

**P**enny Ur's article (ETp Issue 21) raised some very interesting issues and caused me to reflect on my own experience of teaching English. When I was completing my CTEFLA course (now the CELTA), I accepted most of what I was taught by experienced trainers without much critical reflection. I have since gained more experience and qualifications; the level of my critical reflection has increased and I have formulated my own views regarding language teaching and learning. One of

of view, providing background details, and offering a range of practical procedures and techniques. It informs us, we decide what is reasonable and appropriate, and then we test it out.

#### Research

Research has been carried out with regard to learner-centredness and its effect in the areas of motivation, self-confidence and self-monitoring through questionnaires, diaries, observations and interviews, with inconclusive results. However, other experimentation carried

# On reflection

His own experience has led **Jeremy Cross** to some conclusions about different approaches to teaching.

these is that a learner-centred approach, task-based learning and consciousness raising are worthwhile alternatives to more teacher-centred and form-focused approaches and deserve a closer look with respect to their practical application.

#### A learner-centred approach

This involves learners as far as is feasibly possible in developing, implementing and evaluating a course. Handing over some of the responsibility for their learning to the learners themselves, allowing them to have a say in what they learn, catering for different learning styles, encouraging them to reflect on their learning, giving and receiving ongoing feedback and providing learner training are features of this approach which are designed to foster some level of learner independence.

#### Context

As with any approach in English teaching, the context in which you teach and how you consider language is best learnt (based on underlying theory) will determine the extent to which you adopt, adapt and apply it in your own teaching. In the context of my teaching, it is clear that learner-centredness is a sound notion, and the amount of literature on the subject indicates that it is not just something writers pay lip service to. It is important to add that this literature is no more than a resource, giving a point

out has led to some positive conclusions. For example, Cotterall integrated learner training activities aimed at assisting and encouraging learners to develop and experiment with strategies for monitoring and evaluating their personal learning. The learners indicated they used such strategies outside the classroom, improved their ability to self-assess their performance, developed

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personal problem-solving techniques to overcome learning difficulties and reported increased self-confidence when dealing with language. Significantly, research has also shown differences in learner and teacher perceptions of the importance of selected learning activities, which is well worth noting.

#### In the classroom

I carry out a needs analysis in my own classes at the beginning of each ten-week term. I'm interested in finding out what the needs of the learners are so that I can cater for them, regardless of whether I'm using a coursebook or not. I also ask learners to write one or two study goals for the term, which gives



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►►► them something tangible to aim for. If I try an activity or approach for the first time, I get their reactions. After about the third week of term, I give learners 15–20 minutes of a lesson to discuss what they want more or less of in their classes (I delegate one learner to make notes and I leave the room), and I take appropriate action in line with their feedback. About six weeks later, five minutes per learner is set aside to discuss with each of them their strengths, weaknesses and progress. I set some questions for homework prior to the discussion in order to provide a focus:

- Did I achieve my study goal(s)?
- What other area(s) have I improved in this term?
- What area(s) do I want to improve in more?
- What can I do to improve in that/those area(s)?

During this discussion, some kind of project work or task needs to be provided for the other learners in the class to get on with. Feedback indicates that learners, particularly new ones, value this personal attention and guidance. It also gives them the opportunity to reflect on their learning.

Learner training is also a key element in my classroom and includes:

- promoting language for classroom interaction (eg 'What did you get for number one?')
- guidance on metalanguage to facilitate consciousness-raising activities (eg 'Well, I think it's a state verb, that's why a continuous form is not used.')
- encouraging learning strategies (eg Student: 'I don't know what this word means.' Teacher: 'Look at the word in its context and try to work out its meaning.')
- highlighting ways to organise vocabulary notebooks.

## Task-based learning and consciousness raising

Task-based learning (TBL) arose out of dissatisfaction with the Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) approach. Rather than get drawn into a PPP versus TBL debate, I recommend readers take a look at Evans' discussion

of this area. TBL focuses on meaning and achieving outcomes. It is basically concerned with learners completing tasks using whatever language they want, along with exposure to language in a natural context. In addition, it allows for constant interplay with form.

Consciousness raising (CR) focuses on drawing learners' attention to features of authentic language such as discourse, functional exponents, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. It is all there in a natural context, which is perhaps the only way language and how it functions can really be seen. Furthermore, CR is designed to encourage learners to notice and evaluate language for themselves in future.

### Context

The use of TBL in my own teaching context is based upon the five principles outlined by Skehan – consider a variety of language features; choose tasks that encourage the use of a range of language features without making them

learners involved in TBL and CR at all levels indicates that they are really motivated by and interested in learning through exposure to authentic language in a natural context.

### Research

At the moment, there is no evidence to suggest TBL is any better or worse than form-focused alternatives. One reason is that most research tends to focus on investigating learners' knowledge of language and not their communicative ability. It is crucial that we base any judgements regarding the effectiveness of one approach over another on practical research into communicative ability.

### In the classroom

A negative argument I have heard from other teachers is that TBL and CR seem to be 'disorganised' approaches to language learning. Admittedly, initially, I felt this way too. However, after reading published material (see Willis' excellent book) and doing some

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compulsory; select tasks at an appropriate level of difficulty which have a balanced focus on fluency and accuracy; establish conditions to maximise focus on form within the framework of meaningful use of language. (I would point out that I do not totally reject PPP.) I am fortunate also that I am able to use a coursebook loosely based on TBL which makes integrating this approach into my teaching a little easier. Clearly though, the wider acceptance of TBL is unfortunately constrained by coursebooks whose content and layout are clearly chosen with the use of PPP in mind. For these, I develop and integrate tasks related to the module topic, not the specified language. If the target structure of the module is apparent in a text, this is a bonus. If not, the target structure can be addressed using another approach. Where there is no coursebook, I am free to concentrate more on TBL in the classroom. Initially, locating a useful written text or recording and transcribing a listening text and producing a language-focus CR worksheet takes time, but so does any lesson preparation the first time you do it. Feedback from

experimentation in the classroom, things have become clear. Basically, as with PPP, there are three stages to TBL: 1) Pre-task, 2) Task cycle (the task itself, planning a report and reporting) and 3) Language focus.

The Pre-task is similar to what we would commonly call a 'lead-in' and typically focuses on looking at topic language. The tasks themselves are familiar ones, such as ranking and problem solving. Where TBL differs from PPP in particular is that during these two initial stages, learners use whatever language they have available and, importantly, the teacher is not the centre of attention, but manages and facilitates the interaction and provides feedback. It is perhaps this different role that makes some teachers feel uncomfortable, particularly after completing initial training or years of using PPP. It perhaps involves a change of mindset, letting learners get on with things from the start and only interfering when absolutely necessary, such as when communication breaks down. It is what teachers do anyway in any fluency-based activity. It should be pointed out that the teacher's role is not



only to promote fluency (while learners are 'on-task'), but also to encourage some attention to form (during planning and reporting), but without concern for one particular item of language. The last stage, Language focus, is typically based on an authentic listening or written text which the teacher basically 'mines' for language and then develops CR material for. The following examples are for a lower-level class:

- Read the text and underline all the examples of the present simple and present continuous. When do we use the present simple and when do we use present continuous?
- Find the following phrase and write down what the underlined word refers to: Then he put it in his pocket and ...
- Check the pronunciation of the following words in your dictionary – cupboard, radiator, chimney.
- Underline all the past simple verbs. What is the infinitive and past participle for each?
- Why do you think the speakers use 'er' and 'um' quite often before they speak?
- Read through the text again and underline any language features you find interesting or unusual.

For some teachers, 'mining' a text and coming up with appropriate practice may seem tricky and time consuming at first, but I assure you it's worth persevering with. It's really interesting to see what can come out of a text, and much more stimulating for both teachers and learners.

In CR the teacher provides appropriate input and practice activities, focusing on any of the features – discourse, functional exponents, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary – that come out of the text. Such language practice activities are those that are already found in abundance in various coursebooks and workbooks and are typically used in the practice stage of PPP. Further tasks and CR activities provide learners with the opportunity to encounter features they have been made aware of again and again, build on what they know, and, when they are ready, give them the opportunity to use them as part of their communicative repertoire.



My view, then, is that a learner-centred approach, task-based learning and consciousness raising provide viable, adaptable, integratable and practical alternatives (in my teaching context) to

more teacher-centred and form-focused approaches. The challenge is not only to make teachers, particularly those new to English language teaching, aware of these alternatives, but also to provide on-going training and support. They may then be better able to make reasoned judgements regarding their application and use. **EP**

Cotterall, S 'Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses' *ELTJ* 54/2 2000

Evans, D 'A Review of PPP' University of Birmingham 1999 (available from: <http://www.bham.ac.uk/CELS/CELS%20pages/essays/evanssla.pdf>)

Skehan, P *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning* OUP 1998

Willis, J *A Framework for Task-Based Learning* Longman 1996



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## COMPETITIONS

### Competition results

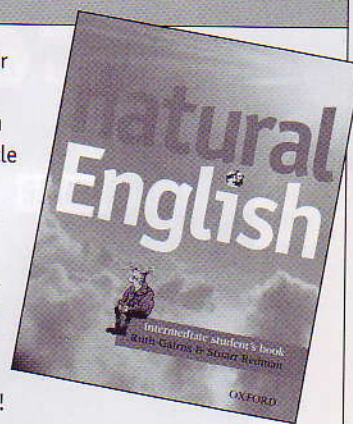
Congratulations to the six winners of our 'Simile crossword' competition, who will each receive a copy of the new *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*:

**Sarah Richardson**, Sydney, Australia  
**Christine Henderson-Muniz**, Seville, Spain  
**Darina Boukalova**, London, UK  
**Lothar Forner**, Ingolstadt, Germany  
**Ewa Groszek**, Myslowice, Poland  
**Nicole Décuré**, Toulouse, France

### Answers

**Across:** 2 fox, 3 parrot, 4 button, 6 dodo, 7 grass, 8 hell, 12 thieves, 13 eel, 14 ox, 15 kitten, 16 brass  
**Down:** 1 Solomon, 4 boots, 5 two short planks, 7 gold, 9 mule, 10 lemon, 11 ice

Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman based the syllabus of their new coursebook on research they did into language that students really need to be able to communicate in English and to progress beyond intermediate level (see their article on page 5). Why not send us a list of the 25 individual words or expressions (not more than six words long) that you and your colleagues think are the most essential? To celebrate our 25th issue of *ETp*, we will give 25 prizes of a copy of *natural English* (published by OUP) to 25 entrants (to be drawn at random). The closing date for entries is 25th January 2003. Don't forget to include your full name and postal address – prizes cannot be sent by email!



### There's still time to enter our 'Enigma' competition.

Solve the coded story on page 46 of Issue 24 and send your entry to *ETp* by 25th October. Six lucky winners will each receive a copy of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (Penguin Readers). Don't forget to include your full name and postal address.

### Competition entries and all correspondence to:

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