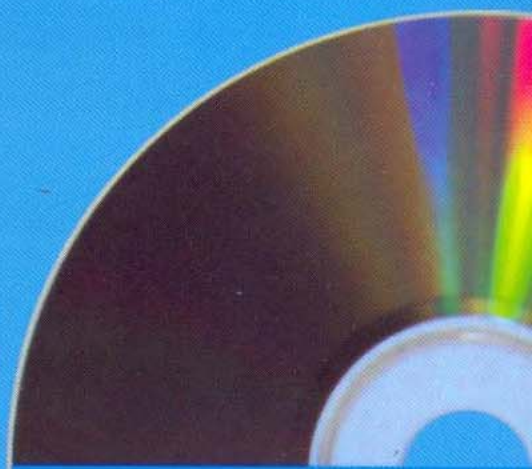
Jeremy Harmer

how to

teach english

new edition



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Jeremy Harmer has taught in Mexico and the UK, and has trained teachers around the world. As well as editing the *How to...* series of books, he is also the author of the highly acclaimed *The Practice of English Language Teaching*.

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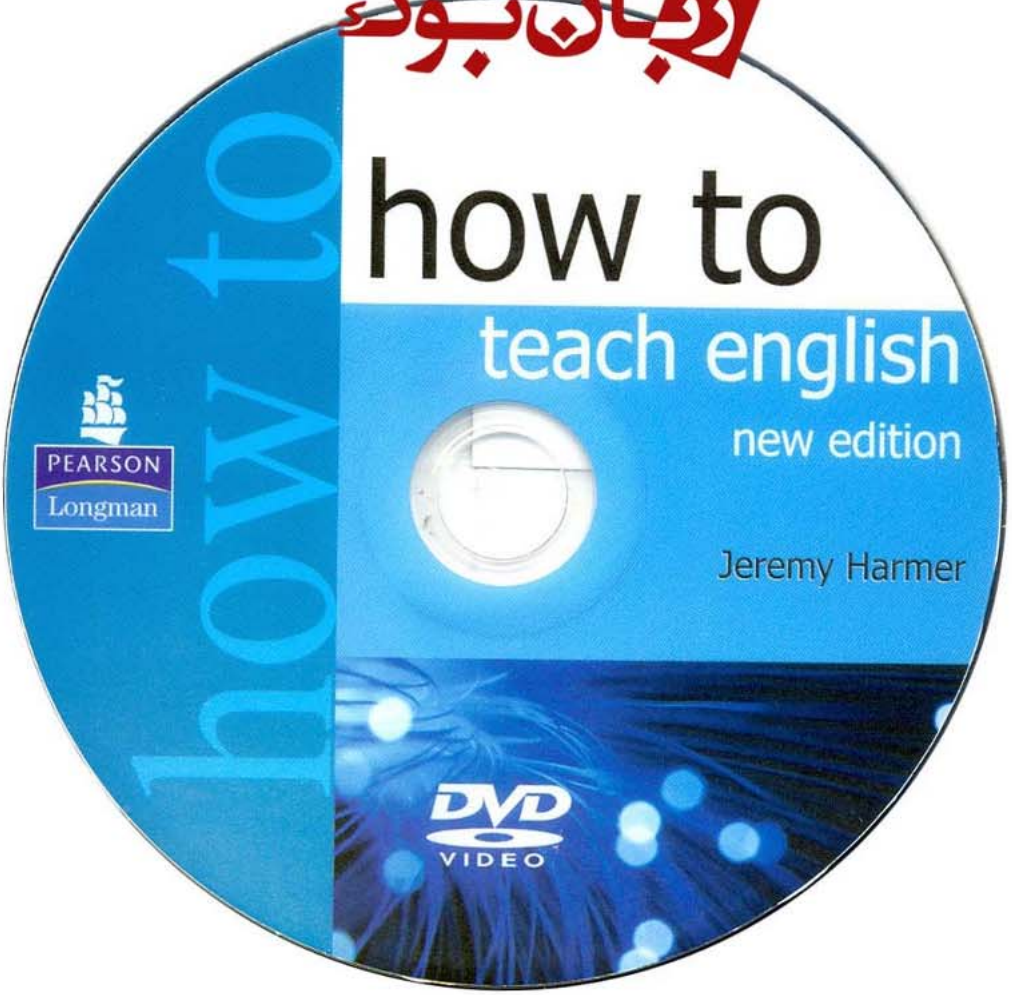

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This is for the students that readers of this book may teach.
(But most especially for Tanya and Jessy.)

Contents

Introduction

A friend of mine who is an orchestral conductor was asking me (early in our acquaintance) about what I did for a living. When I told him that, apart from other activities, I wrote books about how to teach English he said 'Books in the plural? Surely once you've written one, there's nothing more to say!' I wanted to reply that he had just argued himself out of a job (I mean, how many performances of Beethoven symphonies have there been in the twenty-first century alone?), but someone else laughed at his question, another musician made a different comment, the conversation moved on, and so Martin-the-conductor's flippant enquiry evaporated in the convivial atmosphere of a British pub.

But his question was a good one. Surely we know how to teach languages? After all, people have been doing it successfully for two thousand years or more, and some aspects of teaching in the past have probably not changed that much. But other things have, and continue to change. Which is (I suppose) why every time I re-examine past assumptions about teaching, I find myself questioning and reinterpreting things I thought were fixed. And of course, I am not alone in this. We all do it all the time – or at least we do if we haven't closed our minds off from the possibility of change and renewal.

Language teaching, perhaps more than many other activities, reflects the times it takes place in. Language is about communication, after all, and perhaps that is why philosophies and techniques for learning languages seem to develop and change in tune with the societies which give rise to them. Teaching and learning are very human activities; they are social just as much as they are (in our case) linguistic.

But it's not just society that changes and evolves. The last decades have seen what feels like unprecedented technological change. The Internet has seen to that and other educational technology has not lagged behind. New software and hardware has appeared which we could hardly have imagined possible when the first edition of *How to Teach English* was published as recently as 1998. And it's exciting stuff. There are so many wonderful possibilities open to us now (not least the ability to write and edit books electronically!). I've tried to reflect that excitement and newness in parts of this new edition. But we need to be careful, too. In the words of Baroness Greenfield, speaking in Britain's House of Lords, 'We must choose to adopt appropriate technologies that will ensure the classroom will fit the child, and buck the growing trend for technologies ... to be used to make the twenty-first-century child fit the classroom.'

But finally, there is the sheer joy – and frustration, and disbelief and (in the words of the playwright Dennis Potter) 'tender contempt' – you experience when you look again at what you wrote a few years back; the challenge is to see, in the light of what has happened, what has been said and what has been written, the things that need to be changed, excised or added to.

Readers of the first version of *How to Teach English* will notice a change of chapter order and see a new chapter to introduce the subject of testing. There are new materials and techniques on offer – and quite a few old ones too because they have stood the test of time. There's a more up-to-date set of references at the end of the book, and a glossary to

help new teachers through parts of the mighty jargon swamp that our profession generates just like any other.

And so – I want to say to my conductor friend – thank heavens for new developments, new technologies and new interpretations. They keep us alive; they make us better teachers. We shall not, of course, cease from exploration in T S Eliot's famous words, but even if we do end up back where we started, the journey is all.

1 Learners

- Reasons for learning
- Different contexts for learning
- Learner differences
- The importance of student motivation
- Responsibility for learning

Reasons for learning

All around the world, students of all ages are learning to speak English, but their reasons for wanting to study English can differ greatly. Some students, of course, only learn English because it is on the curriculum at primary or secondary level, but for others, studying the language reflects some kind of a choice.

Many people learn English because they have moved into a **target-language community** and they need to be able to operate successfully within that community. A target-language community is a place where English is the national language – e.g. Britain, Canada, New Zealand, etc – or where it is one of the main languages of culture and commerce – e.g. India, Pakistan, Nigeria.

Some students need English for a Specific Purpose (**ESP**). Such students of ESP (sometimes also called English for Special Purposes) may need to learn legal language, or the language of tourism, banking or nursing, for example. An extremely popular strand of ESP is the teaching of **business English**, where students learn about how to operate in English in the business world. Many students need English for Academic Purposes (**EAP**) in order to study at an English-speaking university or college, or because they need to access English-language academic texts.

Many people learn English because they think it will be useful in some way for international communication and travel. Such students of **general English** often do not have a particular reason for going to English classes, but simply wish to learn to speak (and read and write) the language effectively for wherever and whenever this might be useful for them.

The purposes students have for learning will have an effect on what it is they want and need to learn – and as a result will influence what they are taught. Business English students, for example, will want to spend a lot of time concentrating on the language needed for specific business transactions and situations. Students living in a target-language community will need to use English to achieve their immediate practical and social needs. A group of nurses will want to study the kind of English that they are likely to have to use while they nurse. Students of general English (including those studying the language as part of their primary and secondary education) will not have such specific needs, of course, and so their lessons (and the materials which the teachers use) will almost certainly look

different from those for students with more clearly identifiable needs.

Consideration of our students' different reasons for learning is just one of many different learner variables, as we shall see below.

Different contexts for learning

English is learnt and taught in many different contexts, and in many different class arrangements. Such differences will have a considerable effect on how and what it is we teach.

EFL, ESL and ESOL

For many years we have made a distinction between people who study English as a foreign language and those who study it as a second or other language. It has been suggested that students of **EFL** (English as a Foreign Language) tend to be learning so that they can use English when travelling or to communicate with other people, from whatever country, who also speak English. **ESL** (English as a Second Language) students, on the other hand, are usually living in the target-language community. The latter may need to learn the particular language variety of that community (Scottish English, southern English from England, Australian English, Texan English, etc) rather than a more general language variety (see page 79). They may need to combine their learning of English with knowledge of how to do things in the target-language community – such as going to a bank, renting a flat, accessing health services, etc. The English they learn, therefore, may differ from that studied by EFL students, whose needs are not so specific to a particular time and place.

However, this distinction begins to look less satisfactory when we look at the way people use English in a global context. The use of English for international communication, especially with the Internet, means that many 'EFL students' are in effect living in a global target-language community and so might be thought of as 'ESL students' instead! Partly as a result of this we now tend to use the term **ESOL** (English for Speakers of Other Languages) to describe both situations. Nevertheless, the context in which the language is learnt (what community they wish to be part of) is still of considerable relevance to the kind of English they will want and need to study, and the skills they will need to acquire.

Schools and language schools

A huge number of students learn English in primary and secondary classrooms around the world. They have not chosen to do this themselves, but learn because English is on the curriculum. Depending on the country, area and the school itself, they may have the advantage of the latest classroom equipment and information technology (**IT**), or they may, as in many parts of the world, be sitting in rows in classrooms with a blackboard and no other teaching aid.

Private language schools, on the other hand, tend to be better equipped than some government schools (though this is not always the case). They will frequently have smaller class sizes, and, crucially, the students in them may well have chosen to come and study. This will affect their motivation (see page 20) at the beginning of the process.

Large classes and one-to-one teaching

Some students prefer to have a private session with just them on their own and a teacher. This is commonly referred to as **one-to-one teaching**. At the other end of the scale, English

is taught in some environments to groups of over 100 students at a time. Government school classes in many countries have up to 30 students, whereas a typical number in a private language school lies somewhere between 8 and 15 learners.

Clearly the size of the class will affect how we teach. **Pairwork** and **groupwork** (see pages 43–44) are often used in large classes to give students more chances for interaction than they would otherwise get with whole-class teaching. In a one-to-one setting the teacher is able to tailor the lesson to an individual's specific needs, whereas with larger groups compromises have to be reached between the group and the individuals within it. In large classes the teacher may well teach from the front more often than with smaller groups, where mingling with students when they work in pairs, etc may be much more feasible and time-efficient.

In-school and in-company

The vast majority of language classes in the world take place in educational institutions such as the schools and language schools we have already mentioned, and, in addition, colleges and universities. In such situations teachers have to be aware of school policy and conform to syllabus and curriculum decisions taken by whoever is responsible for the academic running of the school. There may well be learning outcomes which students are expected to achieve, and students may be preparing for specific exams.

A number of companies also offer language classes and expect teachers to go to the company office or factory to teach. Here the 'classroom' may not be quite as appropriate as those which are specially designed for teaching and learning. But more importantly, the teacher may need to negotiate the class content, not only with the students, but also with whoever is paying for the tuition.

Real and virtual learning environments

Language learning has traditionally involved a teacher and a student or students being in the same physical space. However, the development of high-speed Internet access has helped to bring about new virtual learning environments in which students can learn even when they are literally thousands of miles away (and in a different time zone) from a teacher or other classmates.

Some of the issues for both real and **virtual learning** environments are the same. Students still need to be motivated (see page 20) and we still need to offer help in that area. As a result, the best virtual learning sites have online tutors who interact with their students via email or online chat forums. It is also possible to create groups of students who are all following the same online program – and who can therefore 'talk' to each other in the same way (i.e. electronically). But despite these interpersonal elements, some students find it more difficult to sustain their motivation online than they might as part of a real learning group.

Virtual learning is significantly different from face-to-face classes for a number of reasons. Firstly, students can attend lessons when *they* want for the most part (though real-time chat forums have to be scheduled), rather than when lessons are timetabled (as in schools). Secondly, it no longer matters where the students are since they can log on from any location in the world.

Online learning may have these advantages, but some of the benefits of real learning environments are less easy to replicate electronically. These include the physical reality of

having teachers and students around you when you are learning so that you can see their expressions and get messages from their gestures, tone of voice, etc. Many learners will prefer the presence of real people to the sight of a screen, with or without pictures and video. Some communication software (such as MSN Messenger and Skype) allows users to see each other on the screen as they communicate, but this is still less attractive – and considerably more jerky – than being face to face with the teacher and fellow students. Of course, whereas in real learning environments learning can take place with very little technical equipment, virtual learning relies on good hardware and software, and effective and reliable Internet connections.

Although this book will certainly look at uses of the Internet and other IT applications, it is not primarily concerned with the virtual learning environment, preferring instead to concentrate on situations where the teachers and learners are usually in the same place, at the same time.

Learner differences

Whatever their reasons for learning (or the circumstances in which it takes place), it is sometimes tempting to see all students as being more or less the same. Yet there are marked differences, not only in terms of their age and level, but also in terms of different individual abilities, knowledge and preferences. We will examine some of these differences in this section.

Age

Learners are often described as children, young learners, adolescents, young adults or adults. Within education, the term *children* is generally used for learners between the ages of about 2 to about 14. Students are generally described as *young learners* between the ages of about 5 to 9, and *very young learners* are usually between 2 and 5. At what ages it is safe to call students *adolescents* is often uncertain, since the onset of adolescence is bound up with physical and emotional changes rather than chronological age. However, this term tends to refer to students from the ages of about 12 to 17, whereas *young adults* are generally thought to be between 16 and 20.

We will look at three ages: children, adolescents and adults. However, we need to remember that there is a large degree of individual variation in the ways in which different children develop. The descriptions that follow, therefore, must be seen as generalisations only.

Children

We know that children don't just focus on what is being taught, but also learn all sorts of other things at the same time, taking information from whatever is going on around them. We know that seeing, hearing and touching are just as important for understanding as the teacher's explanation. We are conscious, too, that the abstraction of, say, grammar rules, will be less effective the younger the students are. But we also know that children respond well to individual attention from the teacher and are usually pleased to receive teacher approval.

Children usually respond well to activities that focus on their lives and experiences. But a child's attention span – their willingness to stay rooted in one activity – is often fairly short.

A crucial characteristic of young children is their ability to become competent speakers of a new language with remarkable facility, provided they get enough exposure to it. They forget languages, it seems, with equal ease. This language-acquiring ability is steadily compromised as they head towards adolescence.

Adolescents

One of the greatest differences between adolescents and young children is that these older children have developed a greater capacity for abstract thought as they have grown up. In other words, their intellects are kicking in, and they can talk about more abstract ideas, teasing out concepts in a way that younger children find difficult. Many adolescents readily understand and accept the need for learning of a more intellectual type.

At their best, adolescent students have a great capacity for learning, enormous potential for creative thought and a passionate commitment to things which interest them.

Adolescence is bound up with a search for identity and a need for self-esteem. This is often the result of the students' position within their peer group rather than being the consequence of teacher approval.

Adults

Older learners often (but not always) have a wider range of life experiences to draw on, both as individuals and as learners, than younger students do. They are often more disciplined than adolescents and apply themselves to the task of learning even when it seems fairly boring. They often have a clear understanding of why they are learning things, and can sustain their motivation (see pages 20–21) by perceiving (and holding on to) long-term learning goals.

On the other hand, adult learners come with a lot of previous learning experience which may hamper their progress. Students who have had negative learning experiences in the past may be nervous of new learning. Students used to failure may be consciously or subconsciously prepared for more failure. Older students who have got out of the habit of study may find classrooms daunting places. They may also have strong views about teaching methods from their past, which the teacher will have to take into account.

Because students at different ages have different characteristics, the way we teach them will differ too. With younger children we may offer a greater variety of games, songs and puzzles than we would do with older students. We may want to ensure that there are more frequent changes of activity. With a group of adolescents we will try to keep in mind the importance of a student's place within his or her peer group and take special care when correcting or assigning roles within an activity, etc. Our choice of topics will reflect their emerging interests.

One of the recurring nightmares for teachers of adolescents, in particular, is that we might lose control of the class. We worry about lessons that slip away from us, and which we can't manage because the students don't like the subject, each other, the teacher or the school – or sometimes just because they feel like misbehaving, or because issues in their life outside the classroom are affecting their behaviour and outlook on life. Yet teenagers are not the only students who sometimes exhibit problem behaviour (that is behaviour which causes a problem for the teacher, the student him- or herself, and, perhaps, the others in the classroom). Younger children can, of course, cause difficulties for the teacher and class, too. Adults can also be disruptive and exhausting. They may not do it in the same way

2 Teachers

- **Describing good teachers**
- **Who teachers are in class**
- **Rapport**
- **Teacher tasks**
- **Teacher skills**
- **Teacher knowledge**
- **Art or science?**

Describing good teachers

Most people can look back at their own schooldays and identify teachers they thought were good. But generally they find it quite hard to say *why* certain teachers struck them as special. Perhaps it was because of their personality. Possibly it was because they had interesting things to say. Maybe the reason was that they looked as if they loved their job, or perhaps their interest in their students' progress was compelling. Sometimes, it seems, it was just because the teacher was a fascinating person!

One of the reasons that it is difficult to give general descriptions of good teachers is that different teachers are often successful in different ways. Some teachers are more extrovert or introvert than others, for example, and different teachers have different strengths and weaknesses. A lot will depend, too, on how students view individual teachers and here again, not all students will share the same opinions.

It is often said that 'good teachers are born, not made' and it does seem that some people have a natural affinity for the job. But there are also others, perhaps, who do not have what appears to be a natural gift but who are still effective and popular teachers. Such teachers learn their craft through a mixture of personality, intelligence, knowledge and experience (and how they reflect on it). And even some of the teachers who are apparently 'born teachers' weren't like that at the beginning at all, but grew into the role as they learnt their craft.

Teaching is not an easy job, but it is a necessary one, and can be very rewarding when we see our students' progress and know that we have helped to make it happen. It is true that some lessons and students can be difficult and stressful at times, but it is also worth remembering that at its best teaching can also be extremely enjoyable.

In this chapter we will look at what is necessary for effective teaching and how that can help to provoke success – so that for both students and teachers learning English can be rewarding and enjoyable.

Who teachers are in class

When we walk into a lesson, students get an idea of who we are as a result of what we look like (how we dress, how we present ourselves) and the way we behave and react to what is

going on. They take note, either consciously or subconsciously, of whether we are always the same or whether we can be flexible, depending on what is happening at a particular point in the lesson.

As we have said, teachers, like any other group of human beings, have individual differences. However, one of the things, perhaps, that differentiates us from some other professions, is that we become different people, in a way, when we are in front of a class from the people we are in other situations, such as at home or at a party. Everyone switches roles like this in their daily lives to some extent, but for teachers, who we are (or appear to be) when we are at work is especially important.

Personality

Some years ago, in preparation for a presentation to colleagues, I recorded interviews with a large number of teachers and students. I asked them 'What makes a good teacher?' and was interested in what their instant responses would be. A number of the people I questioned answered by talking about the teacher's character. As one of them told me, 'I like the teacher who has his own personality and doesn't hide it from the students so he is not only a teacher but a person as well – and it comes through in the lesson.'

Discussing teacher personality is difficult for two reasons: in the first place there is no one ideal teacher personality. Some teachers are effective because they are 'larger than life', while others persuade through their quiet authority. But the other problem – as the respondent seemed to be saying to me in the comment above – is that students want not only to see a professional who has come to teach them, but also to glimpse the 'person as well'.

Effective teacher personality is a blend between who we really are, and who we are as teachers. In other words, teaching is much more than just 'being ourselves', however much some students want to see the real person. We have to be able to present a professional face to the students which they find both interesting and effective. When we walk into the classroom, we want them to see someone who looks like a teacher whatever else they look like. This does not mean conforming to some kind of teacher stereotype, but rather finding, each in our own way, a persona that we adopt when we cross the threshold. We need to ask ourselves what kind of personality we want our students to encounter, and the decisions we take before and during lessons should help to demonstrate that personality. This is not to suggest that we are in any way dishonest about who we are – teaching is not acting, after all – but we do need to think carefully about how we appear. One 12-year-old interviewee I talked to (see above) answered my question by saying that 'the teacher needs to have dress sense – not always the same old boring suits and ties!' However flippant this comment seems to be, it reminds us that the way we present ourselves to our students matters, whether this involves our real clothes (as in the student's comments) or the personality we 'put on' in our lessons.

Adaptability

What often marks one teacher out from another is how they react to different events in the classroom as the lesson proceeds. This is important, because however well we have prepared, the chances are that things will not go exactly to plan. Unexpected events happen in lessons and part of a teacher's skill is to decide what the response should be when they do. We will discuss such **magic moments** and unforeseen problems on page 157.

3 Managing the classroom

- **Classroom management**
- **The teacher in the classroom**
- **Using the voice**
- **Talking to students**
- **Giving instructions**
- **Student talk and teacher talk**
- **Using the L1**
- **Creating lesson stages**
- **Different seating arrangements**
- **Different student groupings**

Classroom management

If we want to manage classrooms effectively, we have to be able to handle a range of variables. These include how the classroom space is organised, whether the students are working on their own or in groups and how we organise classroom time. We also need to consider how we appear to the students, and how we use our most valuable asset – our voice. The way we talk to students – and who talks most in the lesson – is another key factor in classroom management. We also need to think about what role, if any, there may be for the use of the students' **mother tongue** in lessons. Successful classroom management also involves being able to deal with difficult situations – an issue we will discuss on pages 180–182.

The teacher in the classroom

Our physical presence can play a large part in our management of the classroom environment. And it's not just appearance either (though that was clearly an issue for the secondary student in Chapter 2 – page 24). The way we move and stand, and the degree to which we are physically demonstrative can have a clear effect on the management of the class. Most importantly, the way we are able to respond to what happens in class, the degree to which we are aware of what is going on, often marks the difference between successful teaching and less satisfactory lessons.

All teachers, like all people, have their own physical characteristics and habits, and they will take these into the classroom with them. But there are a number of issues to consider which are not just matters of personality or style and which have a direct bearing on the students' perception of us.

Proximity

Teachers need to consider how close they should be to the students they are working with. Some students are uncomfortable if their teacher stands or sits close to them. For some,

on the other hand, distance is a sign of coldness. Teachers should be conscious of how close they are to their students, should take this into account when assessing their students' reactions and should, if necessary, modify their behaviour.

Appropriacy

Deciding how close to the students you should be when you work with them is a matter of appropriacy. So is the general way in which teachers sit or stand in classrooms. Many teachers create an extremely friendly atmosphere by crouching down when they work with students in pairs. In this way, they are at the same level as their seated students. However, some students find this informality worrying. Some teachers are even happy to sit on the floor, and in certain situations this may be appropriate. But in others it may well lead to a situation where students are put off concentrating.

All the positions teachers take – sitting on the edge of tables, standing behind a lectern, standing on a raised dais, etc – make strong statements about the kind of person the teacher is. It is important, therefore, to consider what kind of effect such physical behaviour has so that we can behave in a way which is appropriate to the students we are teaching and the relationship we wish to create with them. If we want to manage a class effectively, such a relationship is crucial.

Movement

Some teachers tend to spend most of their class time in one place – at the front of the class, for example, or to the side, or in the middle. Others spend a great deal of time walking from side to side, or striding up and down the aisles between the chairs. Although this, again, is to some extent a matter of personal preference, it is worth remembering that motionless teachers can bore students, while teachers who are constantly in motion can turn their students into tennis spectators, their heads moving from side to side until they become exhausted.

Most successful teachers move around the classroom to some extent. That way they can retain their students' interest (if they are leading an activity) or work more closely with smaller groups (when they go to help a pair or group).

How much we move around in the classroom will depend on our personal style, where we feel most comfortable for the management of the class and whether or not we want to work with smaller groups.

Awareness

In order to manage a class successfully, the teacher has to be aware of what students are doing and, where possible, how they are feeling. This means watching and listening just as carefully as teaching. This will be difficult if we keep too much distance or if we are perceived by the students to be cold and aloof because then we will find it difficult to establish the kind of rapport we mentioned in Chapter 2.

Awareness means assessing what students have said and responding appropriately. According to the writer Michael Lewis, a colleague of his, Peter Wilberg, put this perfectly when he said that 'the teacher's primary responsibility is response-ability'! This means being able to perceive the success or failure of what is taking place in the classroom, and being flexible enough (see page 157) to respond to what is going on. We need to be as conscious as possible of what is going on in the students' heads.