

SECOND EDITION

TOP NOTCH FUNDAMENTALS

Teacher's Edition and Lesson Planner

with Active Teach

Joan Saslow • Allen Ascher

With Sarah Lynn and Penny Laporte

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PEARSON
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Top Notch: English for Today's World Fundamentals, Second Edition
Teacher's Edition and Lesson Planner

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Scope

Each level of the *Top Notch* course contains enough material for 60 to 90 hours of classroom instruction. Split editions are also available. A wide choice of supplementary components makes it easy to tailor *Top Notch* to the needs of diverse classes and programs or to expand the total number of hours.

(For a pictorial presentation of all components of the *Top Notch* course, please see pages ix–xi of the Student's Book.)

Goal

The goal of the course is to make English unforgettable, enabling learners to understand, speak, read, and write English accurately, confidently, and fluently. Three key features are emblematic of the *Top Notch* course:

- Multiple exposures to new language
- Numerous opportunities to practice it
- Deliberate and intensive recycling

Content

Top Notch has a classic sequential grammatical syllabus. Grammar, vocabulary, and social language are integrated within topical, communicative units. Offering a balance of practical and informational topics, the content is designed to be consciously appealing to the student learning English.

Language and culture

Since English is the primary language of international communication, the *Top Notch* course goes beyond the traditional cultural and linguistic features of English. It prepares students to communicate with the diverse array of English language speakers around the world—more than two-thirds of whom are not native speakers of English.

Although the spellings, pronunciation, and usage in *Top Notch* language models for students are in standard American English, *Top Notch* integrates a variety of regional, national, and non-native accents throughout the listening texts and in the video program, *Top Notch TV*. The first language of speakers with non-native accents is identified for you and your students. In addition, the Teacher's Edition contains a wealth of information, clarifying relevant differences between American and British usage.

In contrast to a focus on native language culture, *Top Notch* emphasizes “cultural fluency.” This emphasis helps students build the communication skills and self-confidence needed to navigate social, travel, and business situations in unfamiliar cultural settings.

All spoken language models in *Top Notch* are informed by and confirmed with the Longman Corpus Network, which collects both spoken and written samples of authentic language. *Top Notch* students can be assured that the language they are learning is authentic and appropriate.

Instructional design

Top Notch is a complete course with a wealth of supplementary components and a simple integrated technology, allowing the maximum flexibility for all teaching styles, learning settings, and course needs. The following is a synopsis of the *Top Notch* Fundamentals instructional design.

A communication goal for each class session. Each of the three numbered two-page lessons in a *Top Notch* Fundamentals unit is designed for one class session of 45–60 minutes, and has a clearly stated communication goal.

Three reasons for having a communication goal are to make each class purposeful, to demonstrate progress in each class session, and to enable a more focused evaluation. When teachers and students are unaware of the purpose of each lesson, they often just “go through the motions.” Conversely, when teachers and students know the purpose of the lesson, they see value in it and are motivated to achieve a successful outcome.

Integration of skills and content. Research has indicated that when students encounter new language only once or twice, they find it difficult to master or even remember. For that reason, new vocabulary and grammar are embedded in exercises, conversation models, pair work activities, listening comprehension texts, readings, and other activities to make them unforgettable. In each lesson, new language is examined, explained, integrated, expanded on, and applied so that students receive multiple exposures to the language as well as numerous opportunities to practice it in all skill areas.

Confirmation of progress. The culmination of each lesson is a carefully constructed, guided communication activity called Now You Can. Each of these is a conversation model and a controlled conversation or role play in which students demonstrate their achievement of the goal of the lesson. Students are motivated by their success, and in keeping with the aims of the “Can do” statements of the Common European Framework, continually see the practical value of their instruction.

Explicit presentations of vocabulary, grammar, and social language. In order to allow the *Top Notch* Student's Books to double as both a teaching and

a reviewing tool, language is presented explicitly. Explicit presentations take the guesswork out of understanding meaning, form, and use and provide a concrete reference for students to review. For those who prefer an inductive presentation of grammar, there are printable "Inductive Grammar Charts" on the ActiveTeach multimedia disc at the back of this Teacher's Edition. These charts provide an alternative (inductive) approach to each grammar presentation in the Student's Book. In addition, Vocabulary Flash Cards on the ActiveTeach multimedia disc can also be used for an alternative approach to presenting vocabulary.

A model-based social language syllabus. Each unit in *Top Notch Fundamentals* contains three models of essential social language in short conversations. Each of these Conversation Models serves a clear communicative purpose by embedding key conversation strategies. A full list of conversation strategies can be found in the Learning Objectives

charts on pages iv–vii of the Student's Book. All of the Conversation Models in *Top Notch* are designed to be changed and personalized by pairs or groups of students, using the target grammar and vocabulary. This practice activates and engraves the language in students' memories, providing them with "language in their pockets;" in other words, language that is accessible and ready to use in real life.

A consistent progression from controlled to free practice. In addition to controlled personalization of the Conversation Models, students are offered opportunities to use the language they have learned for free expression. Directions in the textbook prompt students to extend their conversations, using previously taught social language and vocabulary. In addition, units end with an extension page that ends in a free communication pair- or group-work activity in which students apply the language they have learned.

Methodology for a Communicative Classroom

The goal of any communicative language course should be to enable students to express themselves confidently, accurately, and fluently in speaking and writing; to understand spoken and written English as it is used in the world today; and to function socially in English in a variety of settings, both familiar and unfamiliar. Much practice is needed to reach those goals.

Because the typical student has limited opportunities to observe and practice English outside of class, the goal of the classroom must be to provide rich sources of input for observation as well as intensive opportunities for controlled and free practice. In other words, the classroom must become both a microcosm of as well as a rehearsal for the "real world." It is a goal of this section and the goal of the *Top Notch* course to suggest a methodology which makes that possible.

Permitting active observation of language

Although the world is saturated with English (through the Internet, films, music, and television), much of it is incomprehensible to beginning and intermediate students and difficult and frustrating to learn from. Nevertheless, students should be encouraged to seek out and observe English outside of class whenever possible.

On the other hand, students benefit greatly and learn easily from exposure to models

of spoken and written English at their own productive level or language just above that level. The level of challenge that benefits students most is often called "i+1" (Krashen and Terrell, 1983*) or "comprehensible input." Comprehensible input is language that contains some unknown words or structures, but is still at a level that students can understand. Such language, especially when it is authentic, is extremely valuable for student progress. At the *Top Notch Fundamentals* level, a small number of unfamiliar words are integrated into the reading and listening passages to help students begin to understand meaning from context. Care has been taken, however, to avoid over-challenging or frustrating beginning students.

Although current methodologies often expect immediate production of target language, we believe that each class session should provide students with an opportunity to observe language by reading it and hearing it as well.

In order to benefit from the observation process, students should be encouraged to look at and/or listen to reading and listening material for several minutes in order for them to process it and to make connections between what they know and what is new. Only after students have had

* Krashen, Stephen and Terrell, Tracy D. 1983. *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

ample opportunity to immerse themselves in the observation process should they begin discussing the text or answering questions about it. And to maximize the value of observation, we strongly suggest that students support their opinions or answers by indicating where in an observed text or listening they got the information they needed to answer or to form an opinion. In this way, observation becomes an active process rather than simply a receptive activity.

Encouraging repetition of new language

Some people believe that repetition of language is indicative of an outdated behaviorist audio-lingual approach. Consequently, recent trends in language teaching tend to de-emphasize or discourage repetition of language being learned. However, we have observed that repeating new language is valuable as long as it is not overused and does not interfere with awareness of meaning. Repetition helps students remember correct pronunciation, stress, and intonation. It is recommended that students listen and repeat new language being learned for production.

For this reason, when students are learning new vocabulary or new social language, they should be encouraged to listen, or to read and listen, and then to listen again and repeat. When using audio materials as models, students appreciate the opportunity to compare their pronunciation, stress, and intonation with those of the speakers on the audio. We recommend that repetition be a regular feature of the presentation of vocabulary and model conversations.

For activities requiring students to listen and repeat, we suggest having students listen the first time while looking at the written form in their textbooks. This allows students to link the written form in the textbook to the sound they hear. Next, as students are asked to listen and repeat, have them do it with their textbooks closed. This serves to reduce distractions and allows students to focus exclusively on listening and repeating, rather than reading. It also reduces the confusing effect of English spelling on pronunciation. However, if students find this difficult, allow them to keep their books open for visual support.

It is always beneficial to vary the method and sequence of repetition. Using alternative approaches does not diminish the value of repetition; the approaches add variety and help maintain interest. For example, it is not necessary to limit repetition to simply mimicking the words in the textbook.

Occasionally, and within reason, students can practice by making small changes in conversation models as they are repeated. For instance, if the Conversation Model is "How have you been?" "Well, actually, I have a headache," students can be encouraged to change the model, substituting another ailment such as "backache." In this way, the original model is heard and used, yet not parroted mechanically, and still reinforces correct rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation.

It is best to keep the pace of repetition and personalization lively so that the greatest number of students have a chance to participate, maximizing their exposure to new language.

It is also beneficial to vary the number of people being asked to repeat. Sometimes it is helpful to have students repeat individually; at other times the whole class, half the class, all the males, all the females, etc. can be asked to repeat as a group. The goal is always served, no matter how the repetition is structured.

It is important, however, not to exaggerate the amount of class time devoted to repetition. A lively pace and a short time period will achieve the desired results; then it is time to move on to more substantive activities.

Ensuring that students use learning strategies

It is important to provide opportunities for students to work toward goals, to access prior knowledge, and to practice strategies such as planning, self-assessing, predicting, etc. These strategies have been proven to have positive results on students' learning. Knowing learning strategies is not enough, however. Research has shown that unless students are aware of the value of strategies, they are unlikely to incorporate them into their own learning initiatives.*

Working toward goals. At the beginning of each term, before beginning instruction, probe students' individual personal goals in learning English. This discussion can be conducted in English or in the students' native language, depending on their level. Common goals could be for their profession, travel, academic study, etc. Help students become aware of how their course and/or their textbook will help them reach those goals; for example, by helping them learn to understand and communicate in

* The foundational learning strategies that follow are an intrinsic part of the *Top Notch Student's Book*. For teachers who would like to teach additional reading, listening, and vocabulary-building strategies, there are numerous printable extension activities on the ActiveTeach multimedia disc in the back of this Teacher's Edition.

spoken and written English. It is also worthwhile to encourage students to brainstorm a specific list of what they want to be able to do in English in practical or specific terms. For example:

I want to learn English because I want to:

- *order meals in a restaurant.*
- *get directions when I travel.*
- *give directions to foreign visitors to my city.*
- *check in and out of hotels.*
- *read academic journals or articles.*
- *write e-mails or letters.*
- *discuss news and current events.*
- *have social conversations.*
- *use the Internet.*

Have students look through their textbook to see if it will fulfill any of their goals. Ask them to point out lessons or units that they look forward to learning from.

Make goal-setting or goal awareness an important part of each unit and lesson. Before beginning a unit or lesson, have students look it over and brainstorm what they will be able to do at the end of it. Such awareness builds expectation of results, focuses students' attention on the purpose of instruction, and results in greater satisfaction with each class. Specific techniques for using the goals in class are covered in *Applied methods: How to teach a Top Notch unit* on page Txviii.

Observing progress and self-assessing. When a brief discussion of goals takes place at the beginning of a class session, it then becomes easy for students to observe and confirm their progress that day. One simple way to ensure this is to ask "Did you learn how to give someone directions?" "What did you learn today?" and so on. When students confirm that the lesson's goal has been achieved, they value their instruction. Similarly, regularly review progress at the end of each full unit. In general, cumulative positive reinforcement of their success motivates learners to persevere. See a detailed explanation in *Applied methods: How to teach a Top Notch unit* on page Txviii.

Being aware of the instructional process. Make students aware that presentations and activities in class, as well as those assigned for work outside of class (homework, projects, laboratory activities), have a definite purpose and are not random or accidental.

Effective lessons offer students presentations and activities that integrate target content. However, merely *offering* students such lessons is often not enough. The lesson will be more effective if students are *cognitively aware* of the value of each section of the lesson in achieving the lesson goals.

When finishing tasks, projects, and homework, take a moment to review the language students

used in the task; for example, ask "Where did you use the present continuous today?" When students become aware that they actually used the present continuous in their conversations, practicing it becomes valuable to them. It is surprising how often students are not aware of the way in which activities help reinforce what they are learning. They often see a conversation practice session as isolated from grammar or vocabulary content, viewing it as just for fun or something to do to fill time.

Reflecting on one's learning. A number of hurdles must be overcome in learning a foreign or second language. One such hurdle is confusing the difference between *understanding* a word and *being able to translate* it into one's own (native) language.

Learners instinctively attempt to translate everything they read or hear, word for word. This is futile for two reasons. First, no one can possibly translate word-for-word quickly enough to follow a speaker speaking at a natural pace. Second, word-for-word translations are impossible for idioms, expressions, metaphors, or other figurative language.

In order to build students' awareness of this fact, you must help them reflect on the meaning of "understanding." Help them to see that they can instantly derive both general and specific meaning from spoken and written texts that contain words they have not heard or seen before. If students say they do not understand the meaning of a new word being learned, help them to describe its meaning, rather than to try to translate it. For example: assume you have presented the word *tight* (for clothing size) through an illustration depicting a person in a shirt that is too small. The caption states, "The shirt is tight." Because students already know the word *small*, they may be puzzled at seeing *tight* used here, instead of *small*. The natural impulse of learners is to search for a word in their own language that means *tight*. They will probably ask "What's *tight*?" To help students grasp the difference between understanding and translating, ask them to explain the meaning of "The shirt is tight." They will say "The shirt is too small." Point out to students that they in fact do understand the meaning of *tight* and that not being able to translate a word is different from not understanding it.

This is a profound awareness on which every learner of a new language needs to reflect. This awareness creates the desire and need to depend on context to infer meaning, promoting the development of one of the most important strategies for language learners—understanding meaning from context.

Managing pair, group, and collaborative activities

Collaborative activities, as well as pair and group work, facilitate interaction in English and are a hallmark of communicative language teaching. These activities encourage students to use their own language resources, which in turn makes the lesson more personal and meaningful. They also ensure that students initiate as well as respond in English. Also, by working together, students get to know each other faster and become more independent; they rely on the teacher less for guidance and ultimately take more responsibility for their own learning. We recommend the following approaches for activities featuring pair and group work.

Creating a student-centered environment. Some students, particularly those accustomed to teacher-centered lessons in which teachers spend a lot of time explaining, may not immediately see the benefits of working in pairs or groups. Remind students that working together allows them more time to practice their English and allows you to listen to more students individually. Reassure students that you will circulate to give them individual attention and that this will make you aware of any points that need explanation.

Encouraging cooperative learning and collaboration. Encourage students to help and learn from each other; in other words, to create a community of learners in the classroom. Whenever possible, try to elicit answers from other students before answering a question yourself. If a student asks a question that was previously asked by another student, direct him or her to the person who first asked that question. Also, before asking students to speak in front of the class, build their confidence by having them rehearse language in pairs, small groups, or collectively as a class. Students can also collaborate on written exercises with a partner or group, either by completing the activity together or by comparing their answers.

Facilitating a flexible seating arrangement. To ensure that students interact with a variety of partners, have them sit in a different location for each class. When dividing the class into pairs or groups, try to match students of different abilities. One method of forming groups is to have students count off according to the number of groups needed. The “1”s work together, the “2”s work together, and so on.

Monitoring activities. During pair and group work activities, monitor students by moving around the room to keep them on task and to provide help as needed. When possible, avoid participating in pair

work yourself, as this will limit your ability to monitor and offer assistance to the rest of the class. If you are faced with an odd number of students, create a group of three students. The third student can work as a helper to encourage eye contact and other socially appropriate behavior and to correct mistakes.

Managing time. To keep students on task, it is best to set time limits for each activity. End activities when most of the class has finished to avoid “dead time” during which students are waiting for others to finish. For students who finish a conversation activity early, have them write out the conversation they created. If you use supplementary activities, it is a good idea to have some of those photocopied and on hand.

Correcting errors purposefully

In general, language learners—particularly adults—like feedback and expect to be corrected when they make a mistake. However, recent research (Brown, 2007*) suggests that correcting errors in students' speech and writing may not be as effective in promoting correct language use as is commonly believed. In fact, research indicates that excessive correction in a communicative course can embarrass, dishearten students and discourage them from attempting the experimentation and practice that is essential for language acquisition. In view of these findings, we recommend striking a balance between the need for correction and maintaining feelings of success. The following are approaches to provide effective and positive feedback.

Promoting accuracy. For activities where accuracy is the focus, such as controlled conversation pair work, address mistakes shortly after they occur. Students need guidance as they attempt to use new words, phrases, and grammar; immediate correction is important. Ask students to incorporate the corrections as they continue their pair work.

Promoting fluency. For freer and more challenging activities where fluency and free expression are the focus (discussions and role plays), refrain from stopping the flow of student discussion with corrections. In these activities, accuracy is less important than communicating ideas, improvising, and remembering and using the full range of language students have learned. Developing the ability to retrieve and use previously learned language is critical if students are to convert the English they have learned in the classroom into the

* Brown, H. Douglas. 2007. *Teaching By Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (3rd ed.). White Plains: Pearson Education.

English they need in their own lives. Interrupting students with corrections discourages this experimentation. Instead, take notes on common student mistakes and then review those errors with the entire class at the end of the activity.

Encouraging self-correction. If allowed, students are often able to correct their own mistakes. First let the student finish the thought, then indicate by sound or gesture that there has been a mistake. Try to point out where the mistake was to give the student an opportunity to self-correct.

Some techniques for eliciting self-correction include counting each word of the phrase on your fingers and pausing at the mistake, or repeating the student's sentence and pausing at the mistake; for example, S: "He has two child." T: "He has two?" S: "He has two *children*."

A less intrusive method is to correct the student's mistake by reformulating what the student said without stopping the flow of conversation; for example, S: "He have a car." T: "Oh, he *has* a car?" S: "Yes, he has a car." Note that these techniques often prompt the student to self-correct.

Being selective. Do not try to correct every mistake. Doing so could discourage or overwhelm students. Instead, focus corrections on the skills that are being taught in that particular lesson or on mistakes that interfere with comprehensibility.

Providing emotional support. Above all, be careful not to embarrass students. Be aware that students may be sensitive to criticism in front of their peers and may prefer more private feedback. Give students enough time to think before they answer to avoid making them feel pressured. There is nothing more effective in promoting student participation than reinforcing their belief that you are "on their side." To that end, suggest that you show approval for student experimentation, even when language is inaccurate. Correction can come later. Experimentation is an essential step on the road to mastery.

Checking and managing homework. Maximizing the amount of time students have to interact and practice English is essential in a classroom environment. It is best to limit the amount of class time devoted to checking answers and correcting homework. For exercises done in class, have students check their answers with a partner. This increases interaction time, ensures that errors get corrected, and encourages students to correct their own mistakes. It also helps students avoid the possible embarrassment of giving incorrect answers in front of the entire class.

When the class has finished comparing answers, review the correct answers as a class, either by eliciting the answers from individual students or by having volunteers write their answers on the board. In classes with time constraints, we recommend that you write the answers on the board, as this method is faster.

We suggest that you follow a similar approach with homework by quickly reviewing correct answers. In large classes, you may prefer to systematically select which papers to review out of class in order to give individual feedback and check progress. If five to ten papers are collected every session, each student will receive individual feedback several times per term.

Actively developing free expression

One of the greatest challenges in the English language classroom is successfully engaging learners in free discussions and role plays. Teachers often find that students are reluctant to produce single short "fossilized" utterances or resort to using their first language. Some impediments to students' success are lack of vocabulary, grammar, subject knowledge, or interference from forgetting previously learned language. There are psychological and psychosocial hurdles as well. Adult and young-adult students have many ideas to express but worry that they will be judged by their teachers as well as their peers.

The following four techniques form part of a process approach to discussion and are recommended to mitigate the challenge of free discussions and role plays. They support learner confidence and increase quantity, quality, and complexity of expression.

Idea framing. When students are presented—unprepared—with a discussion topic, they typically approach it narrowly; for example, if you propose a discussion of vacation preferences, students may only think about one particular aspect of vacations. Worse, students often worry about what you consider appropriate to include in the discussion.

Providing students with a stimulus such as an online or magazine survey or questionnaire can help them frame their ideas by indirectly suggesting topics to be included in the discussion to follow. Surveys and questionnaires you provide also reduce student anxiety by clarifying your expectations of what is appropriate to include in the discussion.

Notepadding. Giving students an opportunity to write notes helps them consider how they will express their ideas. Here again, students may start with a narrow view of what to include in the discussion, but when they are given preparation time beforehand, they will broaden their ideas and plan how they want to express

them. Notepadting builds confidence and yields more complex statements than discussion without preparation does.

Text-mining. Although language textbooks usually contain readings that provide students with an opportunity to confront “i+1” comprehensible language, using these readings solely for reading comprehension can be a missed opportunity. One way to make the most of a textbook reading is to ask students to notice and select language from it (“mining its text”) that they can use in a discussion or role play. Permit students to circle, underline, or copy “mined” language prior to classroom discussions. Text-mining greatly enhances students’ ability to acquire and use language slightly above the level they have learned.

Wordposting. Another huge challenge to students is remembering known language—even recently learned language—and using it in discussions and role plays. But when students do not use and reuse learned language, they inevitably forget it.

To ensure that students recycle previously taught language, we suggest that you (or the students themselves) make and keep “wordposts”—lists of relevant recyclable language.* Wordposts can be written on the board or photocopied and distributed. To encourage the use of the wordposts during the discussion, you or your students can write a checkmark, cross out, or circle each word or phrase as it is used. Wordposting is one effective recycling technique that makes English unforgettable.

Teaching the receptive skills: reading and listening

Reading and listening are sometimes thought of as receptive skills. In a communicative classroom, however, reading and listening activities can greatly enhance speaking and writing, provide growth of comprehension, and help students cope with authentic language containing unknown words and complex ideas. The following are suggestions for approaching reading and listening in order to gain maximum benefit.

Authentic reading and listening passages will always contain a quantity of unknown language. We know that students can understand more language than they can produce, but they are often frightened to tackle readings or listening activities that include unknown language. (See the earlier discussion of the value of “i+1” comprehensible input on pages Tvi–Tvii.)

Readings and listening activities should represent real language. However, it is important

to avoid language that falls significantly above the comprehensible level. Identifying a zone of comprehensibility enables readings and listening activities to maximize the building of comprehension skills and vocabulary.

As stated earlier, it is important to recognize that most language learners instinctively try to translate every word as they read and are frustrated by their inability to create a one-to-one correspondence of the English words to their native language. Adopting an approach that respects the amount of challenge a reading or listening activity presents, discouraging translation, and teaching reading and listening skills and strategies can help students read and listen successfully.

Reading strategies and applied comprehension skills.

Reading skills and strategies that help students cope with the challenge of foreign- or second-language reading help prepare them to confront such readings with confidence. Some are practiced before, once during, and still others, after the actual reading.

Before a reading activity, encourage students to explore their ideas about the topic of the reading. To pique their interest in the reading, get them to access any knowledge they already have about the topic. Another strategy that helps students cope with a reading is identifying its source; for example, is it a magazine article, a website, a series of letters, an advertisement, etc.? These pre-reading strategies will help students approach a reading with the confidence that they know what is coming and will discourage them from focusing on every unknown word.

Some strategies and skills that help students while they read are *skimming*, *scanning*, and *focusing on the context* in which unknown words occur, to help students understand meaning (instead of trying to translate those words). Encourage students to quickly read the passage from beginning to end without stopping for details. One way to teach skimming is to have students read the first sentence of each paragraph and the first few sentences at the beginning and the end of the passage.

Scanning for specific information is another helpful skill. Before students read line for line, they can be asked to find information about dates, names, ages, times, etc. Such information usually identifies itself by format—numbers, isolated words, charts, and the like. Keep in mind, though, that not all readings lend themselves naturally to skimming or scanning. Only choose skimming or scanning with readings that naturally lend themselves to that sort of examination.

* In *Top Notch* units, wordposts are listed within a box called *Be sure to recycle this language*.

As students read and encounter unknown words, help them to find the context clues that “explain” the meaning of those words. In the following sentence, the general meaning of the word *dousing* can be understood from the context: “Songkran is a wild and wonderful festival in which people of all ages have fun *dousing* each other with water for three solid days.” Many students would instinctively reach for the bilingual dictionary to look up *dousing* or simply decide the reading was too hard. But asking them to look for the meaning in the surrounding text (the “context,” where they will find “with water”) helps build the habit of searching for context clues and taking educated guesses.

A good way to help students see the value of searching for context clues is to ask them to explain their reasons for guessing the meaning of a word. Ask them to go into the text to provide support for their opinions. In the case above, students would cite “with water” to support their opinions. Note that a precise definition or translation is not necessarily the goal. Students should also be encouraged to guess the “sense” of a word; for example, whether it is positive or negative, male or female, something you eat or wear, etc. If this is done regularly, students will develop the habit of looking for meaning in the context.

After reading, *summarizing* a text is a valuable applied reading comprehension skill. When students are able to summarize a reading, it indicates that they have identified the main idea and can distinguish it from random facts or details that are included in the article.

One way to provide practice in distinguishing main ideas from details is to ask students to take notes as they read and to organize or separate their notes into categories; for example, in a reading about the experiences of a woman with physical challenges, students can be asked to take notes about her habitual activities in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. In a reading about healthy eating habits, students can be asked to jot down information about foods that are good for you and those that are not good for you. Putting notes into categories helps students perceive the details that support the main ideas of a reading and can provide a framework for a logical and articulately expressed summary. A further way to help students understand the main idea of or the point of view expressed in a reading is to ask them to try to *paraphrase* what the author’s idea is. As they read, ask students to put the author’s words into their own words.

The input/task ratio. When asking comprehension questions about a reading (or a listening activity; see below) it is helpful to keep in mind the relative difficulty of the text. If a text is very challenging

and has a lot of difficult or unfamiliar language and complex ideas, questions and tasks should be relatively easy and receptive, such as determining general or main ideas. If a text is relatively easy, the tasks and questions should be commensurately more difficult, productive, and inferential, and should require more critical thinking. In other words, the difficulty of the task should be inversely proportional to the difficulty of the text. If this ratio is respected, even very difficult texts can be used by students at lower levels.

Listening skills and strategies. Listening is often frustrating to students because of factors such as speed, accent, background interference, and the fact that in the real world, a listener usually has only one opportunity to understand. In contrast, a reading text—even if difficult—can be explored, studied, and re-read at the learner’s pace.

For most learners, understanding spoken language can be very difficult, especially when the speaker is not seen, as during a phone conversation or when listening to the radio, a podcast, or a classroom audio program. Listening skills and strategies can help reduce the natural panic that occurs when students listen to challenging speech.

If we want students to be able to cope with real spoken language, it is crucial to expose them to listening passages recorded at a normal rate of speed and in a variety of accents. When students are presented with unnaturally slow and over-enunciated listening passages, they may understand them easily and perform well on comprehension exercises. Unfortunately, however, this apparent success is misleading because it does not indicate that students will be able to understand authentic speech, which is inevitably faster and less enunciated. As language educators, it is important for us to ask ourselves what the purpose of listening comprehension exercises is in a communicative classroom. Is it to get students to understand every word they hear in a comprehension exercise or is it to help them learn how to successfully understand real spoken English in the world outside the classroom? Although we know the answer is the latter, we struggle with our own feelings of “failure” when students are unable to easily understand the listening texts we bring to class.

To offset our own fears as educators, it is important to explain to students the value of challenging listening experiences and to reassure them that the exercise is not a test of whether or not they understood everything the first time. Be sure students understand that the purpose of this practice is to help them obtain meaning, even from something that is not completely understood, and not simply to answer questions.

In presenting listening comprehension practice in class, be sure students have several opportunities to listen to each passage. Focus students' attention by having them listen for a different purpose each time they listen. Build up the progression of tasks from easier to more challenging ones. Add an extra listening opportunity again after other tasks in order to let students check their work.

The input/task ratio especially applies to constructing listening activities in the classroom. (See page Txii.) If the listening passage is fast, accented, or otherwise difficult, present a less challenging or receptive task, such as understanding main ideas or identifying the global purpose. On the other hand, if the listening passage is slow or otherwise easy, present more productive or difficult exercises. A convenient way to apply the input/task ratio to listening comprehension exercises is to compare them to the reading skills of skimming and scanning: for more difficult listening passages, expect students to "skim" by listening and getting the main idea, but few details, inferences, or complexities. For easier listening passages, expect them to "scan" for details, make inferences, and draw conclusions based on those.

In all cases, however, make sure students realize that these exercises are meant to increase their ability to cope with natural spoken speech, not a means to judge what they can understand on one listening.

Improving written expression

Writing tasks perform a number of useful functions in a communicative classroom:

- First, they offer yet another vehicle for students to remember, practice, and consolidate language they are learning, reinforcing vocabulary and grammatical conventions.
- Second, they promote the development of accuracy because students and instructors read and edit the writing; errors are visible and can be meticulously corrected.
- Third, they can prepare students for the real writing they will do in their work and social lives: letters, e-mails, reports, articles, messages, and the like.
- Fourth, tasks based on a writing syllabus can teach students the conventions of standard written expression, such as sentence and paragraph development, use of topic sentences, and written rhetorical devices. These cannot be learned through speaking activities.

Students should have frequent opportunities to write. In every class session, they should be offered grammar, vocabulary, reading, and listening comprehension exercises that require a written

response. Exercises should include word and phrase-level cloze or fill-in-the-blanks exercises; sentence-level exercises that require one or several sentences; and other controlled writing tasks. Such exercises should be corrected for grammar, usage, punctuation, and capitalization errors, either through peer-correction or through self-correction by seeing the correct responses on the board. Alternatively, exercises that have written responses can be collected and corrected periodically. (See section on checking and managing homework on page Tx.)

Students should also be given topics to write about. Even beginning-level learners can write short paragraphs based on the topic or theme of the textbook unit as long as the goal is specific; for example, if beginning-level students have learned the vocabulary of daily activities, the simple present tense, and frequency adverbs, a good writing assignment would be for them to write about their typical day."

Expect an increase in both quality and quantity as students develop their writing skills. Students should be reminded and encouraged to actively use the language they have learned, and they should try to vary the vocabulary they use and the way they express themselves. In addition, they should always be encouraged to write a little more. If students have their writing in pairs or groups, have other students ask questions about information they want to know more about. Do the same when you read students' work.

Writing is a process that begins with ideas. Encourage students to brainstorm ideas, write lists, make notes, organize their thoughts, use graphic organizers, etc. before they begin writing a first draft. Encourage revision as a regular habit in writing. Students should get feedback from others and look at their own writing critically for clarity of ideas. Then they should rewrite to try and improve what they wrote in the first draft.

When you first read your students' writing, respond to the ideas they are trying to express, rather than focusing on errors. Ask questions that encourage students to say more and clarify what they are saying. Focus on accuracy only after students have had an opportunity to revise and improve the content of their own work.

Intermediate-level and advanced-level learners can cope with more challenging assignments; for example, if students have completed a unit in their textbook on the unreal conditional, government, politics, and global issues, they can write an essay about what they would do about corruption if they were in government.

At all levels of instruction, however, it is important to construct a writing assignment that

students are prepared to write about. Many failures in writing occur when students begin translating their ideas from their own language into English, instead of using the words, expressions, and grammar they are familiar with. When assigning a writing task, ask yourself if it will require students to use known language or whether the subject is unrelated to what they know.

To help develop students' abilities in the conventions of writing, it is helpful to link each writing assignment to a particular skill to be

applied, such as correct capitalization or punctuation, the use of connecting or sequencing words, the inclusion of topic sentences, and introductory and concluding statements, and other features of effective writing. In this way, students practice the language they are learning as well as the conventions expected in English writing. Finally, so that students become familiar with the conventions of formal and informal written expression, vary the text types in assignments, from e-mails to formal letters and essays.

Commonsense Testing and Evaluation

One of a teacher's most difficult challenges is to construct tests that fairly evaluate global student progress. Without pretending to present an exhaustive approach to testing and evaluation, we offer a few principles. First of all, although all teachers accept the principle that "we should test only what we teach," this is easier said than done in a communicative classroom, where more than 50% of class time is spent practicing the oral/aural skills. If we were to "test what we taught" this would require more than 50% of our test items to evaluate listening and speaking. However, oral tests take a lot of time because each student must be tested individually; few programs provide enough time for such testing. For this reason, most programs rely on tests that are largely written.

We would like to suggest procedures that answer the following two questions:

- How can students receive credit for their progress in speaking—the aspects of language learning that have received the most emphasis in class? In other words, how can we evaluate speaking?
- How can we construct a written test that permits students of ability levels to demonstrate their knowledge of the language they've studied and which measures their abilities in listening and reading comprehension as well as written expression?

Oral tests

As mentioned above, formal oral tests are very time-consuming. In a class of thirty students, administering a five-minute unit oral test to each student would take 150 minutes (two and a half hours). Almost no program could dedicate that much time to oral testing at the end of each textbook unit, so it's only possible to administer a few oral tests per term. However,

teachers report that when there are very few oral tests, students tend to panic and perform poorly because the stakes are too high. An evaluation on which students underperform doesn't accurately assess their progress. A more practical and effective way to measure students' progress is to provide an ongoing, less formal, in-class assessment of speaking skills.

One approach is to keep a record of students' progress over a class session. If a class has thirty students, we suggest focusing on ten students in each session, making a mental note of their spoken responses in whole class, small group, and pair work activities. At the end of the session, make a notation in your record book in a form that makes most sense to you. One simple notation system is to give each student you evaluated a "plus," a "check," or a "minus" for that day's oral work. In the following class session, focus on the next ten students, and in the following session, focus on the final third of the students. In that way, students receive credit for their progress as they begin to retrieve and use target language to communicate in class. You can determine the criteria you wish to use to evaluate your students (e.g. fluency, accuracy, clarity, etc.). The important thing is that you have a record of each student's ongoing progress. This set of records can then be factored into the grade each student receives for the marking period, unit, term, etc. The percentage of weight you wish to give to this ongoing oral evaluation in relation to the written test is up to you and your program.

Written tests

How can we construct a written test that enables us to fairly evaluate the progress of all students—those who are gifted as well as those who struggle? All students learn, though not at the same rate, and some learn more from a textbook unit or from a lecture, etc. than others. We suggest that test items in written tests be weighted as follows so that all students who have

progressed acceptably can demonstrate that growth on the test. (Note that the item types described below can be mixed throughout the test.)

We propose that 80% of the test items be receptive and literal ones. Examples of these item types would include such things as true and false, multiple choice, and cloze sentences with word banks from which to choose items. These items should “test” students’ knowledge of the target vocabulary and grammar they studied in the unit. In terms of difficulty, these items should be at a level that all students who have studied and learned the material can answer successfully.

In turn, 10% of test items should be items that require more thought and more productive responses than those mentioned above. Examples of these items would be an answer to a question, a completion of a conversation response, or cloze sentences in which students have to complete items without benefit of a word bank or a set of choices. These items should “test” students’ knowledge and use of vocabulary and grammar learned in the unit. Regarding difficulty level, these items should target average and above-level students. While it is possible that weaker students will correctly complete these items, it is not probable. It is worth noting that all students sometimes perform above expectation, and that performance should be encouraged.

The final 10% of test items should require responses of multiple sentences or paragraphs, etc. that indicate mastery of vocabulary and grammar and that may require critical thinking, such as inferential understanding of language and ideas in context from reading passages. These items would typically target the strongest students in the class. Again, it is possible, however unlikely, that some weaker and average-ability students might perform well on these items. Any success should be supported.

If a written test is constructed using items apportioned as above, all students can demonstrate progress, with the weakest student (who have worked to their capacity) possibly achieving a potential 80% score, average-ability students achieving a potential 90% score, and the best students achieving a potential 100%. Of course, these percentages are not guaranteed, but they do permit

even the weakest students to see their progress and the best ones to demonstrate their mastery.

A compelling reason for this approach to constructing written tests is to address teachers’ frequent concern that their students don’t “do well on the test.” Research has shown that teachers often write tests that provide items weighted on the side of the most difficult content taught, under the rationale that “if students can answer these questions, I can assume they could have answered easier items.” The consequence of this assumption is that many students don’t receive recognition for the language they have learned because they are unable to answer the most difficult and productive items perfectly. However, it is our contention that the easier content, such as the knowledge of the target vocabulary, is at least as important as the ability to use the most difficult grammar. We believe that all of the content should be evaluated.

Once a score on a written test has been determined, you (or your program) can decide how much weight to give oral tests or the ongoing oral assessment in the student’s global evaluation. If we are to truly test what we taught, and the amount of time spent on the oral/aural skills is at 75%, then a case could be made for “counting” the written test for 25% of the grade, although few programs would adopt such a scale, for reasons of expediency. Our purpose here is to provide a starting point for discussion to enable programs to consider what weight to assign the oral and written tests so that each student’s evaluation meets the goals of the program.



For more information on the topics in this section, please consult the ActiveTeach multimedia disc in the back of this Teacher’s Edition and Lesson Planner. You will find four academic articles written by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher:

- “Making English Unforgettable: Enhancing Acquisition in the EFL Setting”
- “The Purposeful Use of Songs in Language Instruction”
- “A Process Approach to Discussion: Four Techniques that Ensure Results”
- “From Awareness to Application: Five Essential Aids to Learner Training”