7 Teaching flexibly

The previous chapter described the ways in which language teachers manage individual students in their classes. It showed that many of the strategies of experienced language teachers can be understood in terms of a desire to channel the energies of individuals in positive directions, while minimising the negative effect that the behaviour of individuals can have on the social wellbeing of their class groups. It also drew attention to the fact that the spontaneous classroom actions of experienced language teachers are based on noticing behavioural clues and rapidly responding to them in ways that they consider appropriate.

The present chapter focuses on pedagogic aspects of classroom language teaching, explaining how and why language teachers teach in such flexible ways. It is divided into four sections. Section 7.1 dispels two myths: that teachers teach in pre-planned ways, and that teachers teach from textbooks in the prescribed manner. Section 7.2, which occupies the major part of the chapter, presents a key premise of the book: that it is their capacity to draw on all their previous classroom experience that enables language teachers to make so many executive decisions in their classrooms with such speed and assurance. This section explains how sensitivity to students' learning needs enables experienced language teachers both to deviate in major ways from their lesson plans, and to digress in minor ways during the course of classroom activities. It also draws attention to the relationship between long-term goals and teaching flexibly. Section 7.3 identifies the ongoing need of language teachers to teach creatively in their classrooms, while Section 7.4 identifies the relationship between teaching flexibly and the maintenance of a sense of community within language classrooms.

7.1 The reality behind the myth

In 1970 large-scale research was conducted in the USA on the effects on student learning of three different foreign language teaching methods. The major conclusion came as a surprise to everyone (and a disappointment to those who had assumed that the audio-lingual approach would prove to be more effective): there was no significant difference in the levels of achievement of the students in the different groups. In other

words, all three methods were equally effective. However, certain incidental findings were intriguing. One was that numbers of teachers admitted that they had not adhered strictly to the approach they were meant to be using, but had taught in the ways they thought best. This finding highlights the fact that teachers find it extremely difficult to limit themselves to teaching in prescribed ways: pedagogic eclecticism is, it seems, a key feature of effective teaching.

For a discussion of the findings of the Pennsylvania Project see Clark (1969).

Clearly, there are many reasons why no two teachers ever teach in the same way. Many of these are deep-seated ones quite unrelated to the immediate context of the language school, the program or the particular class being taught. The classroom behaviour of every teacher is subtly influenced by a unique combination of factors: their personality, their interests and life experiences, their previous learning experiences, their attitudes, values, assumptions and so on. A description of how these factors combine in myriad ways, enabling each language teacher to develop a unique world-view that in turn both informs and influences their classroom practice, will be presented in Chapter 11.

Comment

The infinitely flexible ways in which language teachers behave in their classrooms can be examined from a number of theoretical perspectives. References are given later in this chapter to schema theory and social constructivism, both of which go some way to explaining how and why classroom language teachers find themselves compelled to behave in such a range of unanticipated ways in their classrooms.

The present section focuses on two specific aspects of classroom teaching where the classroom practices of experienced language teachers confound expectations. These are (1) not making or following lesson plans in time-honoured ways, and (2) not following textbooks in a slavish fashion.

Doing away with the lesson plan

The practical component of teacher training programs requires trainees to decide what they want to teach in a number of practice lessons, plan

and deliver each lesson, and then reflect on how each one went. It is emphasised right from the start that detailed planning is essential. Apart from creating a sense of security and minimising the risk of things going wrong, lesson planning enables trainees to appreciate the importance of sequencing activities, and of relating them all to the overall aim of the lesson – so that the lesson forms a coherent whole. By having the importance of lesson planning emphasised so strongly, trainee language teachers complete their courses believing that meticulous planning is the key to successful language teaching. On successful completion of her course one trainee decided not to go into language teaching after all – explaining that she felt daunted by the prospect of having to spend so many hours laboriously planning each and every lesson.

Once they enter the real world of everyday language teaching novice teachers find the situation very different. They notice that few teachers around them spend time writing detailed lesson plans – and certainly not ones containing formal aims and objectives. They notice that it is far more common for teachers to be making lists of items in the order in which they intend to teach them, or jotting down rough notes or reminders to themselves about what they intend to cover. They notice that many teachers happily go to class with piles of photocopied materials (but no apparent plan), while others go to class with nothing more than a short text, or perhaps even a single picture, to last for a two-hour lesson. What is going on here? Are teachers not fully planning their lessons because they are lazy or because of lack of time? Or is detailed planning not so essential after all?

It is the same story with longer-term teaching plans. Although they may complete weekly outlines of linguistic items, skills or topics to be focused upon, language teachers often complete such outlines retrospectively (as a record of what they have covered, as opposed to what they intended to cover). And if asked whether they plan whole courses in any kind of detail in advance, experienced language teachers regularly throw up their hands in horror and exclaim, 'Impossible!' or 'No way!' They may have an overall plan or framework for their course – but are often reluctant to specify the individual components of the course in advance.

It is not surprising that some language teachers (particularly those who do not intend to remain in the profession for long) are happy to grab materials off the shelf and rush off to teach without either a lesson plan or any particular teaching goals in mind. What is surprising, however, are the number of committed language teachers who explain that they go to class with their lesson plans in their heads – often in the form of general ideas about what they *might* do, rather than specific ideas about what they *will* do. The lesson plans of experienced language teachers are likely to reflect the following description:

> My lesson plans are definitely in my head or on scraps of paper – or often I'll plan half the lesson and then, when I'm in the lesson, I'll see how what I wanted to do is developing. That's not to say that I don't go in with a clear set of activities, but I don't necessarily think through, 'X minutes on this', 'Y minutes on that' and rigidly stick to it. So if I do go in with a plan, it's likely to be a fairly rough idea of what I want to do, rather than a strict plan that I follow. And I'm very happy to deviate and amend it as I go through.

In his book *Beyond training* (1998) Richards has a useful chapter on lesson plans, in which he reports on a study of how experienced and less experienced ESL teachers used lesson plans. The study revealed that the experienced teachers reported less frequent use of lesson plans than the inexperienced teachers, made greater use of mental plans than written plans, and, because their plans were much briefer, included less information in them.

Language teachers put forward a number of reasons for their reluctance to engage in detailed lesson planning. The first one is practical: why bother to write out a detailed lesson plan if it's highly unlikely you'll follow it? One teacher recalled a transition moment early in her career when she looked at her beautifully written lesson plan and said to herself, 'It's a lost cause trying to stick to a set structure – so I'm not going to bother to write detailed plans any more'. Another teacher explained that, whenever she was inspected, she would always design and then follow a carefully planned and timed lesson plan – because she knew that this was what was expected of her. However, as soon as the inspectors' backs were turned she would go back to doing what she always did: teach lessons according to her gut feeling of what was right for her class, adjusting the length and focus of activities as she thought fit.

Language teachers believe that another limitation of lesson planning is that lesson plans compel them to focus on their lesson delivery rather than on the responses of their students. In the words of one teacher, 'When you keep referring to your lesson plan it dulls your sensitivity – the teaching antennae you've opened up are wilted or blunted'. A further criticism of lesson plans is that they take the excitement out of teaching, making it a more mundane exercise. One experienced teacher believed that he taught far more effectively when he didn't know in advance precisely the direction that his lessons would take. In his view, 'If you're in a state of reasonable anxiety, with an adrenalin rush – and having to think on your feet as you go – you'll produce more exciting and engaging lessons'. Comments such as these suggest that, although they recognise that lesson

planning is an integral part of the process of learning to teach, many experienced language teachers find rigid adherence to lesson plans artificially restricting and, ultimately, self-defeating. They find that they prefer to go with the flow and, in the words of one teacher, 'respond to what's happening with the students – rather than plodding on with the plan'.

> Cognitive psychologists have identified that one of the roles of experience in expertise is acquiring the ability to foresee and exploit future opportunities to satisfy one's goals. Seifert *et al.* (1997: 105) describe the ability to take advantage of circumstances to solve problems as 'opportunistic planning', saying that the planner should exploit the current opportunity and change his or her expectations to properly anticipate and exploit the future opportunity.

Picking the eyes out of textbooks

In many language schools specific coursebooks are allocated for use with specific classes at specific levels. Most recently published coursebooks are colourful and attractive. They have clear organisational structures and contain carefully balanced and graded grammar, vocabulary, skills work and tasks. Topics and themes are selected with attention to what is likely to be of interest to the presumed users of the book. The accompanying teacher's book, written on the assumption that teachers will go through the book in a sequential manner, gives clear instructions as to how it should be used. Language teachers, it seems, are in a fortunate position. If they are teaching a course for which a particular book has been assigned, they apparently have at their disposal a complete package designed to be used as it stands.

Language teachers recognise the value of coursebooks. They recall how much they relied on them in their early days of teaching, one teacher describing coursebooks as 'an incredibly useful prop for inexperienced teachers'. Language teachers appreciate that coursebooks give a sense of direction, coherence and continuity to language programs. They recognise that coursebooks empower students, enabling them to review what has been taught and to preview what is to come. They understand the key role that dedicated textbooks can play in preparing students for specific examinations, when students need to practise examination techniques on a regular basis and do many additional exercises for homework. Language teachers also understand the face validity of coursebooks. One teacher reported feeling embarrassed when, on being asked by a student for the name of the coursebook so that they could buy their own copy, she was compelled to reply, 'Sorry, but there isn't one'.

> '[Textbooks] too easily become a convenience that inhibits the imagination. . . . Obviously, there is nothing wrong with using texts and other prepared instructional materials nor with taking advantage of well-designed teaching activities. Total dependence on prefabricated devices, however, prevents the teacher from improvising, making subtle readjustments to the learning situation, and imbuing the lesson with stylistic color.' Rubin (1985: 75)

Despite recognising the advantages of using commercially produced materials as complete packages, most language teachers make it abundantly clear that wherever possible they avoid doing so. When questioned about how they use coursebooks, or while talking generally about their teaching approaches, language teachers make statements such as, 'I pick the eyes out of textbooks', 'I mix and match', 'I like to dip and dive', or 'I always supplement the book'. Some experienced teachers use coursebooks as overall syllabus frameworks, covering the linguistic structures but replacing the majority of the activities with different ones. Other language teachers select certain chapters from the book, teach them in a jumbled-up sequence – often leaving out some altogether. Teachers often talk in deprecating ways about 'ploughing through the coursebook' 'doing nothing but the book' or 'being coursebook-dependent'.

It is clear that experienced language teachers are usually unwilling to take what would seem to be the easy option: following the coursebook in the prescribed way. Even teachers of examination preparation classes, who are normally required to use coursebooks specifically designed to cover the syllabus, regularly incorporate supplementary activities into their courses. Even in situations when their pedagogic freedom is severely curtailed, many language teachers seem intent on not doing what they are supposed to be doing. One teacher who had taught in Japan, where there was heavy pressure to follow the approved textbook in the prescribed manner, reported having found ingenious ways of doing things differently and of incorporating his own materials into lessons.

The intriguing question is: why do language teachers persist in giving themselves so much extra work? Why do they spend time and effort finding, modifying and photocopying exercises and tasks, when there are plenty in the book to choose from? Why do they bother to search around for authentic materials (materials that have been developed for purposes other than teaching), when the book contains facsimiles of newspaper articles and so on, accompanied by pre-designed activities and exercises? And why, of all things, do they spend valuable leisure time developing their own worksheets, when there is such a wealth of

published material readily available (not to mention worksheets developed by colleagues that have somehow entered the public 'pool')? Teachers themselves recognise the irony of the situation, wondering why so many of their colleagues persist in 'reinventing the wheel' (an expression commonly heard in staff rooms), rather than following coursebooks in the designated way.

7.2 Experience-based language teaching

A fundamental reason why language teachers teach so flexibly is that they have a firm experiential foundation upon which to base their decisions about what to do in their classrooms and how to teach the target language. In the words of one teacher, 'You can be cooler about things because you've done it all before'. Language teachers are also aware that they know better than anyone else, including coursebook writers, what the specific needs and interests of their particular classes actually are.

As described in Chapter 2, one of the reasons why training to be a language teacher is so demanding is that trainees have only a flimsy knowledge base upon which to design their lessons. Because they are normally doing everything for the first time, they have little idea how best to make their intentions clear, how best to explain grammar points, or how best to organise things in general. Because they do not yet know which aspects of the target language students will find confusing, it is difficult for them to anticipate problems – let alone address them on the spot. Because they are unsure how much students will be able to absorb in a single lesson, or how long students' concentration spans will be, it is difficult for them to pace their lessons appropriately. And because they plan single, uni-directional lessons (usually with considerable time and effort), they are unlikely to deviate significantly from their plans. They also have limited opportunities to think in terms of sequences of lessons.

The situation of novice teachers contrasts starkly with that of experienced language teachers. While for the former teaching is at first a relatively hit-and-miss affair, for the latter it is a matter of building on knowledge and fine-tuning previously tried-and-tested strategies and techniques. One teacher described this ongoing process in the following way:

> I'm always upgrading my materials and trying to find better ways of doing things. Some things I'm happy with, whereas there are other areas where I'm looking for new and more interesting, entertaining, memorable, effective ways of doing things.

Over the years language teachers develop knowledge bases of the kinds of problems their students are likely to have: the structures they find

difficult to master, the words they have difficulty in pronouncing, the expressions they routinely misuse, and so on. They also develop their own preferred ways of presenting new language, of explaining grammar 'rules' and of consolidating student understanding. As one teacher commented:

> I've learnt how to explain some things in what I think is quite a funny and memorable way. Some things I think I do always teach more or less the same way, because I seem to have hit upon some formula that seems to work quite well for me and for the students – and it produces the right results.

When strategies do not work, language teachers either modify them or discard them altogether. When they do work, teachers unconsciously slip them into their memory banks – from where they can be retrieved, dusted off and re-used as required. Gradually teachers' memory banks expand, filled with recollections of strategies that have worked successfully for them in the past. When they later encounter a similar situation, their mind is jogged. They find thoughts flashing across their minds such as, 'That ranking activity would fit in just nicely tomorrow', or, 'Ah yes, I can use that little exercise I made up for that other class to consolidate the understanding of this group'. Often language teachers find themselves responding spontaneously to their perception of students' needs. For example, they may find themselves drawing a timeline on the board to explain the difference between the present perfect and the simple past – without having had any definite plan to do so.

Comment

The flexible ways in which experienced language teachers behave in their classrooms can usefully be explained in terms of schema theory. Cognitive psychologists use the term 'schema' (plural: either 'schemas' or 'schemata') to describe a general knowledge structure used for understanding. According to Medin and Ross (1992: 346), the following points can be made about schemas (italics added):

1. A schema refers to one's knowledge *about* the world (as opposed to information that is *in* the world).
2. It is general, encoding information about a particular *type* of situation, rather than about one particular situation.
3. It is structured, meaning that it includes not only a set of facts, but also how the facts are *related*. This allows *inferences* to be made.

4. Its structure allows it to be used in the comprehension of *types of* situations.

According to Medin and Ross (1992: 347), an additional feature is that they generate expectations about what is likely to happen, help us to understand if something unusual is happening, and enable us to predict what is likely to occur.

The ways that they gradually build up memories of materials, strategies and 'things that work' in their classrooms suggests that language teachers are indeed drawing upon and progressively developing and refining schemas during the course of their everyday teaching.

Livingston and Borko (1989: 36), quoted by Richards (1998: 75), talk about the lessons they observed: 'The success of the experts' improvisation seemed to depend upon their ability to provide examples quickly and to draw connections between students' comments or questions and the lesson's objectives. In terms of cognitive structure, successful improvisational teaching requires that the teachers have an extensive network of interconnected, easily accessible schemata and be able to select particular strategies, routines, and information from these schemata during actual teaching and learning interactions based on specific classroom occurrences.'

Stein (1997) points to the limitations of understanding expertise when studied from a purely cognitive psychological view, suggesting that study of the social context may offer further insights into the nature of expertise. According to Stein, 'An expert is more than the sum of his or her cognitive abilities and skills – he or she is also codefined by context' (1997: 192). The present book supports Stein's position: that it is necessary to understand the expertise of teachers in terms not only of their ability to teach, but also in terms of their ability to function effectively within the social context of the classroom. Subsequent chapters of this book describe some of the ways in which teachers combine both pedagogic and social aspects of the teaching process.

Creating, selecting and adapting teaching materials

Language teachers develop their teaching skills on the job. When they take over a new course they may have the opportunity to chat with the previous teacher of the course, or to look at a course file containing photocopies of the materials that a previous teacher has used. To all intents and purposes, however, they are on their own. In their early days in

teaching, most language teachers spend many hours familiarising themselves with the teaching materials currently available in the resource rooms of their language schools. This process of scouring textbooks (both coursebooks and books containing supplementary materials) for clear explanations of grammatical points, exercises for reinforcement and creative ideas for supplementary activities and tasks, enables teachers to expand their repertoires. They glean ideas from these books and progressively try them out, establishing which ones work for them and which do not. For example, one teacher might be captivated by chorus activities such as those in the *Jazz Chants* books, and teach them with great enthusiasm and verve. In contrast, another teacher might try one activity from the book and discover that they do not feel at ease getting their students to engage in chorus work. Gradually teachers develop their personal styles, teaching in ways that feel comfortable to them and recycling the materials that they can find quickly and that they know will work for them.

As far as commercially produced teaching materials are concerned, it is by no means the case that one size fits all. Language teachers develop clear preferences for certain coursebooks and resource books, drawing regularly on certain books and saying of others, 'I just can't use that book'. Although for some teachers being required to use coursebooks whose cultural content is inappropriate for their students is not problematic, for others it is a significant issue. The situation arises relatively often in Australia, where many of the best-selling coursebooks are published in the UK. Some teachers mentally cringe when they come across articles about Princess Diana or the Loch Ness Monster, while others report feeling uncomfortable when requiring their students to read about rural living in the UK. Even having to explain the meaning of words like 'village', 'cottage' or even 'semi-detached house' – when students in Australian language schools will be living in single-storey houses (known simply as 'houses', not 'bungalows') in suburbia – makes some teachers wince. It is relatively easy for language teachers to substitute items in textbooks with others that have more relevance for their students – and this is what many do on a routine basis. For example, a teacher might bring into class a set of tourist maps of the historic port city of Fremantle (a place regularly visited by West Australians) rather than teach students how to give directions by looking at the map of central London provided in the coursebook.

Language teachers regularly find that they like to 'tweak' the materials that they collect from different sources, customising them so that they reflect more accurately their own ideas of what is important for their students to learn. If they are teaching students different ways of apologising or making excuses, for example, they may well include one or two

idiomatic expressions that Australians would use. The following comment reflects the experience of many language teachers:

> I find it difficult to use other people's materials. I always feel I have to develop my own – or adapt them or adjust them in some way. Some materials are pretty good and pretty sound – and I certainly haven't got the time and energy to produce all my own materials. But I do produce a fair amount of my own stuff. And the things that I take from elsewhere, I always alter them a bit.

There is a general consensus of opinion that religiously following coursebooks tends to lead to the development of a flat, single-paced teaching style – as opposed to a more vibrant, ad hoc style of teaching that naturally occurs when students' needs are being responded to.

Focusing on student learning

When they begin their teaching careers language teachers find themselves consciously thinking about what they are doing. Just as learning to drive a car involves listening to the sound of the engine, judging when to change gear, keeping the required distance from the kerb, reading road signs, deciding when to overtake and so on, language teaching involves focusing your attention on many different things at once. Small wonder, then, that just as learner drivers find it difficult to watch out for pedestrians on top of everything else they're doing, so novice language teachers tend to concentrate on the mechanics of teaching rather than on their students' learning. Happily, just as driving a car eventually becomes a fluid, automatic process, so many aspects of language teaching eventually become second nature to language teachers, who no longer have to focus so intently on everything that they are doing. They just know, for example, that they should write new words on the board, rather than simply present them orally – just as they know that explanations must always be given with words that are simpler than the word or concept being explained. Language teachers do not need to remind themselves to behave in these ways: they find themselves doing so automatically.

Tsui (2003: 19) summarises a core concept of Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1993) theory of expertise, which posits that well-developed routines enable the mental resources of experts to be freed up. These resources can then be 'reinvested' in solving higher-level problems that the expert did not have the capacity to deal with earlier. In this way experts are continually extending the growing edge of their expertise.

This core concept of Bereiter and Scardamalia's theory of expertise is reflected by the classroom practices of language teachers who, while they may not define themselves as experts, are nevertheless able to turn their attention to solving additional problems during the course of lessons.

The ability to perform many classroom functions effortlessly and without conscious deliberation enables language teachers to direct their attention away from their own teaching and towards their students' learning. They find themselves increasingly sensitive to subtle indicators of the degree to which their students have understood, or successfully mastered, whatever it is they are teaching. One teacher reported no longer feeling worried when she saw students with their heads down and frowns on their faces (as she had done in her early days of teaching) – because experience had taught her that such body language was often an indicator of concentration rather than dissatisfaction. Rather, she would probe further, in order to establish the extent to which the students were really having problems in understanding – either by asking individuals directly or by more subtle means. In her words:

> I try to find out covertly at first, with indirect questions, trying to see how they're getting on with an activity. I try to detect signs of whether they're moving towards the aim of the activity, or even enjoying the activity, or seeing the point of it.

By focusing on students' responses and overall levels of receptivity language teachers find themselves having ideas about the kinds of topics, themes and activities that are likely to engage their classes. The fact that ideas readily spring to mind at unexpected moments outside class time suggests that the classes they are currently teaching are never far from their minds. One teacher described the process of identifying the interests of her classes as 'sussing out your class, through a combination of what you know about students from that background and what you find out from them in the course of lessons'. Experience has taught language teachers that, in the words of one teacher, 'You can only do *some* things with *some* of your classes *some* of the time'. One high-school teacher of Japanese reported that one class 'wouldn't let go of the topic of sumo wrestling', while another displayed no interest in the topic. Similarly, a teacher of adult migrants reported that playing English songs in class (and having everyone listen and sing along quietly when they felt ready to do so) went down extremely well with a class of refugees from El Salvador. It failed, however, to appeal to a class of students from the former Yugoslavia, causing the teacher to remark, 'Songs are not for this class'.

> The notion of teaching flexibly is supported by Breen and Littlejohn (2000), who point out that the actual syllabus of the classroom is an unfolding compromise between the original pre-designed syllabus and the individual teacher's alertness to those aspects of learner agendas that may be revealed during classroom work (2000: 9).

Keeping teaching goals in mind

A key distinguishing feature of experienced language teachers is the fact that they have at the back of their minds a clear idea of the overall goals for their courses, in terms of the learning progress that they wish their students to make. This might sound obvious, but it is not. Many less experienced language teachers, while adept at organising classroom tasks and activities, find it difficult to visualise how the discrete parts of lessons relate to overall lesson goals – or how individual lessons relate to overall course goals. For this reason they may be reluctant to let their lessons go off at a tangent, fearing that they may not be able to 'pull the lesson back'. Alternatively, if they are not serious-minded, language teachers may be only too happy to have their lessons go off in unplanned, unexpected directions – particularly if they prepared their lessons in an unfocused way, without really knowing what they wanted to achieve anyway.

In contrast, one of the hallmarks of experienced language teachers is the ability to direct all their teaching efforts towards the achievement of worthwhile learning goals. By so doing their students come to trust them, sensing that every activity has its place in the overall scheme of things, and will benefit their learning in a particular way. When discussing her ability to do what she called 'sidestepping without floundering', one teacher articulated the process in the following way:

> You're able to relax and do these other things, and yet keep the confidence of the class, because there's some sense in which they sense you've got a clear direction and won't let things get out of hand. When you're not so experienced you feel yourself going off track and you might be a bit panic-stricken – and I'm sure the students pick up on that. There's a voice in your head thinking, 'Help! Where am I going? What am I going to do next?' It becomes survival mode – whereas when you're experienced you don't really feel that. You know you're going somewhere worthwhile – you sort of go with the flow, and yet you know it's going where you want it to go.

Ironically, it is the ability to retain in their minds clear learning goals for their classes that enables experienced language teachers to behave

flexibly in their classrooms. Just as an experienced yachtsperson keeps their yacht on course by adjusting the direction to take advantage of the wind and the currents, and by tacking in a zig-zag manner whenever necessary, so an experienced language teacher keeps their class on course by being flexible. Without this ability to move indirectly towards the achievement of overall learning goals, language teachers would be compelled to teach in more rigid, formulaic ways. Some language teachers describe this flexible movement towards learning goals in terms of branching lesson plans:

> In my mind I can go in so many different directions at this point in the lesson. I haven't planned it, but because of what's happened, what's been said or thought, it's what you do. You've got to have the main aim of the lesson in mind – but to get to that destination there are many different routes to take. Sometimes when you're in class you think, I was going to take route A, but I could try route B, which might work better with this group.

Some experienced language teachers describe the phenomenon of shifting the goalposts: the practice of having your class achieve something different from what you'd initially intended because you realise that achievement of an alternative linguistic goal is just as valid. Talking about the achievement of specific lesson goals, one teacher said, 'So long as we get to B, or something that's as useful as B in the overall scheme of things, then I'll have taught a successful lesson'. Looking at the broader picture of the achievement of the overall course, as opposed to individual lesson goals, another teacher made the following comment:

> It sort of dawned on me, maybe over one or two courses, that it didn't matter if I didn't achieve those specific objectives, as long as they could do what they were supposed to do at the end of the course. So they didn't have to achieve what I'd set out for them to achieve in that particular lesson.

A common practice, particularly amongst experienced language teachers, is to recap at regular intervals what has been achieved. Some teachers do this by starting each lesson with an activity that requires students to focus on something they learnt yesterday – and then test their peers to see whether they've remembered it too. Teachers whose lessons diverge significantly from the course their students might have expected them to take often not only recap what has been learnt, but also explain precisely how the deviation contributed to their students' learning. They may, for example, explain the circumstances under which students can use the new vocabulary, or remind the class of the specific skill they've just practised and explain how it will benefit them in the future. This retrospective validation is an important way of maintaining student confidence in

the overall direction of language courses which, by their open-ended nature, can sometimes appear to lack a sense of coherence and purpose.

Nunan makes the interesting point that in a study of nine ESL teachers teaching in Australia very few lessons began with the teacher's explicitly laying out for the students the objectives of the lesson (1996: 44–5). He believes the reason to be that in the minds of the teachers the notion of individual lessons was not particularly salient for the teachers, who saw the boundaries of lessons dissolving within the larger framework of the course. A further reason may be that, as the teachers in the present section make clear, their goals were generalised ones that enabled them to teach in flexible ways during lessons. The more experienced teachers would then make a point of explaining what had been taught, and justifying its usefulness, in an *ex post facto* manner.

Dörnyei (2001: 79) states that explaining the purpose and utility of whatever a person is being required to do is a key motivational strategy that is regularly used in civilian contexts. Like Nunan, he observes that even experienced teachers sometimes expect students to carry out a task without offering them any real explanation about the purpose of the activity.

Responsiveness to students' needs

Even though they have a clear idea of the general direction in which they wish their lessons to go, experienced language teachers regularly change their minds about the organisation or sequence of activities. These sudden changes of plan are not fanciful whims but rather rapid responses to subtle indicators that their students' learning needs could be better addressed in slightly different ways. One teacher described this process in the following way:

> I changed my mind twice today, sensing that what I'd suggested was too much for the students. I think I must have taken into account their body language, subconsciously almost. I'd been going to get them to fill in the rest of their sheets individually as homework for next week – but then I decided to get the class as a whole to collaborate and pool their knowledge.

Language teachers regularly report how ideas for modifying what they intended to do suddenly flash across their minds – either during lessons, or as they make their way to or from class. One teacher explained how it suddenly came to her during the coffee break that the role-play activity she had planned for after the break (with the students being either

'travel agents' or 'travellers') would be much more dynamic if she ensured that both groups had hidden agendas. She therefore returned to the classroom and immediately added this additional dimension to the activity.

An important aspect of these sudden changes of plan, or adaptations of classroom activities, is that students are not normally aware that they have been made – experienced teachers being able to disguise their adjustments in such a way that their lessons still appear seamless. The process of making adjustments to activities, in order to maintain the illusion that everything has been pre-planned, is described by one teacher in the following way:

> I didn't have enough time for the last task, so on the spot I had to modify how we were going to deal with the worksheet that I'd already distributed. I couldn't do as much with it as I had originally planned, but because I'm reasonably experienced I was able to say, without missing a beat, what we would do – which was a shorter version of what I'd intended. And then I invented a homework activity that would allow them to pull the ends together of what we'd been doing. . . So the structure of the lesson stood – as was intended from the beginning – and they didn't know that the proportions of time were different from what I'd had in my head when I started. But they should have gone away with the impression that they'd done things in an organised way.

The fact that teachers' subtle change of focus or direction go unnoticed by others is supported by an incident when a group of trainees watched a demonstration lesson in which the teacher being observed made considerable adjustments to her lesson, in response to student difficulties. In the feedback session the teacher was amazed to discover that the trainees had no idea that she'd changed her lesson in any way at all.

Capitalising on students' interests

The more self-assured they become, the more likely language teachers are to make significant adjustments to the content and direction of their lessons in direct response to student feedback (provided that they are not tightly constrained by prescribed syllabus frameworks). Again, students are normally unaware that their teacher has changed direction, since teachers tend to keep their intentions to themselves. Sometimes teachers abandon what they intended to do mid-way through lessons, sensing that something dynamic is happening in the form of high levels of student interest and engagement. One teacher described this experience as 'having a sudden insight into what the students are actually experiencing'. When moments such as these occur, teachers are often prepared to

surrender temporary control over the direction of their lessons and be guided by their students – sensing that such opportunities are too valuable to let slip. One teacher described how she had planned a grammar lesson based on the structures contained in a particular text. However, after creating interest in the story in a series of pre-reading activities, she allowed the lesson to go in a completely different direction. This is her account of what happened:

> I'd built it up and they were like really excited. Every activity was geared towards the grammar – but the students were really fighting against that. They wanted to read and they wanted to find out everything that was going on in that story. They were just taking so long and reading intensively, and I could feel the atmosphere in the classroom, and I thought to myself, they obviously don't want to do the grammar. And that's the moment when you make that decision, whether to go with that or not – because of course they're taking you somewhere else.

In an interesting chapter in Bailey and Nunan's book *Voices from the language classroom* (1996) Bailey describes a similar incident (reported originally in Allwright and Bailey, 1991) where the grammatical focus of the lesson dissolved when the teacher and the students became engaged in comparing anecdotes about theft. Evidently the conversation then moved to talking generally about 'strange things that happen in Los Angeles', and included discussion of the meaning of the terms 'flasher' and 'streaker'. As Bailey points out, 'In this moment of exuberant conversation, the teacher herself had completely abandoned the very point of the original lesson plan' (1996: 23).

Comment

Bailey's anecdote suggests that it is a regular occurrence for teachers and their students to start speaking spontaneously during lessons about points of common interest. Indeed, teachers who are not overconcerned about achieving specific teaching goals by the end of the lesson are often only too happy to be sidetracked. What is interesting in the teacher's account quoted immediately above is that she reports assessing the situation and making a conscious decision to abandon the grammar focus of the lesson. This is a good example of Schön's 'thinking-in-action' (Schön, 1987).

Language teachers regularly report allowing learning activities to run on, sensing that their students are fully engaged and that the learning

opportunity is a valuable one. One teacher reported replaying a song a number of times, when she had fully intended to do something else, 'because the students just seemed so happy and wanting to go along with it'. Language teachers also routinely do the opposite: modifying activities when they see students are finding them too difficult, or cutting them short when they sense that students are getting bored. Again, teachers tend to disguise their subtle changes of plan – unless they choose to abandon the activity altogether.

Many language teachers find that, the more aware they become of their students' learning processes, the stronger their desire becomes to customise their courses to their particular student group and the more reluctant they become to 'deliver' their courses in pre-planned, predetermined ways. One experienced teacher with a particularly busy schedule decided on one occasion to take the easy option and base her afternoon class around a series of videos about the Australian way of life. She was pleased because the accompanying workbook was colourful and contained a range of interesting-looking interactive tasks. The results were disastrous. The students became bored with the predictable pattern of watching each video and then doing the games and quizzes in the workbook – and attendance dropped significantly. The teacher resolved never again to go against her better judgement – which had been to replace the workbook activities with more 'meaty' follow-up activities as soon as she sensed that the students' interest was waning.

Opportunistic digressions

> 'Relevant excursions from the central theme . . . help put ideas in context and highlight their utility, thereby increasing learning. Adroit additions add blossoms to the bare limbs of a lesson.'
>
> Rubin (1985: 21)

Just as they deviate in major ways from what they intended to do in their lessons, so language teachers routinely digress in a variety of minor ways during the course of their daily teaching. Teachers talk about 'sidestepping', 'bringing in extra little bits and pieces' or 'dealing with things as they pop up'. They behave in these ways as a matter of course – perhaps as many as 10 or 20 times in any one lesson. Someone who walks into a language classroom at the end of a lesson usually sees ready evidence of this in the form of a whiteboard filled with items. These include isolated words (often with a code letter indicating their part of speech), groups of words bracketed together (to indicate connections), words contrasted because they have opposite meanings, expressions, sentences, arrows,

brackets, additional marks (to indicate stressed syllables), ticks, crosses and perhaps little drawings too. All these items are evidence of spontaneous interaction having taken place in the classroom: concepts explained, linkages made, new words supplied, correct usage highlighted, and so on.

Digressions such as these do not normally interrupt the flow of the lesson or set the course of the lesson in a different direction. Rather, they function as little add-ons to the basic lesson, designed either to revise or to reinforce what has already been taught, or to expand or enrich students' knowledge of the target language. For example, a teacher might take a few moments to remind the class of the frequently confused adjectival pairs 'interesting/interested', 'boring/bored' and so on, because they notice a number of students confusing them as they write book reviews. Similarly, a teacher might take the opportunity to teach the class, in passing, an idiom such as 'Better late than never' – because it is applicable to a real-life situation that has suddenly occurred (such as a student arriving late).

Language teachers describe the practice of teaching opportunistically as 'grabbing opportunities', 'seeing a little window of opportunity' or 'striking while the iron is hot'. Such spur-of-the moment decisions are based on a sudden feeling that the moment is right to correct a misconception (described by one teacher as 'doing running repairs'), to expand on something or to teach something extra that students might find interesting or memorable. Teachers do not necessarily check later whether their additional snippets have been absorbed. This is partly because they may not recall all the extra points they have touched upon during the course of their lesson and partly because they sense that some things will be remembered, even though only mentioned in passing. One teacher explained the meaning of the word 'masochistic' to her advanced level class (in the context of discussing people doing exams for the fun of it) – and suddenly found herself teaching the word 'sadistic' as well. In her view the students were ready to appreciate the deep and complex meanings of certain words, and might well remember these two highly specialised words.

Once they have a wealth of experience behind them, language teachers find it easy to stand up at the whiteboard and improvise: they do not need to work out how to present or explain something first. As one teacher remarked: 'I see myself as an instinctive teacher. Perhaps because I've been teaching for a while I just feel that maybe I can think on my feet very quickly now'. Experience also provides language teachers with a basis upon which to decide both what their students need to know, and when they need to know it. Crucially, they develop a sense of when it is worth interrupting a lesson to make a point to the whole class, and when

it is not. One teacher with a working knowledge of Chinese decided to stop her lesson to remind the whole class that, whereas in Chinese the same word is used for 'gate' and 'door', in English different words are used. As she explained:

> I suddenly realised that there would always be a chance of putting the wrong one when they were talking about a main door. They know the difference between the door of a room and a garden gate, but they were obviously thinking that if it was a big entrance, then you'd call it a gate. So I thought it was worth stopping and saying that to everybody – because that seemed the kind of error that many of them could make.

The ability to judge when a critical number of students in the room will benefit from a digression is an important one. One teacher reported seeing 'the eyes of everyone else in the class glaze over' when he attempted to address the answer to a very specific question asked by one particular student to the class as a whole. In contrast, another teacher noticed the class suddenly paying attention when she digressed to answer a particular question – sensing that at that particular moment 'the students were clicking because they needed to know'. This teacher explained that her decision to digress was based on the fact that she sensed that there were enough students in the room who would relate to what she wanted to say – and would find the digression (the elucidation of a particular grammar point) worthwhile.

7.3 To thine own self be true

A final reason why language teachers behave in such a wide range of ways in their classrooms is because they are driven by an ongoing desire to satisfy not only the needs and interests of their students, but also their own personal needs for stimulation, fulfilment and creativity. One might have expected language teachers who have been in the profession for a significant length of time to sit back, relax and take the easy option: use the same range of materials, techniques and strategies that they know work for them. Why bother to try anything new? Although some teachers may choose this option, the vast majority consider that by doing so they will be selling themselves short. In the words of one teacher:

> I'd much rather give up my lunch hour putting together a worksheet that I feel excited about and want to use with the students – rather than giving them any old slapdash thing. I just can't do it, because I've got a standard that I've set for myself. I know the easy options, but I just think, 'No, I'm not going to take

> the easy road'. I remember saying to one of my other colleagues, 'I plan my lessons, not only for the students, but for myself too' – because I don't want to be bored out of my brain. I prepare stuff that that I believe they as young people will find exciting – and that I find exciting too.

This comment suggests that teachers who have been in the profession for some time feel the need to identify topics and to develop materials and activities that they personally find interesting, engaging and worthwhile. One teacher, required to teach a fill-in lesson for a colleague, chose to reject the textbook-based lesson plan that had been left for her and went into class instead with a set of booklets that she had found in the resource room on how to deal with stress. Her decision to base her lesson on the booklets – and to develop three hours' worth of activities from them once she got inside the room – was influenced by the fact that she had recently learnt that a student in her own class was suffering from stress. It appears that the knowledge of a particular student suffering from stress at that time influenced and validated her decision to focus on the topic of stress with another class. It was as if her awareness had suddenly been raised of the relevance of this particular topic for language learners in general.

It is clear from the ways that they describe getting ready for their lessons that, even though they may not engage in detailed lesson *planning*, language teachers do engage in lesson *preparation*. Apart from assembling materials, lesson preparation involves thinking about the lesson that is about to be taught – sometimes only five minutes before the lesson, or even when walking along the corridor to the classroom. It is different from lesson planning in that it involves teachers preparing themselves mentally to teach their lessons. Teachers report getting themselves 'psyched up' to teach lessons, so that by the time they walk into their classrooms they have got themselves into a state of teaching readiness. In the view of one teacher, 'the key to successful language teaching is feeling in a positive, dynamic frame of mind as you put your hand on the handle of that classroom door'.

When they select materials and devise tasks that they consider interesting and worthwhile, the enthusiasm of language teachers conveys itself readily to the students in their classes. There is a very real sense in which language teachers can make any approach, any materials or any activity work successfully with their classes – provided that they have sufficiently high levels of confidence and enthusiasm, and a strong enough belief in the efficacy and relevance of what they are doing. One teacher regularly required her students to read texts aloud around the class, each student in turn reading one sentence – reporting that her students found this activity stimulating and worthwhile. A fellow teacher

decided to try the same technique (not one that she had ever used before) with her own class, curious to see whether it would work equally well for her. Her own students did not respond nearly as positively, and even asked her what the point of the activity was. This teacher came to the conclusion that the activity had not been a success because she did not set up the activity with sufficient conviction that it would benefit the students.

A further reason why language teachers behave so individualistically in their classrooms is that over time they have come to know their personal strengths and weaknesses. Not surprisingly, they choose to do the things that they enjoy doing and can do well – and avoid doing those that they do not. For example, some teachers are highly proficient at using the phonemic alphabet, and write many words on the board in phonemic script to illustrate correct pronunciation while others go to great lengths to avoid ever using the phonemic alphabet. Teachers are also aware that different techniques work for different people and normally avoid using techniques that make them feel uncomfortable in some way. One teacher recalled observing colleagues successfully doing musical-chairs-type activities with classes of adults in which the forfeit for not getting a chair required students to stand in the centre of the circle and make statements about themselves. He said he would never organise such an activity himself, explaining:

> It's just not 'me' somehow. It's something to do with my perception of myself and my own character and my own personality and the way I relate with adults that just stops me from doing things like that.

The desire to teach in accordance with their own personalities, and to seek innovative ways of making language learning come alive in individualistic ways, appears to be a deep-seated one. It is summed up by one teacher, who said: 'I'd hate to teach in a language school that made you follow its own particular method, because it's so controlling, and it seems to rob you of your creativity and autonomy. It would be like teaching in a straightjacket.'

A final reason why language teachers teach in flexible, never-to-be repeated ways in their classrooms is that their behaviour is a product of the dynamic interaction that occurs between themselves and their students. Language teachers develop two-way relationships with their classes, with their own behaviour influencing the responses of their students, and the responses of their students in turn influencing their own behaviour. The notion of language teachers influencing the behaviour of the students in their classes is not surprising. What is less well recognised is the power of classes of language learners either to lift the performance

of language teachers, so that they teach in increasingly innovative and creative ways – or conversely to drag their performance down to a more perfunctory level. An example of a teacher and a class raising one another's level of performance was provided by the following teacher, who said at the end of a course:

> I don't think I'll ever have as good a class, ever. And because of that I really put in a good performance these last ten weeks. I wanted to perform better, and they wanted to perform better – it was a reciprocal thing. They made some terrific progress, and I felt it was the best class I'd ever taught. . . It was a big class, but they were always there, and it was just one long positive spin-off all the time. And I thought, 'Well, this is it, I'll actually give them everything I've got.'

Teachers are equally aware of the opposite scenario, when their desire to teach in interesting ways is dampened by their students' lack of enthusiasm. Teachers often report responding to the temptation to slacken off when they feel that their class is not responding to their efforts. When this happens they report spending less time preparing lessons, teaching in more mundane ways and sticking more closely to the book.

The lack of responsiveness on the part of students can also affect how teachers feel about themselves – which in turn affects their classroom behaviour. One teacher reported that he was happy to make a fool of himself in noisy classes – whereas quiet classes made him feel awkward and self-conscious. He gave the example of how, if a class was silent and unresponsive, he would find himself not doing things he would normally do, such as giving a physical demonstration of the meaning of the phrasal verb 'to trip over'. One teacher articulated how language teachers feel when confronted by unresponsive classes, saying, 'There's something quite depressing and almost overwhelming when you face that wall of blankness'.

Teachers report being able to sense when their students are metaphorically sitting back in their chairs with their arms folded, waiting for them to perform. Human nature being what it is, when language teachers sense that their students are unwilling to respond to their initiatives to make their lessons interesting and dynamic, they pull back and think, 'Well, I'm not going to bother to put on a performance for them. Why should I?' As one teacher said, 'If I've done my best to get them involved and they don't respond, then I just get on with it and do the routine old stuff. But if there's more response, I'm more inclined to add things in and run with things and teach in more interesting ways.'

A key to understanding (1) the high levels of individualism demonstrated by language teachers in the ways that they teach, and (2) how the behaviour of teachers and students influence one another, is to consider them in terms of the psychological theory of social constructivism. Williams and Burden (1997: 52–3), acknowledging the work of Salmon (1988), provide an excellent description of a constructivist view of teaching, which accommodates the following notions:

- Teachers teach the things that are personally meaningful to them, rather than a parcel of objective knowledge.
- Teachers teach not only what they know, but their position towards it.
- Teachers experience an engagement with their learners. This enables both of them to reshape both their ways of understanding and their views of each other.
- No two teachers and no two teaching situations are ever the same.
- The content of any lesson and the way in which it is offered are part of the person of each individual teacher.

7.4 Why flexibility does not lead to chaos

This section raises an interesting question: With language teachers behaving so flexibly in their classrooms, and leading their classes towards the achievement of learning objectives in such indirect, unpredictable and opportunistic ways, how can their classes possibly continue to operate as unified communities of learners? Surely they will tend to become fragmented, with everyone pulling in different directions?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that it is precisely because experienced language teachers behave so flexibly, routinely adapting their lessons to the wants and needs of individuals in an ongoing, iterative manner, that their classes, more often than not, do remain united. A key group dynamics principle is that groups remain cohesive only when all group members believe that the group is making satisfactory progress towards the achievement of mutually acceptable common goals. Although all language classes clearly have the overall, generalised goal of language learning, individuals within those classes have specific goals that they want to achieve. By behaving flexibly, and responding to the language learning needs of individuals in an ongoing way, language teachers are able to convey the impression that the learning goals of the class as a whole are an amalgam of individual goals. By responding to particular students' needs and wants, language teachers are implicitly

acknowledging and validating the contributions that individuals are making (through their questions, problems and difficulties) to the overall learning experience of the whole class. As a result, students find themselves increasingly committed to the class – their own goals having become subsumed, in a sense, under the umbrella goal of the class as a whole. In this way the feeling that the class is learning in a unified, mutually supportive, collaborative way is enhanced.

Dörnyei and Malderez (1999) identify the notion of 'goal-orientedness' as being the extent to which the group is attuned to pursuing its goal. They quote Hadfield (1992: 134), who emphasises that it is fundamental to the successful working of a group to have a sense of direction and common purpose.

Comment

As pointed out in Chapter 4, it is relatively rare for language teachers to negotiate overall learning goals with their classes at the beginning of courses in an open, direct manner. However, the present chapter suggests that it is commonplace for language teachers to adjust their lesson goals in accordance with student needs in a subtle, ongoing way. This strategy increases motivation, since individual students can perceive the value of the activity to them personally (see Williams and Burden, 1997: 125, for a discussion on the notion of the perceived value of activities).

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the fact that language teachers routinely behave in highly flexible, individualistic and unanticipated ways in their classrooms. It has advanced a range of reasons why the classroom behaviour of language teachers is so difficult to pin down and describe – all of which have been put forward by practising language teachers themselves as they talk about their work. These reasons go some way to explaining why language teachers behave in ways that appear to border on the perverse: for example not following lesson plans when this seems the most obvious thing to do, or cutting and pasting teaching materials when there seems no good reason for doing so.

The central section of this chapter has suggested that the classroom decision-making of language teachers is based on accumulated classroom experience, obtained at the grass roots level through ongoing exposure to materials and multiple opportunities to experiment. It indicates

that language teachers have ever-expanding memory banks, which act as repositories of things they have done successfully (or unsuccessfully) in the past and that can be recycled (or avoided) as appropriate. Once they can perform basic teaching tasks without having to concentrate on them in a conscious manner, language teachers can turn their attention to the responses of the students and begin to behave in even more flexible ways. At this point they find themselves responding more readily and intuitively to the learning needs of their students.

This chapter has also suggested that the deviations and digressions that language teachers routinely make, both during lessons and over the length of their courses as a whole, are a key factor in enabling language classes to progress towards worthwhile learning goals. The process of progressing flexibly towards overall class group goals is represented schematically in the following figure:

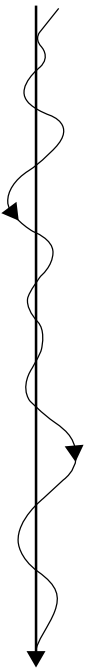

Figure 7.1 Progressing flexibly towards group goals

The final section of this chapter has identified the fact that the desire of language teachers to teach in innovative ways is related to an ongoing desire to teach creatively and to obtain personal fulfilment by so doing. It has also articulated the reciprocal nature of language teaching and

learning: the fact that the classroom behaviour of language teachers varies according to the response they receive from their students.

Summary

- Contrary to popular belief, language teachers seldom follow lesson plans in a slavish manner, preferring to adjust what and how they teach in line with their perceptions of the needs and interests of the students in their classes.
- Language teachers rarely follow coursebooks in the designated manner, preferring to pick and choose activities from them according to their personal preferences and immediate teaching needs.
- Language teachers become proficient at what they do through increased familiarity with materials available to them, and by ongoing experimentation with teaching techniques.
- Language teachers accumulate personal knowledge banks of materials and techniques with which they feel comfortable, refining and reusing them as required.
- Mastery of increased numbers of teaching techniques enables language teachers to focus their attention more fully on the language learning needs of the students in their classes – and adjust their approaches accordingly.
- Language teachers regularly deviate significantly from what they intended to teach in their lessons in response to ongoing student feedback (even though such deviations may not be apparent to their classes).
- A common classroom practice of language teachers is to make myriad digressions during the course of lessons, in order to teach or re-teach language at opportune moments.
- The ability of language teachers to behave flexibly in their lessons, while at the same time retaining a sense of overall coherence and direction, is related to their ability to keep in mind generalised teaching goals.
- The high level of individualism displayed by language teachers is due in part to their desire to teach creatively, and their need for ongoing stimulation and feedback.
- The high levels of variation in how language teachers teach their lessons is related not only to their personalities and preferred teaching styles, but also to the degree to which they are able to establish dynamic relationships with their classes.
- Experienced language teachers view classroom language teaching and learning as an interactive and collaborative exercise, and have a strong desire to teach flexibly in response to their students' needs.

Comment

The topic of how teachers are so readily able to make classroom decisions 'on the run' has intrigued researchers for a number of years. There is a growing consensus of opinion that the way to understand this phenomenon is to ask what we can learn from a careful examination of artistry in teaching. Schön (1987: 13) defines artistry as 'the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice', while Rubin (1985: 4) talks about the 'qualities which undergird teaching virtuosity . . . [being] elusive precisely because they are difficult to analyze and describe'. Some educationalists, including Rubin (1985) and Atkinson and Claxton (2000), consider that teachers are reliant on intuition, which according to Claxton (2000: 50) refers to a loose-knit family of 'ways of knowing' which are less articulate and explicit than normal reasoning and discourse. According to Claxton, the members of this family include the ability to do the following:

- function fluently and flexibly in complex domains without being able to describe or theorise one's expertise;
- extract intricate patterns of information that are embedded in a range of seemingly disparate experiences ('implicit learning');
- make subtle and accurate judgements based on experience without accompanying justification;
- detect and extract the significance of small, incidental details of a situation that others may overlook;
- take time to mull over problems in order to arrive at more insightful or creative solutions; and
- apply this perceptive, ruminative, inquisitive attitude to one's own perceptions and reactions – 'reflection'.

Tsui (2003: 42–66) provides an overview of research in the highly complex area of teacher classroom decision-making. In a recent study Szesztay (2004) uses Schön's twin concepts of knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action (Schön: 1987) to investigate how seven teachers described what she calls 'the immediacy of teaching'. Studies such as these reflect the ongoing resarch interest in this area.

Looking ahead

The following chapter focuses on the many ways in which experienced language teachers vitalise the atmospheres of their classes. These include both superficial techniques and ones that engage the interest and emotions of students at a deeper and more significant level.