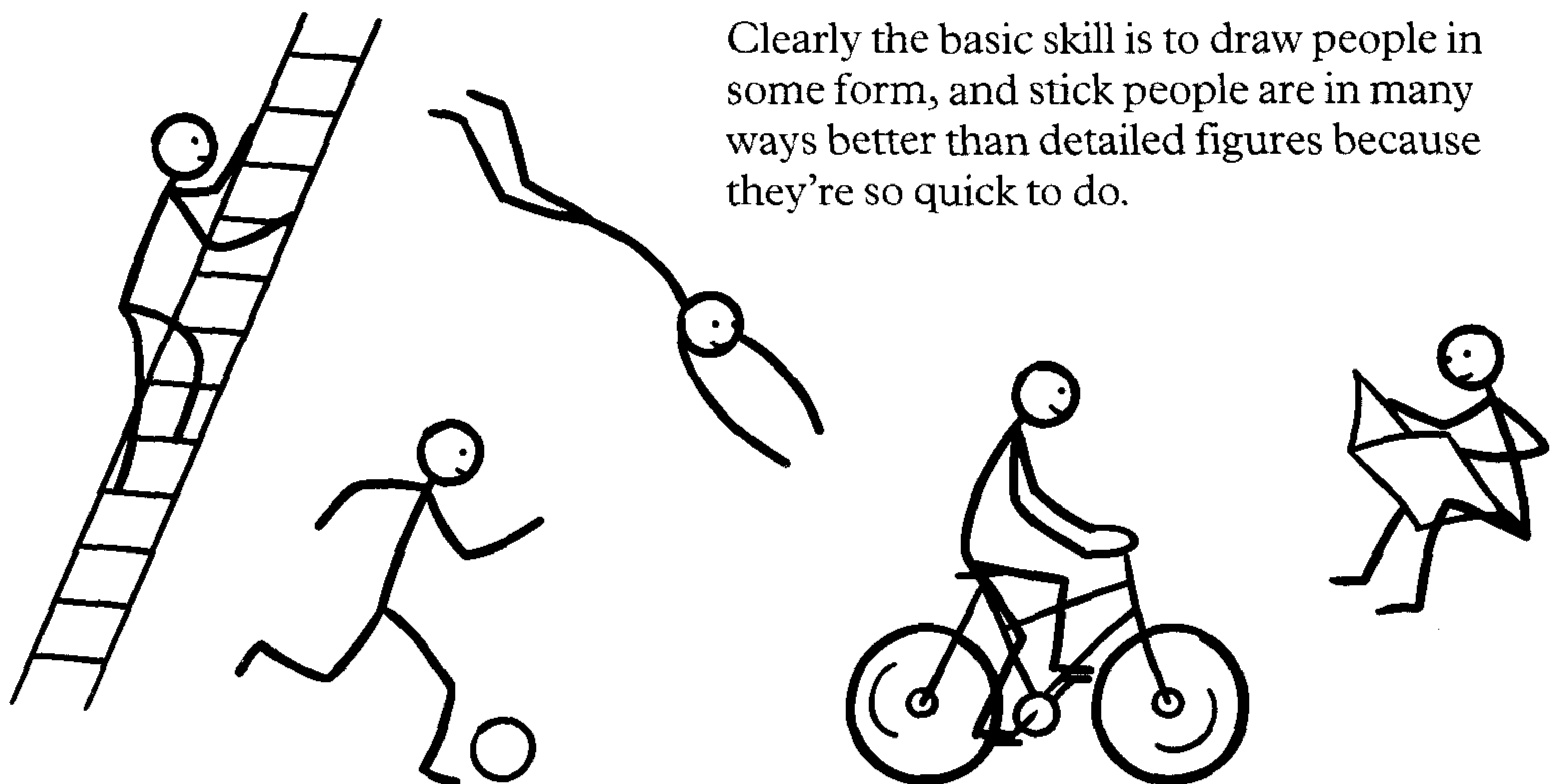
Figure 5.6 Alternative positions when writing on the board

Remember that it's not only teachers who can write on boards – where appropriate, get learners to write up answers and ideas, draw pictures and timelines, etc. The division of the board into sections can also help them to write more tidily.

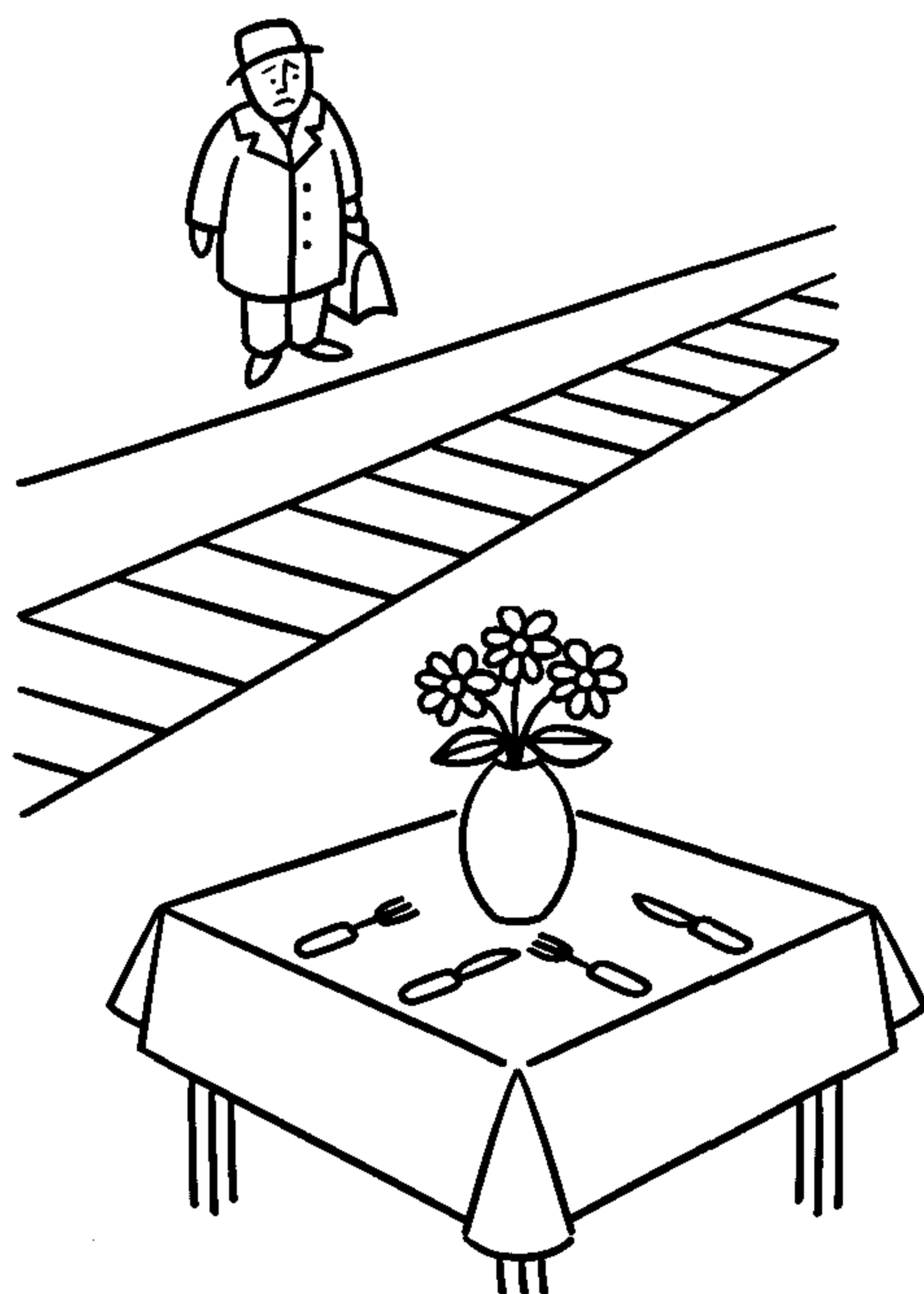
Watch out that you don't use your own writing on the board as a lengthy time-wasting way to avoid real teaching.

8 Board drawing

Don't say you can't draw! No matter how un-Monet-like your artistry, one picture is often worth many unnecessary words. For the quick explanation of vocabulary items, for setting up a discussion, a dialogue or role-play, for story-building, you need pictures.



Clearly the basic skill is to draw people in some form, and stick people are in many ways better than detailed figures because they're so quick to do.



Add character by giving different shapes of head, fattening up the bodies a little, drawing in simple clothes, adding expression in the mouth and eyes.

Add locations by a few simple props for example, a railway line and a platform makes a station; a table, knife and fork and a vase of flowers makes a restaurant.

Remember that the pictures alone are usually only a starting point. They don't need to do all the work – build from them with questions and discussion. And even if they end up looking like nothing on earth, badly drawn pictures can actually be a rich source of language and humour in the classroom. If they don't understand what on earth you've drawn, whisper the word to a student and get them to draw it.

Task 55: Practice in quick board sketches

Draw quick pictures (single images or a sequence) to illustrate some of the following:

swimming pool, London, happy, escalator, mouse, exhausted, robbery, whale, planet, overtake

What questions could you ask your learners about the sketches to establish that they actually see what you intend them to?

9 Eliciting

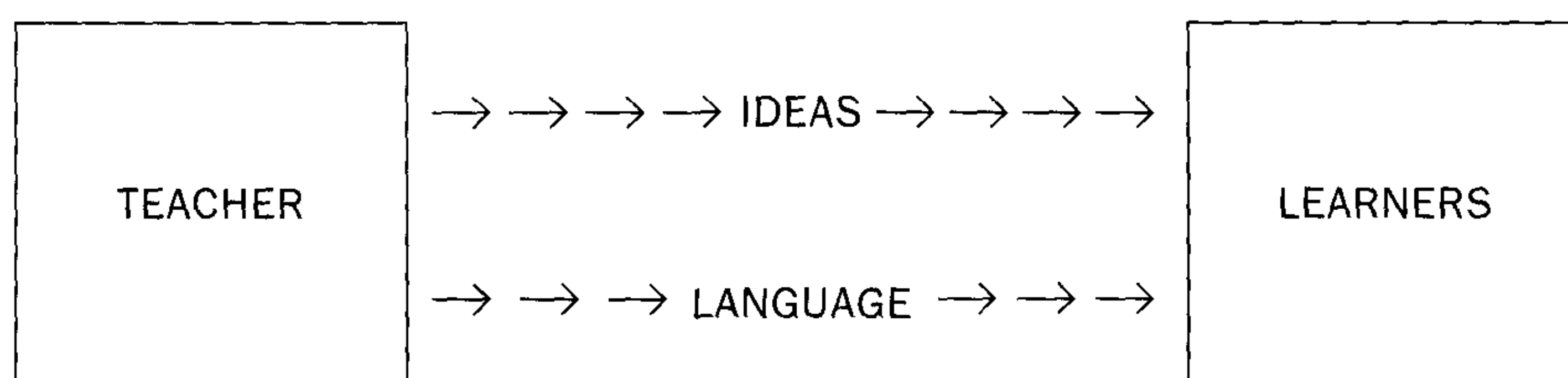
'Eliciting' means drawing out information, language, ideas, etc. from the students. It is a technique based on the principles that:

- students probably know a lot more than we may give them credit for;
- starting with what they know is a productive way to begin new work;
- involving people in a question-and-answer movement towards new discoveries is often more effective than simply giving 'lectures'.

Eliciting enables me to start from where the learners are and then to work forward from there. The learners have a real effect on the outcomes of the lesson in terms of ideas, language and pace. With constant learner involvement, I can work more at their speed rather than my own. I can find out where the real difficulties and problems are.

There are three steps to eliciting:

- 1 I convey a clear idea to the students, perhaps by using pictures, gestures or questions, etc.
- 2 They then supply the appropriate language, information, ideas, etc.
- 3 I give them feedback.



I *can* elicit: language, ideas, feelings, meanings, contexts, memories, etc.

I *can't* elicit: things they don't know.

Here is an example from a lesson:

The teacher is working on the present simple tense for daily routines. On the board, she has written the words *Every day* and drawn a house. She adds a bed to one room.

She looks at the students and gestures that she wants the word. One says 'Bed'. The teacher does not repeat it, but gets other students to repeat the word. Students who didn't hear ask the first student to repeat it.

The teacher does the same procedure with a clock and with the time (seven o'clock). She then draws a stick man and mimes yawning and climbing out of bed. She looks to the students and gestures to encourage them to say a sentence. 'He get up seven o'clock,' says one student. The teacher thanks him for the sentence, but doesn't repeat it. Instead, she uses finger correction (see Chapter 14, Section 7) to establish a corrected version from him (with the help of other class members). When it is correct, she gets the class to repeat the sentence a number of times.

In that sample lesson, the teacher did not model the vocabulary or grammar herself; in fact, she didn't even say the vocabulary or sentence being worked on. The vocabulary was known by at least one student. The grammar, though not accurate, was close enough to be useful to work on. If no student had known *bed* or *clock* or *get up*, then the teacher would have said these herself, having found out that they were really new and needed. As it was, she was able to elicit most of the language from the students and hardly needed to speak at all herself.

With this technique, there is a reduction in unnecessary teacher talk and a maximisation of student talk. The students take an active part in the learning, being involved even in the part of the lesson that might otherwise be only teacher explanation. The teacher is able to pinpoint precisely what students know and what they still need to work on. The language is learned through a process of guided discovery, and it seems likely that it will be more memorable because of the degree of student involvement in the learning. Confidence is built because their use of the language is continuous and does not have to wait for the end of teacher exposition.

Task 56: Advice when eliciting

Here is some advice for elicitors. Two pieces in the list are spurious: cross them out.

- 1 Give sufficient information. Eliciting doesn't mean 'Guess what's in my head'. Don't try to elicit your grandmother's maiden name.
- 2 Use hand gestures to indicate who is being asked to speak, either a gesture for 'anyone' or to a specific individual. If everyone speaks at once, it can be hard for students to know which answer was OK and which not.
- 3 Give very clear feedback on each student utterance. They want to know if what they said was acceptable. You could use simple gestures or facial expressions to register 'OK' or 'Not OK' to students.
- 4 If someone gives an incorrect answer, get them to repeat it two or three times and then say the correct answer yourself.
- 5 If they can't provide an answer, don't stretch the eliciting out too long. Silence or wrong answers are evidence that they need your input.
- 6 When you have an appropriate answer, make sure it is clearly established as a good answer, perhaps by getting it repeated by a variety of individuals.
- 7 Don't use eliciting with monolingual classes.
- 8 Use eliciting regularly as a basic technique in most lessons for keeping your class active and involved.

Answers

Points 4 and 7 are the foxes in the henhouse!

Task 57: 'Lead-in' questions

You're planning a lesson on language used when meeting people at parties. What questions could you ask at the start of your lesson in order to interest the learner and to elicit some of their personal feelings and reactions?

Task 58: Planning questions to elicit specific things

Consider the next lesson you need to teach. Write down one specific item of factual information that the students will need to know: maybe a grammar rule, a fact about the topic, what a picture on the board represents, etc. Write a sequence of questions that you could use to lead the students step by step towards finding out that same information for themselves.

If possible, work with someone else to try out your sequence of questions. Practise drawing out the information rather than explaining yourself.

10 Students using their own language

The learners' first language can be a very useful resource in the classroom (which we'll look at in Chapter 14, Section 3), but at other times – when you really want them to use English – it can also get in the way.

'They always talk in their own language. I can't get them to use English.'

This is a common problem in monolingual classes, especially with children and young adults. What might the reasons be?

- Because it's easier to speak my own language.
- Because the teacher always corrects me if I speak English.

- Because I don't want to get it wrong in front of others.
- Because it's not 'in' to speak in English.
- Because the teacher is only pretending not to understand my own language.
- I need to use my own language because I can't say what I want in English.
- Because the teacher can't hear me – so why should I bother?
- Because it's silly to speak English. It's much easier to communicate in the language we all understand.
- Just because ...

Task 59: Student attitudes to using English in class

Imagine yourself as a specific individual student in your class. What change in the teacher, students, atmosphere, activities, lessons, etc. would make you comfortable, or even keen, to use English in class?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Many factors may play a role. Some important ones are discussed in the next section. ■

Using English in class

Some teachers have found that competition and bribery are techniques that get results (e.g. 'Every time you speak Spanish, I'll give a red mark to your team. The team with the fewest red marks at the end gets a bar of chocolate.'). I have some problems with this, as it seems to be building a motivation quite separate from the genuine interest in the subject matter that I am hoping to arouse; it seems to be a case of 'Do this to please the teacher'.

I am sure that inducements, threats, prizes, etc. can all have a limited success in creating an 'English-only' classroom, but I believe that a more complete solution involves looking at the whole atmosphere of the class.

As an ideal, I would like a classroom where learners were free to use their own tongue whenever they wanted, but in fact mostly chose to use English. How would this be possible? Perhaps by creating a climate where it was OK to use English, where using English was normal and natural and not special or frightening. There is no easy way to get to this, but here are some ideas that might help:

- Use lots of listening material to surround them in the sound of English.
- Put English-language posters on the walls.
- Have short, clearly demarcated sections of the lesson when English is the first language; at other times, other languages are possible.
- Negotiate the ground rules with the students or – better – let them set rules completely by themselves.
- Discuss (as opposed to 'Tell') the point of the activity, lesson, course. Agree how it will be done, why using English is important.
- Respond positively to every effort at using English.
- Don't tell learners off for not using English, but keep operating in English yourself.
- Only 'hear' English.
- Spend a lot of time on fluency work without correction.

- Establish that you are delighted for them to speak anything at all; communication is your priority, rather than accuracy.
- Create lots of pair and small-group activities that require them to do something with English without the loss of face of getting it wrong in a bigger group.
- When it becomes a big problem, stop the activity and negotiate again: 'I notice that many of you are using (Portuguese). Is this OK?'
- Be prepared for English use to grow gradually, rather than be established for a whole lesson at the start of the course.

11 Intuition

Use of intuition is fundamental to teaching. It is the skill of spontaneously understanding something, bypassing the supposed conventional route of thinking carefully and reaching a considered decision. Although it sounds somewhat 'magical', it is a quite down-to-earth, if rather unexplored, part of our teaching work. It is something that all teachers exercise to a greater or lesser degree, and it is learnable and improvable.

Intuitive responses are important in teaching because things happen so fast in lesson time and there is so much to notice, flying at us all at once: how the activity is proceeding, how each student is reacting, etc. On-the-spot in class, you don't have much thinking space. Fluent teaching depends on being able to quickly read the classroom situation moment by moment and respond (or choose not to respond) appropriately.

Task 60: Intuition

Do you recognise yourself in any of the following examples?

- You are teaching (or planning teaching) and know suddenly or instinctively what to do or how to do it.
- In class, you decide to do/not to do something without having explicitly thought through 'why'; something just comes to mind.
- You have an understanding of what the learners need that doesn't seem the result of logical reasoning.
- You make a connection between two aspects of the lesson that had not seemed connected before.
- You suddenly realise a sense that there is an overall system, structure or pattern to some things that you previously thought unrelated.
- Pieces of a solution reveal themselves as metaphors, images, puns, etc.
- You know something that you had no apparent way of knowing.
- You get a sudden understanding or insight into a student's character.
- You look at a student (or students) and get a sense of what they are thinking.
- You feel some embarrassment, because your way of working seems to run counter to training and to messages you get from respected peers.

Origins of intuition

Where does intuition come from? How can it be improved? I think intuition is your ability to smoothly access the quantity of experience you have stored inside you to help you interpret what is happening in the present moment. We can get better at it by gaining more (and a wider range of) experience and storing it away.

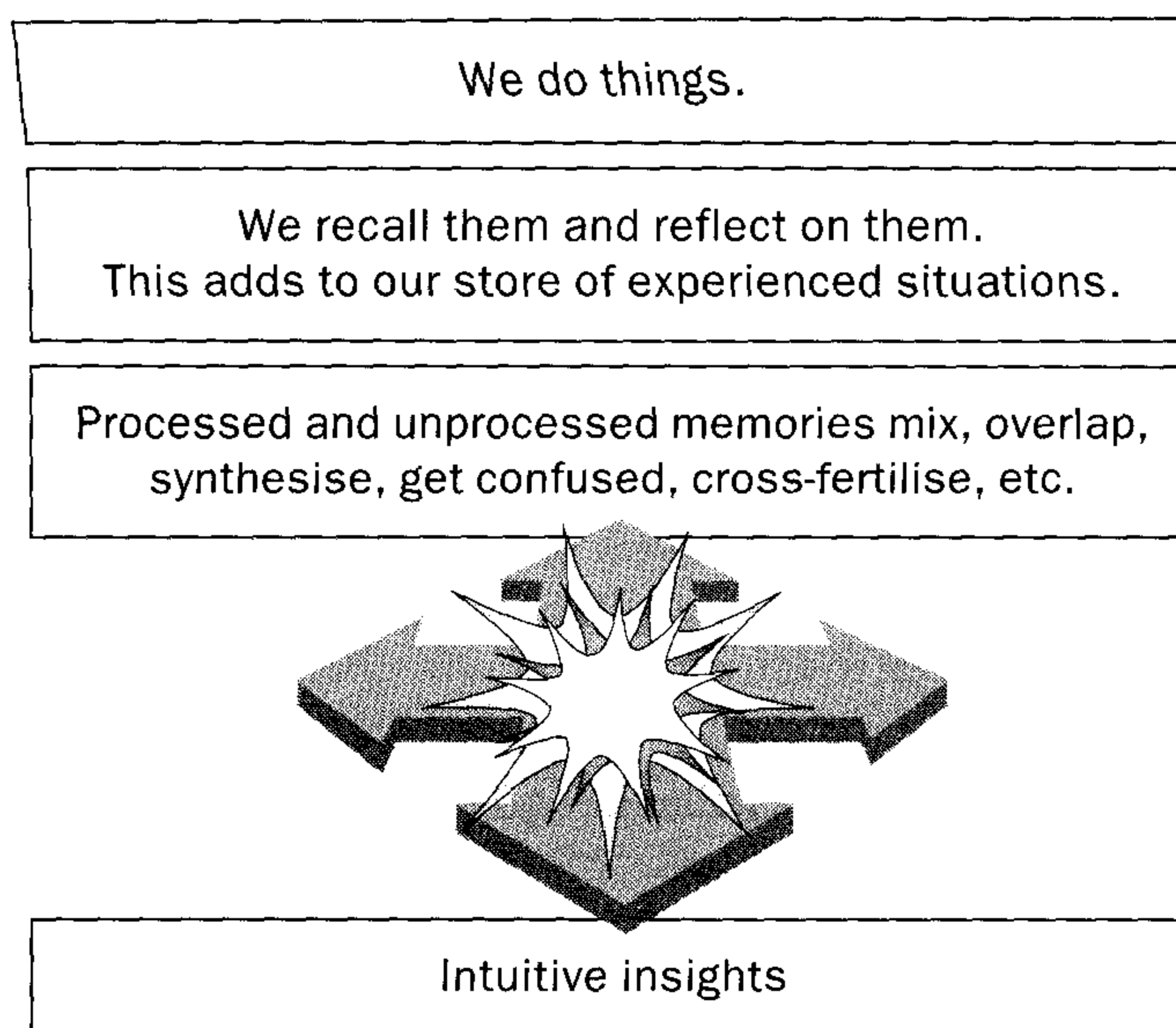


Figure 5.7 How we use intuition

Task 61: How you learned to teach

Recall how you learned to be a teacher on your teacher-training course. I don't mean how you learned the theory, but what your first lessons were like, how much you could apply what your trainers had taught you to do in class.

Intuition and teaching

If your initial experience of teaching was anything like my own, you had a whole pile of things weighing on your shoulders when you went into class: books you'd read (like this one!), seminars you'd attended, helpful advice you'd been given.

Yet on stepping into the live, real-time situation in class, you probably found that you couldn't just apply all these things, like assembly instructions for putting together some bookshelves. It didn't work like that, because teaching isn't like do-it-yourself or cookery. If I'm learning to cook, I can read some TV chef's book and find out precise step-by-step instructions for making a new dish. If I follow those instructions precisely, I am quite likely to get something similar to the original target dish. There will be some call on my intelligence and some degree of luck and some local variation in terms of what my cooker is like, what ingredients are like, etc., but it is by and large a relatively predictable task.

Teaching isn't like that. The instruction book doesn't work, because every teaching event is significantly different. And it happens too fast before your eyes. You very quickly find that you have to use something else, from Lesson 1 onwards, when the handed-down guidelines break down in the face of real people with real unpredicted responses. You are already working on intuition: taking risks, trying things out, learning not to be frightened, realising that this is the way to move forward, that the things that go wrong contribute to you being better able to do it next time. And recalling and reflecting on what you do after you do it seems to add to the pool from which this intuition draws. You don't have to

process the learning very deeply to draw specific conclusions – it may often be enough just to recall it, sift through it.

So, new teachers starting out make a lot of use of intuitive decisions – deciding to do something on the spur of the moment. What happens as a result then itself feeds into the stock of data available to them for future decisions.

New teachers also make intuitive readings of how people are reacting. Interestingly, their intuitive readings are often incorrect; for example, trainees often tend to misread whether students are bored with an exercise or how difficult a listening task is. New teachers often transfer their own nerves, doubts, worries and expectations about how students will respond and then find what they expected to find in the learners' faces, body language, voices, etc.

There is a danger that such incorrect readings may get set in concrete. One needs to constantly challenge and consciously upgrade one's intuition – and I suspect that much of the process of learning to be a better teacher is a process of *collecting concrete feedback and information* (about learners, language, teaching ideas, etc.) in order to become more spontaneously and accurately intuitive in class, i.e. becoming a 'learning teacher'.

Training courses tend to expect trainees to put into practice certain ways of working propounded by the course. Teachers often try to do what they are asked to do and come badly unstuck – tripping up on the sheer difficulty of following prescribed steps through a dance that in reality has no fixed pattern. The 'painting by numbers' approach to teaching is possible, but with very limited outcomes.

Yet, some trainees dare to put the training requirements to one side – muffling the trainer's voices in their head – and manage to reach back to their own natural intuitive skills. They start to feel that buzz that teaching brings; the shiver of excitement when an activity starts working, the thrill that pushes them on to experiment more and to enjoy it more. This isn't an argument against training or against academic input, but it is a reminder that, just as teachers can't do the learning for their students, trainers can never directly hand over their own teaching skills to their trainees.

We need to study things, but we also need to put them to one side; we need to forget things, we need to lose things inside us, we need to worry less about the exact instructions. If we hold other people's guidance in front of us as infallible route maps to follow, we are likely to get lost. And that's probably true of cooking as well – maybe we won't be a real cook till we can leave the book closed. This same process, I think, is how we then go on to become the teachers we are.

Most people will discover that they didn't learn to be teachers from seminars or books or conferences or observation feedback, though all of these have a very definite impact. You learn to teach by teaching. You learn to teach by doing it.

Task 62: Your use of intuition

As a teacher, how much do you make use of intuition to know what your students are thinking, to read their reactions to things, to decide if they like a task or not, to determine if they are bored, etc.? What informs your intuition?

12 How to prevent learning – some popular techniques

Here are some ways that teachers unintentionally hinder or prevent learning.

TTT (Teacher Talking Time)

TEACHER: When nothing else is happening in the classroom, I open my mouth. I've no idea what I say most of the time. But it stops those horrible silences. It's probably useful for them to listen to me speaking English. After all, I ...

The more you talk, the less opportunity there is for the learners. They need time to think, to prepare what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. Allow them the time and the quiet they need. Don't feel the need to fill every gap in a lesson. Explore the possibilities of silence.

Echo

STUDENT: I went to the cinema.

TEACHER: You went to the cinema. Good. You went to the cinema.

Who gets more language practice here – the student or the teacher? If you become aware of your echoing and then start to control it, you will find that learners get more talking time and that they start to listen to each other more. When you echo, they soon learn that they don't need to listen to anyone except you, because they know that you'll repeat everything! That has a dramatically negative effect on interaction patterns within the classroom.

Helpful sentence completion

STUDENT: I think that smoking is ...

TEACHER: ... a bad thing. Yes, I agree. When I went into the pub ...

You can be so desperate for a student to say what you want them to say (so that the lesson can move on to the next stage) that you are already predicting the words the student will produce and eagerly wishing for them to be said – so much so that you often find yourself adding 'tails' to sentence after sentence. But this kind of 'doing the hard work for them' is often counter-productive. People need to finish their own sentences. If students can't complete the sentence themselves, they need help – but help to produce their own sentence, using their own words and their own ideas. By letting students finish what they are saying, you also allow yourself more time to really listen to the student and what he is saying.

Complicated and unclear instructions

TEACHER: Well, what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna ask you to get into pairs, but before that there are some things we've gotta work out. So just jot down if you've got a pen, could you write this, then when we've finished that we're going to do the next thing which involves more ...

Unplanned, unstructured instructions are extremely confusing to students. They probably understand only a small percentage of what you say – and guess what you want them to do from one or two key words they did catch. Work out what is essential for them to know and tell them that, without wrapping it up in babble.

Not checking understanding of instructions

TEACHER: My instructions were so clear – but all the students did different things, and none of them did what I asked them to do.

Even the clearest instructions can be hard to grasp so, after you've given them, it's worth checking that they have been understood. A simple way is to ask a student or two to repeat them back to you: 'So, José, what are you going to do?' In this way you satisfy yourself that the task has been understood. Having done that, make sure you monitor the start of the activity to see if they really do what you wanted.

Asking 'Do you understand?'

TEACHER: Do you understand?

STUDENT: ... er ... yes ...

When you want to check learners' understanding, questions such as 'Do you understand?' are often useless. If you get a 'Yes' reply, it could mean 'I'm nervous about seeming stupid' or 'I don't want to waste the class's time any more' or 'I think I understand, but ...'. You often need to get clear information about what students have taken in. The best way to do this is to get students to demonstrate their understanding, for example by using a language item in a sentence, or by repeating an instruction, or by explaining their interpretation of an idea. This provides real evidence, rather than vague, possibly untrue information.

Fear of genuine feedback

TEACHER: Did you like my lesson?

STUDENT: ... er ... yes ...

In an active, forward-moving class, the learners will constantly be giving you feedback on what they have understood, what they think, what they need, how they feel, etc. Many teachers believe in the importance of open, honest feedback but find that, in practice, it can be hard to get. This is partly to do with the classroom atmosphere, partly to do with the questions asked, and mainly to do with the attitude and response to feedback received. The more you see feedback as a threat to you and to your position and your confidence, the more you will attempt to avoid feedback, or to defend yourself against perceived attack when you do get feedback. If you can open yourself up to the possibilities of really listening to what students have to say with a view to simply hearing them – without self-defence, justifications or arguments – then you may find that you can start to find out what they are really thinking, and that you can work on responding appropriately to that.

Insufficient authority/over-politeness

TEACHER: So if you don't mind, it would be very nice if you could just stop the activity if you feel that's OK.

This kind of pussyfooting is a common way in which teachers undermine themselves. Be clear. Say what you need to say without hiding it. If you want to stop an activity, say 'Stop now, please'. Feel your own natural authority and let it speak clearly.

The running commentary

TEACHERS: So now what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna move my chair over here and sit down and just get comfortable and now I'm gonna tear up these pieces of paper, and I had to use these because I couldn't get any card, so I found these at the back of the teacher's room, and I'm gonna tear them up now and when I've done that what I'm gonna ask you to do is if you don't mind ...

Don't give a running commentary about the mechanics of past, present and future activities. Boring, hard to follow, unnecessary. Tell students what they need to know – and stop.

Lack of confidence in self, learners, material, activity/ making it too easy

TEACHER: I wonder why they look so bored?

A common cause of boredom in classrooms is when the material used is too difficult or too easy. The former isn't hard to recognise – the learners can't do the work. A more difficult problem is when work is simply not challenging enough. Teachers often have rather limited expectations about what people can do, and keep their classes on a rather predictable straight line through activities that are safe and routine. Try to keep the level of challenge high. Be demanding. Believe that they can do more than they are aware of being able to do – and then help them to do it.

Over-helping/over-organising

TEACHER: Yes, now you can ask her your question. Mmm, that's a good question. What do you think? What's your answer going to be, Silvia? Yes. Go on – tell her what it is ...

When you give students a task to do in a group, it's often best to let them get on with it. A lot of 'teacher help', although well intentioned, is actually 'teacher interference' and gets in the way of students working on their own. As long as you are around, they will look to you for guidance, control and help. If you go away, they are forced to do the work themselves. That is when learning might happen. It can be a difficult lesson to learn, but sometimes our students will do much better without us, if only we have the courage to trust them.

Flying with the fastest

TEACHER: So – what's the answer?

STUDENT A: Only on Tuesdays unless it's raining.

TEACHER: Yes, very good – so, everyone got that? And why did he buy the elastic band?

STUDENT A: So he wouldn't lose his letters.

TEACHER: Good. Everyone understands then!

If you only listen to the first people who speak, it's very easy to get a false impression of how difficult or easy something is. You may find that the strongest and fastest students dominate, and you get little idea of how the majority of the class finds the work. This can lead you to fly at the speed of the top two or three

students and to lose the rest completely. Make sure you get answers and feedback from many students. Try directing questions at individuals (e.g. 'What do you think, Dominic?') and sometimes actively 'shh!' the loud ones – or simply 'not hear' them.

Not really listening (hearing language problems but not the message)

STUDENT: I am feeling bad. My grandfather he die last week and I am ...

TEACHER: No, not 'die' – say 'died' because it's in the past.

STUDENT: ... he died last week ...

TEACHER: Excellent. Now, did anyone else's grandfather die last week?

Because we are dealing in language as the subject matter of our courses, it's very easy to become over-concerned about the accuracy of what is said and to fail to hear the person behind the words. The example above is an extreme one, but on a minute-by-minute basis in class, teachers frequently fail to hear what learners say. The only point in learning language is to be able to communicate or receive communication – it is vital that work on the mechanical production of correct English does not blind us to the messages conveyed. Check yourself occasionally – are you really listening to your students, or only to their words?

Weak rapport: creation of a poor working environment

TEACHER: I try to be nice – but my classes always seem so dull.

If rapport seems to be a problem, then plan work specifically designed to focus on improving the relationships and interaction within the class (rather than activities with a mainly language aim). Until the relationships are good within a class, the learning is likely to be of a lower quality, so it's worth spending time on this. Bear in mind the three teacher qualities that help to enable a good working environment: authenticity, respect and empathy

Don't be too worried by this terrible list! These are the kinds of problems we all have. You'll find yourself doing these things, so notice yourself doing them and note the ways in which they do or don't seem to 'prevent' learning. But also accept that this is a part of the natural process of your own learning and development. As your awareness and confidence grow, you'll find that you not only become more able to recognise such problems in your own teaching, but that you can also start to find effective alternative options that enable rather than hinder learning.