19 Teaching language items reactively

A Warm-up

1 Look at this definition of *reactively*.

> reactively (adverb): in a way that reacts to events or situations, rather than acting first to change or prevent something.
>
> *Cambridge Dictionary*

What do you think that *teaching reactively* means? How do you think it might differ from teaching pre-selected items?

2 Read the sentences below. Put a tick next to any you definitely agree with. Put a cross next to those you definitely disagree with. Put a question mark against any that you are unsure about.

- Teaching reactively means putting learners first.
- Teaching reactively means never using a coursebook.
- Teaching reactively means never planning lessons.
- Teaching reactively starts with a focus on meaning.
- Teaching reactively is only for experienced teachers.
- Teaching reactively involves setting up an activity, monitoring and giving feedback.

Work with a partner and explain your choices.

> I harness the communication, because I can't control it, and base my method on it.
>
> Sylvia Ashton-Warner, 1963

B Planning a reactive lesson

1 a Number the lesson stages below so that they form a logical sequence.

- ☐ The learners work in small groups to complete the activity.
- ☐ The learners report back what they discussed.
- ☐ The teacher monitors the groups carefully – listening and writing down examples of good language use and also areas of possible improvement.
- ☐ The teacher shows an interest in what the learners say, praises and highlights good uses of language and elicits, or shows, how the learners' use of language could be improved.
- ☐ The teacher sets up a group speaking activity.

b What happens between the learners finishing the group activity and the teacher providing feedback on the language they used to communicate?

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009091602.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2 Put the phrases below into the correct box to summarize this approach to teaching.



monitor and support learners
give feedback
set up and encourage communication

3 How might a teacher scaffold (or support) the learners' output during monitoring?

4 After completing the stages in 2, above, a teacher decides to set the same, or a very similar, activity to the one they used in activity 1. Think of advantages of doing this.

C Selecting what to teach

1 One of the challenges of teaching reactively is to select appropriate language items on which to focus from the learners' output. Teachers need to monitor activities carefully to be able to do this.

Look at the notes below, made by a teacher during group work. The learners were sharing information in order to solve a murder mystery puzzle.

Good points	Things to correct/improve
They must've got in through the window. (Good pronunciation, good grammar) How many suspects are there? (Good vocabulary) Sorry, I interrupted. After you. (Very polite!) There is a fingerprint. (Good vocabulary)	X There are four suspect (/su:spekt/). X X They must had know each other. X X The window broke and the glasses is all over the floor. X X Does the police interview the business partner? X X The victim he goes to the police now. X - Where is the document that has the information about who will have money of the dead one? - There were three persons in the house, I think.

Work in small groups. Take turns to select one of the notes from either column and explain to your partners how you would use it in the feedback stage of the lesson. For example:

- Would you write anything on the board?
- What questions would you ask?
- What information would you give?

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2 Here is an extract from the discussion of one group in the same lesson. Work in small groups. Pick out some things that you would highlight as good examples of language use. Pick out some things to correct/improve.

Ateeqa: I think the reason is for the money.
Jonas: Yeah, right. I am agree with you. Kah Yee, what do you think?
Kah Yee: I think the cooker might be the guilty. He has argued with the victim.
Ateeqa: Oh yeah, I forgot that. But the cook isn't working that night.
Jonas: I think the cook is not the person we need.
Kah Yee: Let's repeat what we know for sure.
Jonas: Good idea. Ateeqa, what you said?
Ateeqa: Before?
Jonas: Yes.
Ateeqa: OK. I think the reason is the money. They all need money!
Kah Yee: The business partner wanted to sell the business. I think that is importance.

3 Work with another group. Take turns to choose an item from your list in activity 2 and use it to 'teach' the other group.

D Concerns of teachers

Look at the comments on teaching reactively from teachers. Can you give advice to help any of these teachers?

Teacher 1:

I can't always hear what the students are saying, and I feel I have let the students down if I don't comment on anything they said.

Teacher 2:

I would like to teach by responding to what students say, but I am worried that I won't be able to explain their mistakes if I don't prepare before the lesson.

Teacher 3:

I tried this with a class of 20 students and it was a bit chaotic. Most of the students chatted in their own language.

Teacher 4:

I have seen this type of teaching work really well. But at my school there's a fixed syllabus and we are expected to work from that.

Teacher 5:

I think my students expect a fairly traditional grammar lesson. I'm worried that they will think that they are not learning anything.

Teacher 6:

What about practice? How can I give the students any practice when I teach them something new?

Teacher 7:

I worry that the cycle of communication followed by correction can become repetitive.

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KEY WORDS FOR TEACHERS

Check you know the meanings of these terms.

- *teaching reactively*
- *preselection*
- *(giving) feedback*
- *monitoring*
- *scaffolding*

REFLECTION

Think about answers to these questions. When you are ready, compare your ideas with a partner.

1 Does every lesson need to have a pre-selected grammar point?
2 What would you say to someone who said: 'I don't like reactive teaching. Students need to learn grammar.'?
3 Can you summarize how teaching reactively is different to other ways of presenting new language?
4 Can you think of any circumstances where teaching reactively might be particularly appropriate?
5 Have you tried teaching reactively? Would you like to?

Reference

Ashton-Warner, S. (1963). *Teacher*. London: Virago.

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