

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 DVD, 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.