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3 Giving instructions

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When I give an instruction, I sometimes seem to confuse students. They don't know what to do in the task, and I have to spend five minutes going round everyone, checking and telling them again what to do.

Aim

To give clear, effective instructions.

Introduction

Even though they may sometimes only last as little as five or ten seconds, the times when you give instructions are critical moments in any lesson. Get them wrong, and they will cause problems that ripple through the following activity and on into the rest of the lesson. In many classes that I've observed, a whole activity has failed because of student misunderstanding about what it is they were expected to do. Sadly, it's very often the learners who get blamed for doing things wrongly, when the real problem was actually the original instruction.

This unit looks at the instructions themselves. Remember that for an instruction to be heard and understood, you will first need to make sure that students are listening to you and paying attention. (See Chapter 4 Unit 2.)

Techniques: Giving instructions to lower-level classes

The reason that some instructions are unclear or misunderstood is often because they are too long, too complex or delivered too fast. Try some of these techniques:

- 1 Use grammar and vocabulary that is at or below the learners' current level
- 2 Use short sentences. Don't put more than one instruction in one sentence. Chunk your instructions: one piece of information at a time.
- 3 The least that is enough. Don't ramble. Keep instructions simple, concise and to the point. Avoid digressions.
- 4 Speak a little more slowly and clearly than you would normally do.
- 5 Pause after each instruction to allow understanding: processing time.
- 6 Sequence the instructions. Deliver them in the order that you want students to follow them.
- 7 Use signposting language, e.g. 'First ...', 'Then ...', 'Finally ...'.
- 8 Where practical, get students to immediately do each separate part of the instruction, step by step, rather than waiting until they have heard the whole sequence.
- 9 If students can see your lips as you speak, this can aid comprehension.

- 10 Write a few key words on the board as you speak to help listening, understanding and memory of the instructions. Alternatively, use little sketched icons (for example, a pen and paper) to help students.
- 11 Use gestures and facial expressions to support your instructions.
- 12 'Punch' the keywords, i.e. say the essential words in a sentence with a little more stress and separation from other words than you might typically give it. For example, 'Write your answers on the ... other ... side of the paper.'
- 13 It's often worth checking if an instruction has been understood. Rather than asking 'Do you understand?' ask a question that checks if they caught specific points, for example, 'How many questions are you going to answer?'
- 14 Choose the best moment to give out any materials, or tell students to open books, exercises, etc. Once they are staring at a text, they will lose concentration on what you are saying. It's often best to keep books closed and materials undistributed until after the key instructions have been delivered. Having said that, with some activities, students will need to have materials to hand, in order to clearly follow the detail of an instruction.
- 15 Don't let students start doing the task before you have finished giving and checking instructions with the whole class. Having some people rushing into the work distracts others and adds to the noise level. And, of course, they may well not have fully understood what to do anyway. Say: 'Wait – don't start yet', and make sure everyone really knows what to do before you say: 'OK – start now.'
- 16 Until you are comfortable with giving good clear instructions, plan them before the lesson.

Technique: Recognising elements of an instruction

Scott Thornbury categorises a number of possible features of an instruction in his A-Z of ELT. You could use this framework to put together some good instructions when you are planning a lesson. Any single instruction could contain all – or more likely some – of these elements:

- 1 A frame, i.e. a way of indicating that the last activity has finished and a new activity is about to begin. Typically this takes a verbal form, such as 'Right ...', 'OK now ...'.
- 2 A brief summary of the task and its purpose, such as 'We're going to play a game to practise asking questions ...'.
- 3 The organisation, i.e. whether the task is to be done in pairs, groups or individually.
- 4 The procedure, i.e. what it is that the learners actually will be doing – such as filling in a questionnaire, or rehearsing a dialogue, etc.
- 5 The mode, i.e. whether it is a speaking or a writing task, for example.
- 6 The outcome, i.e. what they will be required to do as a result of the task, e.g. report their results to the class, perform the dialogue, etc.
- 7 A strategy to adopt in order to facilitate the task, as when the teacher tells learners just to skim a text initially before reading it intensively.
- 8 The timing, i.e. how long the learners have to complete the task (roughly).
- 9 A cue, such as 'OK, you can start' so that learners know when to begin the task.

Technique: Being very clear about concrete details

Students often get lost because while they understand the general task (e.g. do an exercise), they are unclear about the specific details of what they have to do (e.g. 'Think about the answers, but don't write anything', 'Write full answers in your exercise book', 'Do only questions one to eight', 'Don't write whole sentences – just the correction', 'Write whole sentences', 'You need to think of three suggestions or more' and so on).

It's a good idea to emphasise these very clearly when you speak, perhaps repeating the details and checking them back with students. You don't usually need to write a whole instruction on the board (though it sometimes helps), but it's often a good idea to write up the key details in shorthand, e.g.:

- Qs 1 to 8 ONLY
- Write whole sentences.

Techniques: Showing materials, doing worked examples and giving demonstrations

The clearest way to help learners understand what they have to do is usually to show them.

1 Indicate the tasks

Hold up any documents or books they need to work with. Point clearly at the exercise or text. Don't take your hand away too quickly.

2 Show materials

If learners will need to use any materials in a task (e.g. word cards), hold these up, and read out what is on one or two examples. If you have an interactive whiteboard, you could show a zoomed-in version on it. Otherwise, you could make an enlarged photocopy.

3 Do worked examples

When you set an exercise, do one or two worked examples on the board before students start to work on it themselves. When you show example questions, allow a little thinking time for the whole class to work out possible answers and suggest them to you. It may be useful to write up a wrong suggestion and elicit reactions and reasons why it is incorrect – all before filling in the correct answer.

4 Demonstrate the task yourself

You can deliver a monologue of yourself doing the task, making your actions and thought process explicit. For example, 'So, now I'm looking at the photographs of different notices I want to find any words that are wrong. Ah ... "Do not walk in the grass" – That sounds wrong. I'm crossing out "in" and writing "on".'

5 Role play the task with a student

For pair work or group tasks, get a volunteer student or students up front with you to do a live role-play demonstration of the task. You do not need to do the whole thing. Usually, it's sufficient to show how to start the activity.

Techniques: Reducing the level of detail in your instructions

Part of the act of teaching involves training your class into ways of working that you use. A class that is doing a pair-work information gap for the first time will need careful step-by-step explanations (about how to form pairs, what the task involves, what to ask, etc.) and demonstrations (to show how to sit, how to hold the pieces of paper, how to take turns, etc.). However, after they have done this kind of activity a few times, full-blown detailed instructions should be less and less necessary. It may be possible to reduce the instruction giving to 'Get into pairs' (pausing while they do), 'Keep your picture secret' (while handing out the pictures) and 'Find what is different in your partner's picture'. You might even want to reduce some of these even more, perhaps to single keywords or gestures: OK ... Pairs! If the activity is a type that you regularly do with the class (e.g. back-to-back telephone information gap), it may be sufficient to say the name of the activity, and students will immediately move into the right positions.

Techniques: Making up for bad instructions

While your aim is, obviously, to give good instructions first time, they won't always work. You need to find out quickly if there is a problem and then retrieve the situation.

1 Monitor for potential problems

As soon as you have finished giving an instruction and learners have started on their new task, you will usually need to check to find out if they really know what to do and are doing it. Wander around, unobtrusively listening in to speaking tasks or reading what they are writing. If you see a lot of hesitant or puzzled students, you may have a problem!

2 Avoid multiple repetitions

If you find that a number of students keep asking you for help because they didn't understand the instructions, it's usually better to cut your losses and re-give the instruction to the whole class, rather than repeating it one-to-one forty times. Find a suitable location, say 'Listen and get the whole class attention'; then give the original instruction again, allowing space for checking and questions.

Techniques: Giving instructions to higher-level classes

At lower levels, teachers need to pay careful attention to their choice of language, speed of delivery and complexity of ideas in instructions. These remain important at higher levels – after all, the priority is that students successfully understand what they have to do – but it is also valid to exploit instruction-giving to help tune learners into listening to more natural speech. You might want to deliberately introduce some elements of everyday discourse into your instructions.

4 Key teacher interventions

- 1 Sentence headers: 'What I want you to do is ...'. So what I'm going to ask you to do is ...
- 2 Normal pronunciation features of fluent connected speech: weak forms, assimilation and elision.
- 3 Hesitations and filler chunks: *um, er, I dunno, I suppose*.
- 4 Vague language: *sort of, things, thingamajig, about*.
- 5 Oral sentences that flow rather than have discernible beginnings and endings: ... and put all your answers in this box, and then you're gonna need to get together with ...
- 6 Talk around the task – for example, suggesting strategies for doing an exercise or telling learners the *why* as well as the *how*. So, for example, not just, 'Write answers to Exercise 3'; but adding, 'This is designed to help you choose the correct particle for the phrasal verb. A good way to approach it would be to ...'. Alternatively you could ask the learners what they think the aim of an activity might be.

Techniques: learners give instructions

1 Learners read from the book

In lower-level classes, learners can read the instructions aloud from their coursebook, and you can then show an example or check if they were understood or not. While individual learners' pronunciation will perhaps be hard to understand, doing this will usefully slow the instruction down and encourage students to read it in their own books.

2 Learners read from cards

Split up the instructions you need to give into separate small parts and put each one on a separate card. Number them in order, e.g. (1) 'Stand up', (2) 'Find a partner', (3) 'Ask your partner your first question. Write their answer on your paper', (4) 'Find a new partner', etc.

In class, hand out the cards, each to a different student. Ask the first student to read card number one out, and students do what they are asked to do. When ready, indicate that the second student can read their card. The students follow that instruction, and then the third student reads theirs ... and so on.

Using a technique like this involves extra preparation from the teacher and may be quite time-consuming in class. It is only worth doing if you consider the benefits to outweigh these issues – for example, it might get more students involved in the lesson, may give a chance for quieter students to speak when they read the cards and could prepare students for a greater step towards autonomy (e.g. running a whole task themselves) later on in the course.

3 Learners correct the teacher

A good way to build learner confidence and start training your class in taking a little more responsibility is by deliberately giving wrong instructions yourself and getting them to correct you. You don't need to explain what you are doing, but make the first one or two mistakes so obvious that they will catch on quickly. They may be hesitant to correct you at first, but if you maintain a happy, 'silly me' atmosphere, they will soon get into it. For example:

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Teacher: Turn to page 82. Look at the text about turtles.
Students: Uh? 82? No text! ... Teacher! It's on page 79!
Teacher: Oh ... sorry, yes, you're right. So the text about spaceships on page 79 –
Students: Turtles.
Teacher: Turtles. Yes, OK. Look at the ten pictures.
Students: There are six pictures.
Teacher: Yes ... six ... of course! And there are ten sentences.
Students: SIX!
Teacher: SIX ... thank you. Six sentences above the pictures.
Students: Underneath! (And so on ...)

In deliberately subverting your own authority and omniscience a little, you actually help to create a more cohesive, cooperative, democratic classroom. Because you are seen to have made mistakes deliberately and with preparation rather than because of carelessness or ignorance, it may even have the effect of increasing their respect for you. Paradoxically, because the learners were listening so carefully and with such engagement to what you said (trying to catch you out), there is likely to be a much greater understanding of what to do in the subsequent task than if you had given 100% correct instructions.

4 Learners prepare instructions

In classes that have sufficient English, individual learners (e.g. early finishers of the previous task) can be briefed to prepare to give instructions to others for the next task. This might be to a group of students rather than to the whole class. Where possible, allow time for them to practise with you and get feedback before they do it for real. Getting learners to take on 'teacher' roles can be very confidence-building and motivating.

5 Learners plan and organise

In a fully democratic classroom where learners have taken an active role in deciding what to do and how to do it, the need for teacher instructions naturally diminishes. The learners will be much more in charge of what is done, when and how and can take responsibility for organising work themselves.

Questions for reflection

- Do students ever get confused by your instructions? Which element seems to cause the biggest problems (and could most usefully be improved on): language level, complexity of the thing being explained or speed of delivery?