

From Module 1 Unit 4

Elicitation

For better or worse, English has become so widespread that most city dwellers in most parts of the world have probably come into contact with it at some point in their lives. It would, therefore, be difficult to speak of a true 'English beginner'. You can almost guarantee that even in a class of so-called beginners there will be at least one student, probably more, with a smattering of English and possibly a little knowledge of the grammar. If we extend this idea, it is also likely that in a Pre-intermediate class one or more of the students will have had some exposure to a grammar point that you happen to be presenting; maybe the *second conditional* or the *Past Perfect*. It follows, therefore, that you may be able to use this knowledge to your and the learners' advantage. So, instead of slowly explaining the meaning and use of the language item, you may be able to **elicit** this information from the learners themselves. The technique of elicitation involves drawing out of the learners those pieces of covert knowledge we mentioned above. This has a number of advantages over explanation.

- The learners are actively involved in the lesson immediately and this has a motivating, almost competitive, effect.
- They now have a direct influence over the pace of the lesson. The speed at which the knowledge is fed to the teacher determines how the lesson develops. You should be prepared to adjust your plans slightly to accommodate this eventuality.
- It gives the teacher a chance to discover where the weaknesses of the learners lie and then to take effective action to correct any problems immediately, rather than having to wait until the end of the lesson.
- It does away with the need for often unwieldy, confusing teacher explanations. This enables the teacher to relax and enjoy the lesson more.
- Elicitation can cover not only grammar items, but ideas, opinions, feelings, situations, contexts and words/phrases among other things.

- The amount of teacher talk time (**TTT**) is reduced to a basic minimum, while offering more opportunities for the learners to speak. This is always a major objective for *all* teachers in *all* lessons.
- The rest of the lesson will build on an already secure foundation that the teacher has been able to check to an unusually accurate degree.
- The lesson is likely to be much more memorable for the learners, leading to more successful learning and an increase in confidence.

So, how do we carry out elicitation? There are three basic stages:

1. The teacher sets up a situation, topic or idea by using pictures, board drawings, mime or a very short explanation.
2. The teacher encourages the learners to provide the sought-after vocabulary, tense, opinions, information or whatever, showing rejection or acceptance through gestures.
3. The teacher writes up the elicited information on to the board as necessary and this can then be used in the next stage of the lesson e.g. pronunciation work, concept questions, selecting an idea/topic for a debate.

Perhaps an example will help to clarify the procedure. The teacher wants to elicit a short story from the class to illustrate the Past Simple tense. After showing or drawing the picture of a man and eliciting a name for him, the teacher draws a house with an arrow pointing to it and writes 10 p.m. next to it, then gestures to the class for offers of possible sentences. Someone suggests *Mr. Smith gets home at 10 o'clock* – at this point the teacher gestures over her shoulder with her thumb or writes up the previous day's date to elicit the past tense. A student offers *he got home at 10 o'clock*, which is what the teacher required, so she accepts this (*thank you! good!*) writes it to the board and continues with the rest of the story until the end. The resulting story can then be used as a model for the learners to produce something similar or as a preamble for a listening task.

Notice that throughout this procedure the teacher has spoken very little, while the learners have been drawn into the lesson by being given the opportunity to contribute their opinions, knowledge and ideas. This is much more likely to have a positive effect both on the class atmosphere and on the learning process, so it would be a good idea to use this technique whenever appropriate. Don't, however, expect your learners to offer you information that they clearly do not have; if it looks as if you are not getting anywhere with elicitation, stop and try something else.

Elicitation can also be used to develop a topic or situation.

- When you are teaching words and phrases to the class prior to a reading or listening exercise, you can elicit from the learners what they feel the subject of the reading passage or conversation is likely to be. This sets up a sense of expectation in the learners giving them a stronger motivation for reading or listening.
- One common technique used in the classroom is **brainstorming**. The teacher writes up the name of a topic or situation on the board and asks the learners for suggestions associated with it.
- When using a video, the teacher can show the opening scenes or describe a setting and then ask the learners what the characters might say or what might happen. Pictures can be used in the same way.

Discovery learning

Up to this point all of the techniques have involved a good deal of teacher participation, if not direction and control. There are, however, other alternative ways of dealing with the presentation or initial stage of a lesson. Completely teacher-controlled presentations are at one end of a learning continuum; at the other lies totally independent learning, perhaps best characterised by someone going to live in a foreign country and learning the language not by attending formal lessons, but by picking it up in the course of daily life. Between these two extremes is a guided approach to learning where the teacher provides the language input or information and the learners are then left to discover the

grammatical workings for themselves. Every activity, task and event in the classroom falls somewhere along this continuum, each one more towards one end than the other.

The teacher's job here is to provide a balance of different learning opportunities to appeal to the range of learner types in the class. You may recall from unit 1 the discussion on deductive and inductive learner types; to refresh your memory here are the most relevant sections again:

A deductive thinker draws out specific facts from a general principle which has been given by the teacher. For example, the teacher stands at the front of the class and explains how to form a particular verb tense and what it means. The students then try out this new knowledge on a set of sample sentences in an exercise. An inductive thinker, by contrast, develops a rule or general principle by looking at a set of examples illustrating that rule or principle. In this case, the learner might be given a text featuring instances of the new grammatical item and then be asked to state the rule which is at work.

Although the guided approach to presentations will obviously be favoured by the inductive learner, there are benefits for the full range of learner types. It engages the learners' attention from the outset, stimulates motivation as the learners are doing real work and it also has the effect of encouraging autonomy in the learners, freeing them from dependence on the teacher.

The teacher must, however, be careful not to feel she can simply step back and let the learners go. She has to provide them with good quality comprehensible language input and then create the right conditions to allow the new information to be learned. This can be a demanding job requiring imagination and preparation, but the results in terms of class rapport and learning success are invariably worth the effort. The elicitation example given in the previous section is an instance of guided discovery, but discovery learning is not restricted only to the initial stage of the lesson; it can be used at any point to replace a teacher explanation.

Task 9 *

Look at the situations below and decide whether they represent teacher-controlled or student-controlled learning. Put them in order, beginning with the most teacher-controlled activity to the least controlled.

1. The teacher hands out a short story in the past tense and a list of five sentences all containing verbs in the Past Continuous (e.g. we were walking...) which have been taken out of the story. She then tells the students to put the sentences back in the correct places and to explain the difference between the Past Continuous and the Past Simple.
2. The teacher tells the students in detail how to form questions in the Present Simple (does he work..., do they know...).
3. The teacher gives the students a context. The students then offer ideas to build up a dialogue on the board. The teacher rejects sentences which do not contain the correct examples of the target language, but accepts all 'correct' sentences. She asks the students to decide in pairs how to form the new grammar and to guess its meaning.
4. The teacher writes up a dialogue on the board containing examples of the new grammar item, say a particular tense. She then rubs out several of the words and has a pair of students acting out the dialogue. She rubs out more words and asks another pair to read the dialogue. The process is repeated until the dialogue is reduced to almost nothing. The students then build the dialogue back up again. The teacher asks the students to write a similar dialogue in pairs.

5. A student asks his teacher about the uses of *the* and *a*. The teacher directs the student to the reference and grammar books in the school library.

6. The teacher tells the class a short anecdote. She asks the students to repeat what they can remember. The teacher takes the sentences that illustrate the grammar point and writes them on the board. She then explains the meaning of the grammar.

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