Reviews
Compte rendus

Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL

Jill Bell
Dominie Press, 1988

If you have a friend currently teaching a multilevel class who has a birthday coming up—or even if s/he hasn't—do them a favour and buy them a copy of *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL.*

I have a saying that while teacher aides know HOW, teachers know WHY and HOW. Jill Bell's book is for experienced teachers and teachers-in-training. It presupposes that the reader has some theoretical knowledge and is interested in gaining more; but its strength lies in the application of that knowledge to the classroom in ways that will maximize learning and minimize frustration. Another major strength is that Jill Bell has been there—she writes from first hand experience of the multilevel classroom.

Bell empathizes with the teacher who feels a bit dispondent over what seem like insurmountable problems: "Many teachers feel guilt at what they perceive as their failure when students do not learn, and yet they may have been asked to cope with situations where the problems of a multilevel class are combined with those of large numbers, poor conditions, lack of equipment, inadequate preparation time, or imposed, unsuitable evaluation procedures" (p. viii). While the book cannot remove all the obstacles to a good learning situation, it does make some excellent suggestions as to how to overcome some of them.

Bell begins in Chapter 1 by pointing out that students in a multilevel class are separated by more than just their level of control of the English language. Teachers must consider the students' previous experience with education, their country and culture of origin, their individual differences such as age, intelligence and motivation, and their particular learning situations. The rest of the book tells the reader how to cope with these varied and important differences. It lays out the problems teachers may face and provides interesting and challenging activities.

Chapter 2 provides some guidelines for planning the syllabus and curriculum—and what a delight to have these two terms clearly defined! The next chapter gets into assessment and evaluation—some theory first, then some useful questions, charts, and checklists. From there the book goes into classroom management outlining the tricks of the trade that help

teachers manage heterogeneous classes. For example, Bell offers a slick, quick way of getting students into either equal-ability or cross-ability groups with a minimum of fuss. The three chapters which follow are full of workable activities for the whole class (allowing, of course, for individual differences), for groups, and for pairs. These activities cover listening, speaking, reading and writing. Chapter 7 is entitled "Individual Self-Access Material"; it deals with materials and activities that allow students to learn in their own way at their own pace. The final chapter provides a sample lesson sequence combined with a commentary by Bell on what might happen during the lesson and what to do about it if it does!

A few cartoons add a touch of humour—I liked the one depicting "Cross ability pairs" where "ability" is linked to "pairs" rather than "cross"! An annotated list of useful resources completes the book.

What, no criticisms? No, the book does what it sets out to do—"to provide a practical guide for teachers facing mixed-level classes" and it does it with sensitivity and understanding.

Mary Ashworth

THE REVIEWER

Mary Ashworth is Professor Emerita, University of British Columbia. After spending the past twenty years training ESL/EFL teachers and writing about immigrant children, she is now enjoying retirement on Salt Spring Island, B.C. mixing writing with gardening.

Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities

Paul Davis and Mario Rinvolucri
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988
(Originally published in pilot form by Pilgrims Publications, Canterbury, England. This edition has been reorganized and revised).

Once again the British have given us somethign to think about, in this case, exactly what the title suggests: new methods and possibilities for using dictation in the classroom. Unlike the many books which purport to breathe new life into old approaches, but don't, this one succeeds. The authors attempt to move readers' traditional teacher-centred perception of dictation (teacher says, students write, teacher corrects, students fix) towards a more student-centred approach. So, they have chosen activities which give students control and engage them actively.

Designed for teachers with all levels of experience, the exercises constitute a practical set of familiar classroom activities, imaginatively reworked. The book is not intended for use with any particular student group. Most exercises seem appropriate for both teenagers and adults in general or "functional" English classes, but one could easily adapt them for special purpose groups, such as academic or professional preparation classes.

Dictation seems to be one of those time-worn activities, the use of which goes through periods of popularity and disrepute, like cloze, maybe. They assert, probably accurately, that we have tended to use dictation as an end, rather than as a means to an end. This may be why some of us feel guilty when we use dictation; we like it, and proclaim confidently that our students like it too, but we're not exactly sure what it's doing for them. Davis and Rinvolucri not only tell us, they redefine the technique, providing the activities as concrete examples of how it can work in the classroom.

Let's look at what the book has to offer. First, in the introduction, the authors establish their framework by expanding the notion of what dictation involves, and what its benefits are. The 67 activities are then compiled into 11 units, each with a focus such as vocabulary, spatial order, or using the students own text. Though we may recognize many activities, the authors have often added new elements, making them more interactive, challenging or simply more fun. Thus, dictation becomes a vehicle for integrated language skill development in communicative situations.

Each unit begins with an introduction, noting its focus and special features. The exercises are well-explained, though a few of the more complex tasks require a second reading. New teachers will appreciate the illustrations as well as the skill level notations for each activity; more experienced teachers will easily adapt the exercises for different levels. Noteworthy is

permission to reprint some of the course material. On the assumption that most teachers have some experience with traditional dictation techniques, I have taken a look at what's different here, briefly sketching some of the more creative activities.

Correction techniques are included with many activities, but in unit 1, *Correction,* this topic receives particular attention. Correction should be treated as a student-monitoring, revising process. For example, in 'Speed Control', students direct the teacher's pauses and repetitions. Gattegno's Silent Way grammar chart techniques is the basis for another activity where beginning students work together to construct sentences from their own dictated words. Thus, correction becomes part of the activity, rather than the more traditional after the fact, right or wrong approach.

Units 2 to 4 contain some traditional activities, but many are enlivened with a special focus or additional task. For example, unit 2, *Sounds, Spelling and Punctuation* includes a section called *Program Punctuation,* for groups with access to computers, where students dictate a short BASIC programme to the partners at the keyboard. Vocabulary development is the goal of unit 4, *Single Word Dictations.* Students in technical fields will enjoy *Collocations,* in which the teacher dictates a list of related adjectives (hard, 3 inch, floppy), with students guessing the associated noun (disk).

With unit 5, *Thinking about Meaning,* students are increasingly challenged to work with ambiguity, establish relationships and make judgments. For example, in *Quantifying sentences* the teacher dictates statements such as, "He is shorter than average". Students follow up with their own quantifying comment, maybe, "He is 5'3". The language and ideas generated can easily form a basis for discussion.

An interesting spatial order activity found in unit 6, *Where on the Page,* is *Time Dictation.* Students listen to a historical narration, then write dictated items from it into a timeline. This, and similar exercises in the unit, would work well in academic preparation classes, where students are often required to fit information into frameworks.

Units 7 and 8 give students still more power to develop and control the activities. Many techniques require students to work collaboratively to create, dictate and reconstruct material. Typical is *Half the Story,* in unit 8, *Using the Students' Text.* In this exercise students write their own elaboration (such as a short conversation) of a dictated sentence (one describing a conversational setting). Thus, the students are engaged in both the content and the activity itself.

Students are encouraged to do introverted tasks in unit 9, *Lost in Thought.* This unit has a unique purpose, namely, helping students relax to promote learning. The authors make some clever suggestions for the use of music here. For example, students write a dialogue read to the

rhythm of a classical piece. *Talking to Themselves* suggests a language lab exercise, where the teacher dictates sentences which the students then record. When the teacher is finished, the students' use their own recordings for dictation.

In the final unit, ways of adapting dictation for Curran's Community Language Learning are suggested. Since this approach requires translation, which is then used as dictation material, it has some obvious limitations. Still, it is a reminder that dictation offers a range of possibilities, and encourages experimentation with this well-used technique.

The book concludes with a section on using dictation in teacher training, an answer key, bibliography and index of activities according to level.*Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities,* is a versatile book, appropriate for novice as well as more experienced teachers. Of course one will pick and choose according to the teaching situation, but this is how the authors intend the book to be used. New teaching activities are always in short supply. This book gives a fresh perspective to a technique teachers may have discarded as outdated. The paperback edition is a bargain at $14.95, and well worth including in one's professional or institutional collection.

Jan Selman

THE REVIEWER
Jan Selman teaches English for Academic Purposes at Douglas College in New Westminster, B.C. She is particularly interested in working with subject-area instructors in planning adapted-content courses for ESL students. She has an M.Ed. in Language Education from the University of British Columbia.

Grammar for Everyday Use

Ona Low. London and Glasgow: Collins ELT, 1986, 256 pages

Grammar for Everyday Use is a textbook that provides students with practice in a number of different areas of English grammar. At the same time, it exposes students to a diverse collection of vocabulary items, presented primarily in unrelated sentences. The book is aimed at students ranging from "businessmen, scientists, doctors, technicians, interpreters, guides, personnel catering for tourists" to "others who, in the course of their jobs, travels and overseas residence, have to communicate with native English-speakers or others who share English as a common language" (page 6). According to the Introduction, *Grammar for Everyday Use* is suggested for students with a basic knowledge of English as well as intermediate to advanced level students learning English in the classroom or studying on their own. However, the text does not offer an answer key and the emphasis throughout the book is on spoken English.

The text under review is divided into three parts. Part 1 consists of seven sections, each one divided into five to fifteen sub-sections. It deals with "Verb tenses and verbal constructions" (p. 8) such as reported speech, infinitives and participles, gerunds, clauses after certain verbs, the difference between make and do, and the construction "to have something done". Part 2 includes seven sections, each with between three to eight sub-sections. It covers topics related to "non-verbal parts of speech", e.g. articles, pronouns, pronouns and adjectives, adjectives, adverbs, and word order. Part 3 consists of seven sections, each with two to six sub-sections, and deals with prepositions and adverbial particles. Simple drawings appear throughout the text, usually to illustrate one of the sentences used on that page. A comprehensive index of terminology (e.g. possessive) and vocabulary items (e.g. "study, vb") used in the text concludes the volume.

The individual sections throughout the text are organized along similar lines: general rules for the most general aspect of the topic of the section tend to be presented and followed immediately by a practice section. Exceptions are treated separately and are accompanied by additional exercises. Basic rules tend to be presented clearly and in simplified form. More complex concepts are usually illustrated through examples or charts rather than explained on the basis of rules. A few exercises allow learners to use a grammatical concept to express ideas relevant to their own background and experience. However, more typical exercises consist of instructions, followed by an example, and up to over twenty questions to be answered or sentence fragments to be completed by the students. Most of these exercises are in the form of modified pattern drills. For example,

the main exercise for affirmative/negative answers (p. 11) consists of 18 phrases based on the following pattern:

Which of the following does a secretary often/sometimes/seldom do? Which of them doesn't she do?

1) get annoyed with her boss
2) shout at her boss
3) type letters
4) feel tired
5) answer the telephone

One of the suggested exercises for direct and indirect questions (p. 86) offers two examples:

Where do you live?
He asked me where I live/He asked me where I lived.

followed by 17 questions such as

1) Why is the door open?
2) Why aren't you at work?
3) What's your brother doing for a living nowadays?
4) What languages can you speak?
5) How often do you play bridge?

Once the student has understood the pattern of the utterance, s/he simply "fills the slots". These exercises are not likely to encourage meaningful exchanges within the classroom. The progression within the three parts of the text is based on arbitrarily selected grammatical features and allows little or no opportunity for review of previously discussed material. The decontextualized presentation of individual sentences also reduces opportunities to review vocabulary and to practice the material studied in life-like situations. In addition, exercises include phrases that seem to be of very limited use, others appear out-dated and are probably quite irrelevant for the learner. For example:

My watch has stopped (forget/wind) (p. 34)

(Presumably the expected student response is that s/he forgot to wind it.)

What room does a housewife see about lunch in? (p. 226)
(the kitchen?)

A lack of attention to authenticity and likelihood is also apparent in a number of other areas. For example, the text refers to characters with names such as "Truebody", a millionaire called "Goldwell" while a patient in the accident ward is called "Jock", the doctor "Curall". Communication takes place in locations such as "Aircastle", apparently 40 km from "Smogmarsh". This may appear whimsical to the native speaker, but the

foreign student unfamiliar with even the most common names would benefit from a more realistic use of names.

Although isolated explanations regarding differences between British and North American usage are included (e.g. p. 13), the text is clearly oriented towards British English. This is demonstrated in the use of "shall", and expressions such as "O-level", "R.S.A.", "buy a flat (on the Costa Brava)", "accident ward", "estate car", "juggernaut lorry", etc., which are not commonly used in North America, but are not explained.

Grammar for Everyday Use includes a number of unconventional features. For example, the table of contents at the beginning of the book refers to the major sections only, i.e. Introduction, Parts 1, 2, 3, and the Index. For additional information, the reader is compelled to find a more detailed table of contents at the beginning of each of the three sections. Another somewhat confusing idiosyncrasy of the text is the way in which each page is marked with a standard page number as well as a code, e.g. "1F14", where "1" refers to Part 1, "F" to the section (in this case: infinitives and particles) and "14" to the sub-section (here: verbs followed by an infinitive or a participle with a resultant meaning change). This code is used exclusively in the index, and seems to make reference from the index to specific features in the body of the text rather cumbersome. Conventional pages numbers would seem preferable. Finally, the author uses the Introduction to list reasons for wanting to learn English (one of the reasons given is "to pass examinations") a topic that seems better suited for promotional material than the actual textbook.

In conclusion, *Grammar for Everyday Use* covers the standard grammatical features of English usually included in this type of text. Its author appears to have intended it as a grammar and a conversation text, emphasizing the use of principles of grammar in spoken English. Clear and simple rules of grammar as well as inclusion of some points of usage that are often ignored in textbooks are the strongest features of the text. The grammar explanations seem to be best suited to learners at the low intermediate level, but the large number of different vocabulary items and the lack of opportunity for recycling of rules and vocabulary are likely to be unsatisfactory at this level. The exercises proposed tend to become a routine not apt to captivate the attention of students at any level. Maybe the text is best suited to the reference library of individual teachers.

Hedy McGarrell

THE REVIEWER

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