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## Introduction to English learning and teaching

### Motto

Tell me and I forget.  
Teach me and I remember.  
Involve me and I learn.

*Benjamin Franklin*

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## 1. Some introductory thoughts on language learning and teaching in general

When thinking about language learning and teaching, most of us probably have a number of experiences and several preconceptions to draw upon. Learning foreign languages is a very complex issue, and if we want to examine it thoroughly, we need to take a look at it from several different angles. To be more precise, we need to know how the various fields of linguistics contribute to our understanding of foreign language learning and teaching.

**Descriptive linguistics** provides us with the description of a language, at a given point in time, regarding its phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. This field of linguistics provides us with an objective description of how a language is used in a speech community.

**Applied linguistics**, which is an interdisciplinary field in itself, has several major subfields. Two such relevant subfields are **second language acquisition (SLA)** and **third language acquisition (TLA)**. These branches of linguistics provide us with insight regarding the processes that go on in the language learner's mind.

The conclusions drawn by the study of **language pedagogy and the methodology of foreign language teaching** are vitally important, so that we are aware of the multitude of the theories, methodologies and practices of foreign language teaching.



### Thinking task

People have a great variety of reasons for learning foreign languages.

- 1) Please think of the reasons why you have engaged in learning a foreign language/foreign languages? What was the situation? What was your motivation? What were the learning circumstances? What was your goal?
- 2) Please think of possible scenarios why people learn languages.
- 3) Why would you like to be a teacher?
- 4) Why have you chosen to become an English teacher?
- 5) Have you had any teachers who had a great influence on you in any way (positive/negative, career choice, your relationship to the subject taught by that teacher,

## 2. The English language

When thinking about learning English as a foreign language, we need to understand the special role English plays in global communication.



### Introductory questions

The world's population is about 7 billion. Please estimate how many people speak it

- as their mother tongue (L1)?
- as an L2?
- as an L3/L4, etc.?



### Key

These questions are very difficult to answer. There are only estimates that there are around 300 million people native speakers of English, more than 500 million people speaking it as a second language, and further hundreds of millions speaking it as a further foreign language.



### Extra info

Latest (2018) data on English speaking countries:

- 1) Click on the link below for a map of countries where English is a majority native language and where it is an official but not majority native language.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_language#/media/File:Anglospeak.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language#/media/File:Anglospeak.svg) (free content)
- 2) Click on the link below for a map displaying the countries with the highest number of English speakers.  
<http://www.mapsofworld.com/world-top-ten/countries-with-most-english-language-speaker-map.html>

### 3. What is there to learn?



#### Thinking task

- 1) Imagine that you meet someone who has never learnt English before. Your task is to teach the person how to get to know another person in English. How would you start? What would you teach first? What would the next step?
- 2) In general, what do we teach, when we teach “English”?

Thinking about the questions above has probably made you realize that learning (and teaching) a foreign language is a very complex issue. There are a lot of things that language learners need to know in order to master a foreign language. Canale and Swain’s (1980) communicative competence model provides us with detailed answers regarding what there is for learners to learn and what there is for teachers to teach. According to this model, there are different types of knowledge and skill are involved in language learning and there are three levels of analysis:

- 3.1 Grammatical (systemic)
- 3.2 Sociolinguistic
- 3.3 Strategic

#### 3.1

The **grammatical (systemic) competence** covers all the knowledge and skill related to the way the language works as a system. This again can be subcategorized into many different levels, such as

- 3.1.1 pronunciation (phonetics and phonology)
- 3.1.2 grammar (morphology and syntax)
- 3.1.3 word meaning (semantics)
- 3.1.4 handwriting, spelling, punctuation

#### 3.1.1

When we speak about **pronunciation**, we usually mean two linguistic subfields: phonetics and phonology. Please read the definitions carefully:

*Phonetics*: the study of sound in speech; how speech is physically created and received (e.g. human vocal and auditory tracts).

*Phonology*: the study (and use) of sound patterns to create meaning, how sounds are organised in individual languages.

Click on the link below to see the letters of the English alphabet:

<http://digitalcampus.free.fr/Level1/Unit11/SubUnit111/AlphabetPronuncTable01.htm>

Click on the link below for an interactive phonemic chart of the English sounds:

[http://www.onestopenglish.com/Journals/2010/11/25/-ose\\_phonemicchart.swf](http://www.onestopenglish.com/Journals/2010/11/25/-ose_phonemicchart.swf)

If you click on the individual phonetic symbols, you will hear the pronunciation of each sound. If you move your cursor downwards, you will hear a sample word containing that particular sound.



### Checking questions

Having looked at the alphabet and the phonemic chart, please open the file **Letters and sounds** in the attached folder and answer the questions.



### Extra info

Click here for the link of Gerard Nolst Trenité's poem, The Chaos Of English Pronunciation.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1edPxKqiptw>

The poem is an excellent illustration of some of the anomalies of the English pronunciation.

- 1) Listen to and read the poem.
- 2) Look up the unknown words in a dictionary to expand your vocabulary.
- 3) Try and read out the poem yourself.



### Some fun facts

The most common letter in English is "e".

The most common vowel in English is "e", followed by "a".

The most common consonant in English is "r", followed by "t".

Only two English words in current use end in "-gry". They are "angry" and "hungry".

### 3.1.2

When we speak about **grammar**, we usually mean two linguistic subfields: morphology and syntax. Please read the definitions carefully:

*Morphology*: study of the internal structures of words. A *morpheme* is the smallest meaningful unit in the language.

*Syntax*: study concerned with the ways in which words are put together in sentences, basically the grammatical rules of the language.



### Practice

- 1) Open the **morphemes** file in the attached folder and count the number of morphemes.
- 2) Open the **typical errors** file in the attached folder, where you can see six sentences containing typical errors in English. Find the corrections.

### 3.1.3

#### Vocabulary

When discussing morphology, we have seen how words are 'built'. There are also some other skills, connected to words, such as knowing the lexical field of words or using collocations.

### 3.2

#### Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence can be divided into two categories:

3.2.1 Sociocultural rules of use

3.2.2 Rules of discourse

### 3.2.1 Sociocultural rules of use



#### Thinking task

Think about how you would communicate in the following situations:

1. How do you introduce yourself when you meet someone?
2. How do you greet someone?
3. In a railway carriage how do you ask if you can open the window?
4. How do you ask for the time?

What influences how you express yourself?

When thinking about the task above, you have probably realized that it is not enough to know the words and the grammar of the language, but you also need to consider several other factors, e. g. the setting or the participants. Also, it is important to note that the sociocultural rules of use may vary from language to language, therefore they need to be learnt.

In the examples below, you can see how speakers may keep to the rules of grammar, but still behave strangely. In the case of each example, think carefully of what causes the ‘strangeness’ of the situation.

#### Example 1 (Canale and Swain 1980:30)



Waiter in a restaurant talking to two guests:  
‘OK chump, what are you and this broad gonna eat?’

**Example 2** (Garfinkel 1967:44)



A: How are you?

B: How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my...

A: (Red in the face and suddenly furious) Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are.

**Example 3** (Johnson 2008:29)



A: Excuse me, do you have a watch?

B: Yes, I do, thanks.

**Example 4**



Teacher in the classroom addressing one of the students: Would you like to read it?

Student: No.



**Key**

**Example 1:** The waiter offends against the rule of use, that is he breaks the rule which regulates how it is appropriate to address customers in a restaurant.

**Example 2:** Speaker B fails to realise that A has asked a greeting question, rather than requested specific information.

**Example 3:** Speaker A's intention was to ask what the time is, speaker B fails to realise this.

**Example 4:** The teacher's question was a polite request, therefore the student should not have answered at all, but should have started reading.

In sum, we can say that grammatical correctness is not enough for successful communication. If we do not observe the rules of use, we might fail to understand the speaker's intention or behave inappropriately in certain situations.

### 3.2.1 Rules of discourse

**Discourse** is the way that pieces of speech or writing are joined together to form stretches, the rules of discourse are therefore rules for joining parts together.

#### Thinking task

In the following two examples, the rules of discourse are violated. The two examples demonstrate two different kinds of discourse mistakes. What are they?

#### Example 1 (Johnson 2008:32)

John saw a man in the park. The man's name was Jack. The man was wearing a coat.  
The man had a hat on. The man was carrying a stick.

#### Example 2 (Johnson 2008:32)

A: Excuse me, can you tell me the time?

B: The clouds in the East are gathering, and war may ensue.



#### Key

**Example 1:** It is odd how the sentences are joined together. Try and correct the text to make it more cohesive.

**Example 2:** Speaker B does not answer the question.

Again, note that all the utterances are correct grammatically, nonetheless the rules of discourse are not kept. Also, it is possible for sentences to be seemingly unconnected on the surface, and still be coherent.

#### Example 3 (Widdowson 1978:29)

A: There's the doorbell.

B: I'm in the bath.

### 3.3 Strategic competence

Canale and Swain's third area of competence is the strategic competence. There are many communication strategies, some of the most common ones are:

- paraphrase
- word coinage in the target language
- 'foreign first' thinking, that is borrowing structures and expressions from another foreign language we know
- using the native language
- miming, etc.



### Thinking task

- 1) What do you do if you can't remember/don't know a word that you would like to use?
- 2) Do you think strategic competence can/should be taught? Or will develop by itself?
- 3) Can foreign stay improve it? In what aspects?



### Summary

By studying the present material you have learnt

- what area(s) of science language learning belongs to
- where and how many people speak English
- the set of knowledges, skills and competences that a language learner needs to learn.



### Test your knowledge

Test your knowledge on the main terminology of the present unit by opening the file **test** in the attached folder.



### Tricky question

Why do you think there are only estimates about the number of people speaking English?



### Key

There are no firm statistics, because the following questions are impossible to answer:

- what do we mean by 'speaking English'?
- how much English?
- to what level?
- etc.

## References

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