

# Why learning English

## Reasons for learning

All around the world, students of all ages are learning to speak English, but their reasons for wanting to study English can differ greatly. Some students, of course, only learn English because it is on the curriculum at primary or secondary level, but for others, studying the language reflects some kind of a choice.

Many people learn English because they have moved into a **target-language community** and they need to be able to operate successfully within that community. A target-language community is a place where English is the national language - e.g. Britain, Canada, New Zealand, etc - or where it is one of the main languages of culture and commerce - e.g. India, Pakistan, Nigeria.

Some students need English for a Specific Purpose (**ESP**). Such students of ESP (sometimes also called English for Special Purposes) may need to learn legal language, or the language of tourism, banking or nursing, for example. An extremely popular strand of ESP is the teaching of **business English**, where students learn about how to operate in English in the business world.

Many students need English for Academic Purposes (**EAP**) in order to study at an English-speaking university or college, or because they need to access English-language academic texts.

Many people learn English because they think it will be useful in some way for International communication and travel. Such students of **general English** often do not have a particular reason for going to English classes, but simply wish to learn to

speak (and read and write) the language effectively for wherever and whenever this might be useful for them.

The purposes students have for learning will have an effect on what they want and need to learn - and as a result will influence what they are taught. Business English students, for example, will want to spend a lot of time concentrating on the language needed for specific business transactions and situations. Students living in a target-language community will need to use English to achieve their immediate practical and social needs. A group of nurses will want to study the kind of English that they are likely to have to use while they nurse. Students of general English (including those studying the language as part of their primary and secondary education) will not have such specific needs, of course, and so their lessons (and the materials which the teachers use) will almost certainly look different from those for students with more clearly identifiable needs. Consideration of our students' different reasons for learning is just one of many different learner variables, as we shall see below.

## **Different contexts for learning**

English is learnt and taught in many different contexts, and in many different class arrangements. Such differences will have a considerable effect on how and what we teach.

### ***EFL, ESL and ESOL***

For many years we have made a distinction between people who study English as a foreign language and those who study it as a second or other language. It has been suggested that students of **EFL** (English as a Foreign Language) tend to be learning

so that they can use English when travelling or to communicate with other people, from whatever country, who also speak English. **ESL** (English as a Second Language) students, on the other hand, are usually living in the target-language community. They may need to combine their learning of English with knowledge of how to do things in the target-language community - such as going to a bank, renting a flat, accessing health services, etc. The English they learn, therefore, may differ from that studied by EFL students, whose needs are not so specific to a particular time and place. However, this distinction begins to look less satisfactory when we look at the way people use English in a global context. The use of English for international communication, especially with the Internet, means that many 'EFL students' are in effect living in a global target-language community and so might be thought of as 'ESL students' instead. Partly as a result of this we now tend to use the term **ESOL** (English for Speakers of Other Languages) to describe both situations.

### ***Schools and language schools***

A huge number of students learn English in primary and secondary classrooms around the world. They have not chosen to do this themselves, but learn because English is on the curriculum. Depending on the country, area and the school itself, they may have the advantage of the latest classroom equipment and information technology (**IT**), or they may, as in many parts of the world, be sitting in rows in classrooms with a blackboard and no other teaching aid.

Private language schools, on the other hand, tend to be better equipped than some government schools (though this is not always the case). They will frequently have smaller class sizes, and, crucially, the students in them may well have chosen to come and study. This will affect their motivation.

## ***Large classes and one-to-one teaching***

Some students prefer to have a private session with just them on their own and a teacher, commonly referred to as **one-to-one teaching**. At the other end of the scale, English is taught in some environments to groups of over 100 students at a time. Government school classes in many countries have up to 30 students, whereas a typical number in a private language school lies somewhere between 8 and 15 learners. Clearly the size of the class will affect how we teach. **Pair work** and **group work** are often used in large classes to give students more chances for interaction than they would otherwise get with whole-class teaching. In a one-to-one setting the teacher is able to tailor the lesson to an individual's specific needs, whereas with larger groups compromises have to be reached between the group and the individuals within it. In large classes the teacher may well teach from the front more often than with smaller groups, where mingling with students when they work in pairs, etc may be much more feasible and time-efficient.

## ***In-school and in-company***

The vast majority of language classes in the world take place in educational institutions such as the schools and language schools we have already mentioned, and, in addition, colleges and universities. In such situations teachers have to be aware of school policy and conform to syllabus and curriculum decisions taken by whoever is responsible for the academic running of the school. There may well be learning outcomes which students are expected to achieve, and students may be preparing for specific exams.

A number of companies also offer language classes and expect teachers to go to the company office or factory to teach. Here the 'classroom' may not be quite as appropriate as those which are specially designed for teaching and learning. But

more importantly, the teacher may need to negotiate the class content, not only with the students, but also with whoever is paying for the tuition.

### ***Real and virtual learning environments***

Language learning has traditionally involved a teacher and a student or students being in the same physical space. However, the development of high-speed Internet access has helped to bring about new virtual learning environments in which students can learn even when they are literally thousands of miles away (and in a different time zone) from a teacher or other classmates.

Some of the issues for both real and **virtual learning** environments are the same. Students still need to be motivated and we still need to offer help in that area. As a result, the best virtual learning sites have online tutors who interact with their students via email or online chat forums. It is also possible to create groups of students who are all following the same online program - and who can therefore 'talk' to each other in the same way (i.e. electronically). But despite these interpersonal elements, some students find it more difficult to sustain their motivation online than they might as part of a real learning group.

Virtual learning is significantly different from face-to-face classes for a number of reasons. Firstly, students can attend lessons when *they* want for the most part (though real-time chat forums have to be scheduled), rather than when lessons are timetabled (as in schools). Secondly, it no longer matters where the students are since they can log on from any location in the world. Online learning may have these advantages, but some of the benefits of real learning environments are less easy to replicate electronically. These include the physical reality of having teachers and students around you when you are learning so that you can see their

expressions and get messages from their gestures, tone of voice, etc. Many learners will prefer the presence of real people to the sight of a screen, with or without pictures and video. Some communication software (such as Messenger and Skype) allows users to see each other on the screen as they communicate, but this is still less attractive - and considerably more jerky - than being face to face with the teacher and fellow students. Of course, whereas in real learning environments learning can take place with very little technical equipment, virtual learning relies on good hardware and software, and effective and reliable Internet connections.