When to present a new piece of language

Grading language

As a general rule, any institution that you work in will have a steady registration of people wanting to learn English and it is very unlikely that all of them will have the same ability in English. It would be administratively problematic to make up classes containing learners with different levels of English, so the obvious solution here is, of course, to place all those learners with similar levels of English into the same class. An individual learner's English ability is usually assessed using a **placement test** and he or she is then allocated to a class depending on the result. You will find that classes are normally given names like 'Elementary', 'Pre-intermediate' and 'Advanced' and the students will be issued with coursebooks also bearing the same labels. These are necessarily broad categories designed to describe learners at *approximately* the same point in the development of their English skills, usually based on the number of hours of previous English tuition, or the level of the last coursebook that the learner completed.

Given the immensity of the task of learning a foreign language, how do we decide what bits of the language to teach and when to teach them? You may recall from the first unit that a group of linguists has already isolated the structures of English and graded them according to their structural complexity. Now, although we pinpointed some drawbacks to this approach, and in spite of many practitioners' reservations about the validity of grading linguistic items in this way, this is still by far the most widely used method of slicing up English into manageable chunks for classroom learning. So, certain structures or linguistic items (words, phrases, verb tenses and so on) are considered to be more difficult for non-native speakers to learn than others. The following table gives you some idea of the ordering of structures according to level of difficulty, starting with the easiest:

1   Present Simple tense statements (e.g. I go, he lives, you take)
2   Questions in the Present Simple (e.g. do you live? does he like?)
3   Past Simple tense (e.g. I went, she was, they left)
4   Present Perfect tense (e.g. he has finished, I have eaten)
5   Second Conditional (e.g. if I won the pools, I would…)
6   Inversion (e.g. scarcely had he come in…)

Since these items are graded for difficulty, we would not attempt to teach them all at the same time to a single class; rather, we would withhold some of the more 'complex' structures for presentation at later levels. For example, the Present Simple is invariably the first verb tense that is taught at the very lowest levels (beginner and elementary); the Present Perfect (considered to be a major

problem for English language learners generally) would be introduced later, while verb and subject inversion might be reserved for post-intermediate students. Clearly we do not have the time or space here to go into a detailed listing of all the structures of English and at what level they should be taught. You should simply be aware that in the teaching approach that is most widely used, both learners and the English language are graded to match each other. This is the ideal situation; you will, however, find there are individual variations in English skills even in a smallish class of twelve learners, but this usually causes very few major teaching or learning problems.

The most frequently used labels for the different levels, both learner and course book are:

> Beginner
> Elementary
> Pre-intermediate
> Intermediate
> Post-intermediate
> Advanced

With experience you will be able to determine what linguistic items should be presented to your class, and in what order. Until that time you would be best advised to use the grading of items provided by the class coursebook as a guide to the language that you should be presenting. As an introduction to what is considered 'easy' and what is 'difficult' for the learner of English, try your hand at the following exercise.

Task 1 *

What do you think the order of complexity would be for the structures exemplified in the following sentences? The first one (the simplest) has already been placed as number 1. Can you order the remaining sentences?

1. What's your first name?
2. That can't be the postman already.
3. I haven't read a newspaper since last Monday.
4. They've been to Germany before.
5. Did you study French at school?
6. I don't think your father drives very well.
7. If we'd been on time, we wouldn't have missed the film.
8. If I knew, I'd tell you.
9. Mary has got blue eyes and brown hair.
10. Could I borrow your pen for a moment?
11. We like listening to music.
12. I left school because I didn't pass my exams.