

how to ... introduce new language

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1 Criteria for introducing language successfully

Part of a teacher's role is to draw learners' attention to language areas, principally grammar and lexis, which are new or partly unfamiliar to them. Traditionally called 'presentation', this is sometimes now referred to as 'consciousness raising', i.e. bringing to conscious awareness features of the language that learners may have encountered but not noticed. Whatever approach is used, we need to remind ourselves that the language we select and decide to focus on is not necessarily what our students will learn (although they may learn other things). Nevertheless, in selecting and introducing new language, our aim remains the same: to choose an approach that will create the most favourable conditions for effective learning to take place. How can we do this?

We feel there are four criteria which will aid effective learning:

- introduce language economically and clearly
- make the language focus clear
- make the language focus memorable
- use approaches that are appropriate for the group.

Let's look at these in turn.

introduce language economically and clearly

Perhaps the single most important criterion for success is being economical. If you are introducing new language and conducting your class exclusively, or even largely in English, learners at intermediate level will find this demanding and tiring, and consequently their attention span will be limited. So, keep it brief, and where possible, keep it simple.

Unfortunately, brevity is often in conflict with clarity and truth. If you rush through a language focus in order to save time, your learners may be left confused; and if you distil information down too much, it may be over-simplified and not sufficiently accurate. Obviously there is a balance that needs to be struck here, and this is a key issue you have to consider, not just at the planning stage, but throughout the lesson as new language arises incidentally from other activities.

think!¹

A teacher has decided to focus on the meaning and use of these degree adverbs: *fairly*, *quite*, *pretty*, *rather*. Do you think these explanations have achieved the right balance of truth and clarity for intermediate level? Are any explanations too inaccurate or too detailed for this level?

- 1 *Fairly* means more or less the same as *quite*. If something is *fairly good* then it is *quite good*. They mean that something isn't *very good* but it is *better than OK*. *Quite* is the more common of the two words.
- 2 *Quite* sometimes mean *fairly*, but it can also mean *completely* or *absolutely*. So, you can say that a question is *quite difficult* or *fairly difficult* to answer, but you can also say that an answer is *quite wrong*, which means it is completely and totally wrong. You can't say that an answer is *fairly wrong*.
- 3 *Pretty* means the same as *very*. If a film is *pretty interesting* then it is *very interesting*.
- 4 *Rather* is also similar in meaning to *quite* and *fairly*, but not always used in the same way. When we use *rather*, we sometimes show surprise – something is better than we thought. For example: *The food at the hotel was rather good.* = I am a bit surprised perhaps because it's often not very good.

go to answer key p.149

If you are conscious of the fact that you sometimes struggle to preserve this balance, one way round the dilemma is to divide up your input into smaller more manageable chunks. A policy of 'little and often' is actually one we have generally adopted in **natural English**; if learners need a particular use of the present perfect to achieve a specific communicative goal, we may decide to focus on that use without feeling bound to examine all the other uses of the present perfect at the same time or within the same unit (as books sometimes do if they are driven by a pre-selected grammar syllabus). In his excellent book, *How to Teach Grammar*, Scott Thornbury also points out that being economical enables the teacher to fulfil another criterion for successful learning to take place, which is:

The rule of use: teach grammar in order to facilitate the learners' comprehension and production of real language, rather than as an end in itself. Always provide opportunities for learners to put the grammar to some communicative use.

Want to know more? Read *How to Teach Grammar* by Scott Thornbury (p.153).

go to follow up p.149

make the language focus clear

This is a maxim that is easy to say but more difficult to achieve. How do we know if something is clear? Usually it is quite easy to see after the damage is done and confusion reigns, but how do we pre-empt this? One way is to try and learn from our mistakes. If something hasn't worked, go back over it again and try to identify where and why it might have gone wrong. This can be painful, but it happens to all of us. We don't expect

our students to learn the language effectively without making mistakes, so why should we imagine that we can teach the language effectively without occasionally making mistakes? So, try to look upon it as part of the learning process in getting something right. If you are brave enough, you can show the lesson to another teacher you trust for their opinion.

make the language focus memorable

If you want learners to remember something, make it as memorable for your learners as possible. 'Chalk and talk' may be enough for some learners some of the time, but you are more likely to be successful if you can engage learners' interests. That means:

- using your special knowledge of the group to contextualize language within relevant and motivating topics and situations
- sometimes adapting the topics and situations in the coursebook you are using
- making as much use of the learners as you can; exploit personalities within the group when creating contexts or giving examples (in a sensitive manner), especially if they can be humorous; use actual samples of language from the learners where relevant
- choosing texts and contexts that are in the news or contemporary and relevant to the group.

However satisfactory your coursebook may be in general terms, this is where you can build in a layer of interest and motivation beyond anything a book can provide.

use approaches that are appropriate for the group

Whatever approach you use, it has to be appropriate for your group of learners. Age, level, culture, and learning background are all factors that will influence your choice of approach, although it is important to retain an open mind and not simply assume that one or other approach won't work. A pop song may not seem the most appropriate vehicle to present new language to a group of middle-aged businesspeople, but it may just turn an ordinary lesson into something quite different and special. It is important, therefore, to try out different approaches with your learners and monitor how well they are received. Ask the learners themselves what they have liked or enjoyed. Some teachers may think this is putting their head on the block, but if you are teaching adult learners and consult them in this way, they are unlikely to react negatively to you as a teacher, even if they do respond with a clear preference for one approach you have used over another.

2 Ways of introducing new language


a using visuals

It is obvious that with learners at beginner or elementary level, pictures, realia, diagrams, etc. are immensely useful because:

- they are often the most economical way of dealing with the meaning of new vocabulary items and structures
- if they are clear, they will also free you from the need for sometimes lengthy explanation or concept checking
- they often serve as useful prompts for practice
- they are appealing to most learners, and can make language more memorable.

With learners of intermediate level onwards, pictures can be particularly useful diagnostically. If you ask small groups to label the items / furniture in a picture of an office, you and they will quickly be able to identify what they already know and what they have yet to learn, and they may be able to help each other with unknown items. Realia such as *timelines*¹ and *clines*² can provide a framework for checking understanding as well as a written record of meaning, as you will see in this example.

- 1 Match 1 to 3 with a to c in the **natural English** box. Where does each pair of phrases go on the line?



natural English
emotional reactions

1 I can't stand it.	a It annoys /ə'noʊz/ me a bit.
2 I find it slightly irritating. /'ɪrɪteɪtɪŋ/	b It doesn't bother /'bɒðə/ me.
3 I don't mind (it).	c It drives me mad.

I hate it	I love it
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from **student's book** unit nine p.105

think!²

Which items might you introduce on these clines for intermediate level learners?

1 baby	pensioner
2 boiling	freezing
3 it's definitely true	it definitely isn't true

go to **answer key** p.149

Visuals are very versatile: they provide a focus when you are working with the whole class from the board or OHP, but are equally valuable to prompt and encourage learner interaction in pair or group work. They often play an important role in establishing context, which directly or indirectly may clarify meaning. An example in **natural English** is where learners have to talk about some pictures of people meeting for the first time, and then match appropriate conversation openers with the pictures.

go to **student's book** unit one p.13

*timelines*¹ go to **glossary** p.149 for numbered items

try it out family photos

I use a selection of photos of my family going back about sixty years, but you could use a contemporary selection only. I find these sets of photos incredibly useful for teaching or practising a range of grammatical structures and vocabulary at different levels. Learners are often fascinated by the photos (particularly the old ones) and some classes have brought in their own sets of family photos.

Among other things, I've used them for:

- physical descriptions (appearance, clothes, etc.)
- describing people's lives (X works for / has worked for / has been studying ..., etc.)
- comparing (comparatives, modifiers, superlatives)
- narrating (X used to ... was doing X before Y, etc.)
- deducing (X could be Y's mother, must have been ...)
- relative clauses (That's the uncle who got married three times / whose wife was a night club singer)

One class produced a wall display of their photos which we used often in language practice and speaking activities.

Liz, Hungary

b using texts

Texts can be written or spoken, and either scripted, authentic, or semi-authentic, i.e. guided or adapted. All texts are a potential source for language work. It may be that the language you focus on is in the text itself, e.g. asking learners to find all the words and phrases relating to money in a news text. In other cases, you may be asking learners to identify or notice certain language features, and this may involve some analysis and probably language use. These language features may be grammatical structures, individual words, or lexical phrases. You will find a focus throughout **natural English** on features of spoken English in listening texts, and often in reading texts too, as the articles selected for this level are often in an informal style and include spoken or informal written features.

Alternatively, the target language may not be in the text itself, but be prompted by the content of the text, e.g. a text about someone's very bad morning leading up to an important interview: he forgot to set the alarm, didn't have a clean shirt, didn't have time to shave, got on the wrong train, arrived an hour late for the interview, etc. From this context, the teacher can first give examples of what the person *should* or *shouldn't have done*, then move on to elicit further examples from the group.

Texts are popular for language focus, and reading texts in particular can be 'adult' in approach. Long texts, however, can be time-consuming, and it is important that learners are not weighed down by the text itself; if they don't grasp the gist of the text, they will probably be in no mood to focus on language in it! Written texts have an advantage over recordings in that learners have time to focus on and absorb the written word, and for many learners, reading in English is easier than listening. If they are to focus on language in recordings, a tapescript is essential. You will find the tapescripts and accompanying exercises in the **listening booklet** will enable your learners to focus on spoken English features more easily.

focusing on language

Let's look at a couple of specific ways of focusing on language in spoken and written texts.

In this first example, learners have already listened to the recording and been through the different stages to aid their understanding. Look at this extract from the **listening booklet**. Learners are asked to find out about collocation, form, and pronunciation, then compare with the **natural English** box (see below) which provides a written record of what they have noticed. They then practise the language.

- Look at the tapescript. Find the words *advantage* and *disadvantage(s)*.
- How are they pronounced?
- What preposition often follows these words?
- Which words come before *advantage* and *disadvantages*?

from **listening booklet** exercise 6.3 p.21.



natural English talking about advantages and disadvantages

The main **advantage** of working in the family business is ...

Another **advantage** is ...

The **disadvantage** of my situation is ...

With a partner, use the phrases to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of working for a very big / very small company.

from **student's book** unit six p.75

In this second example, learners read three short letters and replies from a spoof problem page. There is a comprehension check, a brief vocabulary focus, and an opportunity to react to the text in groups. Learners then move on to a focus on rules about adjectives and adverbs: they can infer the rules, using the examples following each rule, and complete the gaps in the rules. They look back at the text to identify the use of underlined phrases containing adjectives and adverbs. Finally, they select the correct form in personal questions, and go on to use the forms in production.

1 Read the rules. Fill in the gaps with the words *adjectives* or *adverbs*.

adjectives and adverbs

- We often use _____ to modify nouns, e.g. a *casual* shirt, a *big* house.
- We often use _____ to modify verbs, e.g. he walked *casually*, listen *carefully*, he speaks *fast* (*fast* can be an adjective or adverb).
- We modify certain verbs (e.g. *be*, *seem*, *look*, *sound*, *feel*, *become*, *get*) with _____, e.g. that looks *interesting*, he seemed *angry*.

- 4 We often use _____ to modify past participles, e.g. *well* made, *badly* written.
- 5 We use _____ before certain _____, e.g. *terribly* cold, *incredibly* stupid.

2 In A / B pairs, A read out an underlined phrase in the article in read on, and B match it with a rule in the box. Swap roles after five phrases.

example 'unbelievably lazy' = rule 5

from **student's book unit five** p.60

try it out dictogloss

Dictogloss (or grammar dictation) is a very useful way of highlighting language forms either for revision or introducing structures. You need a short text (not more than six lines) in natural English, containing at least a couple of examples of the target language, e.g. past perfect, passive forms, *have* sth *done*.

Explain the procedure to the class before you begin.

- 1 Introduce the topic to stimulate interest, perhaps through discussion.
- 2 Read the text at natural speed with slight pauses, so that learners can get the gist. (You could use a recording.)
- 3 Re-read / replay the text. This time the learners can note down key words.
- 4 In small groups, learners write out the text using their notes. The text does not need to be identical, but must convey the same ideas, and should aim to be accurate. Monitor, but don't correct at this stage.
- 5 Together, learners call out suggestions and decide on one version for the teacher to write up, or learners from different groups take turns to write on the whiteboard.
- 6 Give them copies of the original text (or write it on the board). It is important that they identify any differences and decide together if their version is correct. During this stage, you will need to focus on any problems arising with the target language in the text.

Want to know more? Read **Grammar Dictation** by Ruth Wajnryb for a more detailed description of this approach and a wide range of texts.

go to **follow up** p.149

c using examples

Teachers in the past often used to present their learners with a rule and then ask them to apply it (known as the grammar-translation approach). A more common practice nowadays is to proceed in the opposite direction: present examples of language use and then ask the learners to infer the rule (or rules) for themselves. A common example of this, usually referred to as 'guided discovery', is utilizing the learners' knowledge of one concept in order to help them to work out the rules of use of a new (or less familiar) concept that is closely related in meaning. For example, in **how to ...** talk about your past in unit three, learners work in pairs and tell each other about periods in their life based around a series of sentence stems such as, *When I was younger ...* or, *When I left school ...* or, *When I first got married ...*. After this, they listen to some native

speakers talking about similar periods in their lives, and they complete these sentences (see the sample (underlined) answers):

1 **3.7** Listen to some people talking about art. Complete the sentences.

- 1 When I was at primary school, we used to write stories and then draw pictures to go with them.
- 2 When I was a child, I used to enjoy painting lessons at school, but I never liked going round art galleries.
- 3 When I left school, I started a History of Art course at university, but I didn't finish it.
- 4 I remember when I was younger, I drew pictures of my family all the time. My mum really loved that.
- 5 When I was in my early twenties, I worked in a museum for six months.

Having first checked their answers, they then answer the following questions which are designed to help them to infer the difference in use between the past simple and *used to* + verb.

3 Answer the questions.

- 1 Two of the speakers say *used to* in their sentences. What do they mean?
- 2 Look at the other sentences. When is it possible to say *used to* + verb in place of the past simple?
- 3 How do you pronounce *used* in sentences 1 and 2? Practise saying the sentences.

from **student's book unit three** p.41

An opportunity to put the grammar to communicative use is provided towards the end of the lesson.

A contrastive approach like the one above can be very economical, but if you are trying to clarify a rule without the use of contrast, you should have a good range of examples so that learners can discern a clear pattern of use leading to a particular rule, as in the example below.

1 Circle the -ing forms in these sentences. What kind of word comes before -ing?

- 1 One advantage of speaking English is that it helps you get a job.
- 2 You should never give up your job before finding another one.
- 3 You should borrow money from friends or family instead of going to the bank.

- 4 You shouldn't set up a business without doing a management course first.
- 5 You should apply for jobs immediately after leaving school or university.
- 6 The disadvantage of working in only one company is that you don't get enough variety of experience.

from student's book unit six p. 75

The main advantage of a guided discovery approach such as those above is that learners are not spoon-fed a rule; they have to work it out for themselves. This means they are involved in the learning process – active participants and not casual bystanders – and they have to expend more mental effort and do more mental processing. This extra effort and involvement should make the learning experience more meaningful to them, and more memorable. When learners are doing this together, there is the added benefit of a speaking activity with a real communicative aim and a high degree of motivation. Adults usually like this approach, because it treats them as intelligent human beings and makes use of their adult analytic capabilities; for younger learners it may be less appropriate.

There are, however, potential drawbacks. If the rule in question is particularly 'messy', e.g. trying to differentiate some of the many different ways of expressing the future in English, or if the examples have been stripped of too much of their surrounding context, learners may end up with a very partial and inaccurate rule, or they may be confused and frustrated. It pays, therefore, to provide as much of the context as you possibly can, and, of course, to choose your examples carefully.

think!³

How could you finish each of these sentences to illustrate the difference in concept between a and b in each case?

- 1 Show the difference in meaning between the past simple and *used to* + verb.
 - a I used to go to the cinema _____
 - b I went to the cinema _____
- 2 Show a difference between present perfect simple and continuous.
 - a I've painted the room and _____
 - b I've been painting the room and _____
- 3 Show the difference between these connectors.
 - a I worked hard at school, although _____
 - b I worked hard at school whereas _____

go to answer key p. 149

d test-teach-test

Although the title of this chapter is *how to ... introduce new language*, it is increasingly the case from intermediate level onwards, that it is difficult to make assumptions about what learners will or won't know. And a glance at any series of coursebooks will immediately illustrate that a significant percentage of the language introduced at intermediate level is, in fact, a refining and development of structures already introduced at pre-intermediate level; and at upper intermediate

level a very high percentage of language under the spotlight has already been introduced at intermediate level.

using a diagnostic approach

When this happens, you can make more use of a diagnostic approach, i.e. find out how much learners know first, and take that as the starting point for further development and consolidation. Psychologically, it also makes good sense to give learners an opportunity to demonstrate what they actually know and understand first. For some, there are few things more irritating than to have to sit through a lengthy presentation of language they already know (or think they know). Sometimes, of course, initial testing may demonstrate that the learners don't, in fact, have a very firm grasp of the target language you assumed they might know. If this is the case, you will obviously have to retrace your steps and proceed more slowly in the 'teach' part of the cycle, but you can do so in the knowledge that your learners should now realize why there is a need to examine or revisit this particular area of language.

At intermediate level, test-teach-test is often a suitable way to approach the present perfect simple. In the example below, an assumption has been made that learners will be familiar with the form and name of the target structure, having almost certainly encountered it at pre-intermediate level. The 'test' is to find out how well they can distinguish it from the past simple in certain contexts.

1 Look at the speech bubbles on p.147 and answer these questions.

- 1 Underline the verbs in the questions. What tense are they?
- 2 Is the man asking about experiences happening before now?
- 3 Is he asking when things happened?
- 4 Look at the woman's answers. All the *a* answers are in the present perfect. Why?
- 5 All the *b* answers are in the past simple. Why?
- 6 Circle the words *before*, *ever*, and *just*. Which word means:
 - at any time in your life?
 - at a time before this particular occasion / on a previous occasion?
 - recently / a short time ago?

2 With a partner, ask questions 1 to 3 but give your own answers.

from **student's book unit one p.15**

Once learners have either confirmed their understanding or newly arrived at a working hypothesis of the rule, they need an opportunity to test it out (in this instance we have used a correction exercise), followed by an opportunity to put it to more communicative use, as below.

1 Complete the sentences about yourself.

think of

somewhere interesting you've been

I've _____ .

someone interesting you've met

I've _____ .

something unusual you've eaten

I've _____ .

something you've just done in your work/studies

I've just _____ .

something you'd like to do

I've always wanted _____ .

a sport you've never done

I've never _____ .

2 Work in groups of three. Use the prompts in exercise 1 to talk about yourselves. Ask and answer questions to find out more.

from **student's book unit one p.15**

3 Dealing with 'transparent' language

When we search for language that will help our learners to express themselves more effectively, we usually assume we are looking for new and unfamiliar language. But this is not always the case. With some examples of collocation and lexical phrases, learners will be familiar with the individual words and be able to make sense of the whole, but would not express themselves using these phrases unless they had been pointed out. For example, an intermediate learner might well understand that *I had a good time at the party* means *I enjoyed the party*; but it is much more likely that they would use the latter. *Have a good / great / bad / awful time* is not usually part of their productive repertoire, and it deserves to be.

The transparency of this language means that you will probably not need to devote much time to checking that it is understood. The extent to which this is the case will, of course, depend on the learners' mother tongue. Once it has been highlighted, learners need the opportunity to use it. For this reason, you will find that short practice activities are generally provided, as in this example.



natural English
talking about memories

I can remember learn -ing to swim very clearly.

I can just remember learn -ing to ride a bike .

= I can remember, but only a little

I can't remember learn -ing to tie my shoelaces at all.

Listen and complete the sentences. Practise saying them.

2 Look at the pictures. Can you remember learning to do these things? Tell a partner, using phrases in the natural English box.

from **student's book unit three p.40**

think!⁴

Look at the underlined phrases and structures.

a Which would need to be checked in terms of meaning with your intermediate learners because the meaning is not obvious or easily guessable?

b Which would your learners understand because they are transparent, but probably not use?

1 When I got there at 7.30, Richard had left.

2 I find it very difficult to speak English on the phone.

3 I spend a lot of time sitting in traffic jams.

4 I don't know very much about politics.

5 Could you give me a hand with my suitcase?

6 I was busy this afternoon – I had my hair done and then I went shopping.

go to **answer key p.149**

conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed:

- the various criteria for introducing new language successfully
- four ways of introducing new language: using visuals; using spoken and written texts to focus on language or to prompt target language; using examples in a 'guided discovery' approach; and using a diagnostic approach (test-teach-test) to find out what your learners know before introducing new language
- the importance of focusing on 'transparent' language at this level, i.e. common phrases which learners will probably understand but not use correctly.

Examples can be found throughout the student's book in the natural English boxes.

answer key

think!¹ p.143

- 1 There are shades of difference between the meanings of *fairly* and *quite*, but we feel it is simpler and clearer not to worry about the difference at this level, and accuracy is not seriously compromised.
- 2 This is truthful but we doubt it is necessary for the learners at this stage. Truthfulness here could interfere with clarity, simplicity, and understanding.
- 3 This explanation is over-simplified (*pretty* is not synonymous with *very* even though it can mean that), and it also omits the fact that *pretty* is largely used in spoken English.
- 4 There are various nuances of meaning connected with *rather*. This explanation doesn't go into detail on this, but it does a fair job, in our view, of explaining the general meaning but also with some sense of the slightly different shade of meaning it often conveys. It isn't complete, but neither is it inaccurate.

think!² p.144 possible answers

- 1 toddler; child; teenager / adolescent; adult
- 2 hot; warm; lukewarm; cool; cold
- 3 it's probably true / it's likely to be true; it could / might / may be true; it's unlikely to be true / probably isn't true

think!³ p.147 possible answers

- 1a ... every week, but I don't go very often now.
- 1b ... twice last week.
- 2a ... put the furniture back.
- 2b ... I think it'll look nice when it's finished.
- 3a ... I didn't do very well in my exams.
- 3b ... my brother was incredibly lazy.

think!⁴ p.148

- 1 (a) With very little context here, learners might think *had left* means the same as *left*. We feel this concept would certainly need checking, unless your learners have an obviously parallel structure in their language.
- 2 (b) We think many learners will understand this, but not use it. Indeed, in our data, we found they were much more likely to say *For me (it) is very difficult ...*. It's worth pointing out this more natural construction.
- 3 (b) Again, this is transparent for most learners, but many would say *I pass time ...* or avoid this construction altogether.
- 4 (b) The meaning is transparent here, but again, this is not always how intermediate learners would express the idea. In our data, learners often said *I know (a) little about ...*.
- 5 (a) In some languages, there is a similar idiom. However, it is possible with some language groups that the meaning could be unclear and would need checking.
- 6 (a) For most intermediate learners, this structure is not transparent. They are often unaware that it is a kind of passive structure suggesting a service to be paid for. Learners can confuse it with active and perfect tenses. It would certainly need checking.

glossary

timelines a diagrammatic way to illustrate tenses, using a line (see p.95)

clines a diagrammatic way to illustrate a progression from one end of a spectrum to the other (see p.95)

follow up

Thornbury S 1999 *How to Teach Grammar* Longman (worth reading in its entirety)

Carter R, Hughes R, and McCarthy M 2000 *Exploring Grammar in Context* Cambridge University Press

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Harmer J 2001 *The Practice of English Language Teaching* Part 5 Longman