

## Responding to learners' individual language needs

At appropriate points throughout the *Students' Book*, during the tasks, mini-tasks and speaking activities, students are instructed to ask their teacher about any words or phrases they need. The ability to respond to students' individual language needs is central to a task-based approach, and you may find yourself doing this during pair/group/individual work and during preparation stages. The following suggestions are designed to help teachers who may feel daunted by the idea of unplanned, unpredictable input.

### 1 Encourage students to ask about language

Students who take an active approach to their own learning are far more likely to succeed than those who sit back and expect the teacher to do it all for them. It is important to make students aware of this (see *Learner-training worksheet 1* on pages 104–105 of the *Resource bank*), and to convey to them your willingness to deal with their queries. Circulate during pair and individual work, making it clear that you are available to answer questions. Even if you cannot answer a query on the spot, let students know that you are happy to deal with it.

### 2 Be responsive, but do not get side-tracked

One danger of this approach is that a teacher may get side-tracked by dominant students who want all their attention, leading to frustration and irritation among others. If you feel that this is happening, tell these students that you will answer their questions later, and move quickly on. Make sure that you keep moving round during pair/group/individual work. Keep a 'bird's-eye' view of the class, moving in to help students if they need it rather than spending too much time with one pair/group/individual.

### 3 Encourage students to use what they already know

There is also a danger that students will become over-dependent on you, perhaps asking you to translate large chunks for them, which they are very unlikely to retain. Always encourage students to use what they know first, only asking you if they really have no idea.

### 4 Have strategies for dealing with questions you cannot answer

Have at least one bilingual dictionary in the classroom (especially for specialised/technical vocabulary) for students to refer to, although you may still need to check that they have found the right translation. If students ask for idioms and expressions, make sure you keep it simple – in most cases you will be able to come up with an adequate phrase even if it is not precisely the phrase the student wanted. Finally, if all else fails, promise to find out for the next lesson!

### 5 Note down important language points to be dealt with later

Note down any important language points that come up during tasks and discussions and build in slots to go over these later on. Write the errors onto the board or OHT, and invite students to correct them/think of a better word, etc. Remember that it is also motivating (and can be just as instructive) to include examples of good language used as well as errors. Feedback slots can either be at the end of the lesson, or, if time is a problem, at the beginning of the next.

### 6 Select points for these correction slots carefully

Students are more likely to retain a few well-chosen points in these correction slots rather than a long list of miscellaneous language points. The following are useful things to bear in mind:

- *Usefulness*: many items may only be of interest to individual students – only bring up general language with the whole class.
- *Quantity/Variety*: try to combine one or two more general points with a number of more specific/minor ones, including a mixture of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation as far as possible.
- *Level*: be careful not to present students with points above their level or which are too complex to deal with in a few minutes.
- *Problems induced by students' mother tongue*: correction slots are an excellent opportunity to deal with L1 specific errors (false friends, pronunciation, etc.) not usually mentioned in general English courses.
- *Revision*: the correction slots are a very good opportunity to increase students' knowledge of complex language covered previously, as well as to remind them of smaller language points.

## 7 Don't worry if you can't think of 'creative' practice on the spot

If students encounter a genuine need for the language as they try to achieve a particular goal, it is more likely to be remembered than if it is introduced 'cold' by the teacher. In many cases, elaborate practice may be unnecessary – what is important is that you are dealing with the language at the moment it is most likely to be retained by the student. With lexis and small points of pronunciation, it may be enough to get students to repeat the word a few times and write an example on the board, highlighting problems.

## 8 Some simple 'on the spot' practice activities

If you feel more work is needed, the box opposite includes some well-known activities which are relatively easy to adapt 'on the spot' (you can always provide a more substantial exercise later). A few examples should be enough for students to see how the structure is formed, and to increase awareness of it. These activities are also useful for practising phrases in the *Useful language* boxes.

### a Choral and individual drilling

b **Questions and answers:** ask questions prompting students to use the language item in the answer. For example, to practise the phrase *famous for* ask questions such as:

*What's Monte Carlo famous for?* > *It's famous for its Casinos.*

*What's Loch Ness famous for?* > *It's famous for the Loch Ness Monster.*

Alternatively, give an example, then prompt students to ask questions to each other, like this:

*'Monica, ask Henri about Venice.'* > *What's Venice famous for, Henri?*

c **Forming sentences/phrases from prompts:** for example, to practise the construction *it's worth ... -ing* provide the example: *The National Gallery is worth visiting*, then give prompts like this:

ROYAL PALACE/SEE > *The Royal Palace is worth seeing.*

THIS DICTIONARY/BUY > *This dictionary is worth buying.*

d **Substitutions:** give an example phrase/sentence, then provide prompts which can easily be substituted into the original. For example, to practise the non-use of the article, start with *I hate cats*, then prompt as follows:

LOVE > *I love cats.*

BABIES > *I love babies.*

DON'T LIKE > *I don't like babies.*

e **Transformations:** these are useful if there is another construction with almost the same meaning. Give one construction and get students to say the same thing using another. For example, to practise *although*:

*He's rich, but he's very mean.* > *Although he's rich, he's very mean.*

*She's over eighty, but she's very active.* > *Although she's over eighty, she's very active.*

f **Combining shorter sentences/phrases:** give two short sentences and ask students to combine them with a more complex construction. For example, to practise *too ... to*:

*She's very young. She can't do this job.* > *She's too young to do this job.*

*He's too old. He can't drive a car.* > *He's too old to drive a car.*

g **Dictate sentences for students to complete:** dictate a few incomplete sentences including the phrase or structure, which students complete themselves, then compare with other students. For example, to practise *it takes ... to*, dictate:

*It takes about three hours to get to ... It only takes a few minutes to ... It took me ages to ...*