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## Foreword

This book is written in the belief that many teachers are overworked and under stress, and it attempts to address these issues. What may seem remarkable is that it is possible to reduce both workload and stress and do a better job. This is achievable because:

- as teachers, we frequently do not do the necessary work.
- students can take on responsibility for much of that work.
- it is in the students' own interest to do so.
- action at the right moment can save effort and time later on.

The MINIMAX approach aims to increase efficiency by reducing teacher input in the interest of both teacher and student, in such a way that the student learns more effectively by being more involved in their learning. At the extreme, it implies getting the maximum from the minimum.

### The MINIMAX approach

All the activities in this book can be used with little or no preparation, little time and an absolute minimum of materials. It is hoped that you will find them realistic, adaptable and useful at a variety of levels, but also that you will be able to step back and recognise a larger, more complete picture: a genuine 'approach', which is more than simply the sum of the activities proposed.

Some of the activities are not original; while some are still in their original form, others have changed beyond recognition, and many have been springboards for completely new activities. You are recommended to adapt them similarly, to change them or to use them to invent new ones in line with your own teaching style. It is important not to say 'I can't use this activity', but to ask how it might be used in your classes.

### The MINIMAX teacher

The book explains how you might start off with a new class, but including a MINIMAX approach in your current teaching is straightforward. Some of the activities are probably so similar to your own favourites that your students wouldn't notice the slightest difference. The difference will be felt more by you, and be reflected in the longer term progress of the students.

MINIMAX is not a radical new methodology sweeping aside all that has gone before it: it will fit in with most approaches, from Grammar Translation to Task-Based Learning. But whatever your teaching style, the ideas in this book should make life easier for you, more productive for your students ... and much more fun for you both!

Jan Taylor

## Introduction: The Road to Efficiency

I've met the following teachers during my career. Maybe you've met them too. I've given them different names here.

**John** is conscientious, creative and under stress. Right now he is glued to the staffroom table designing a handout for his next class. On the noticeboard is a sign advertising a seminar on how to cut down preparation, but with four more handouts to do, he's not sure he can afford the time ...

**Mary** is creating a crossword puzzle for her teenagers. Before her is a list of vocabulary and a complicated diagram, and she's trying to get the words to interlock appropriately. Last time they did the puzzle in five minutes, so she still has the rest of the lesson to plan when she's finished this ...

**Jane** is learning far more about the English language, and far faster, than her students, even though they pay and she gets paid. Designing worksheets has really helped, even improved her own spelling, though the students barely seem to look at them ...

**Adam** prepares extra material for the faster students in mixed-ability class, but it never seems enough. He exhausts himself keeping them occupied. He's restless waiting for the others, who are trying to catch his attention ...

**Jack** has made some beautiful handouts. He's usually cut out photos onto card with a scalpel. He's done six but needs 20 for this afternoon. He's got a long way to go ...

**Roy** can run off a handout in record-breaking time, but he has to offer every lesson. Right now he needs one, just like one he made last week. It's a pity he doesn't have it with him now ...

**Helen** is preparing a role-play debate, writing out instructions on slips of paper, distributing them and opinions evenly amongst the class, clearly stating them what to think. She's forgotten that last week she refused to defend beliefs they didn't hold, so now she has to explain the vocabulary and the whole activity was rather a disaster ...

**Sally** has got some great games for her classes, especially quizzes. She writes them, chooses the learners, explains the rules, asks the questions, gives feedback, keeps the score, controls the time and checks for cheating. The students love them, but they answer the questions, if they can ...

**Pete** plays some great lessons and really puts everything into them. His teenagers find them either too easy or too difficult, so they get involved and are often disruptive. So the harmonious experience he had in mind frequently becomes a battle of wits ...

**Keith** has filled her car boot with sets of notebooks to mark. Some exercises require her careful attention and professional judgement, while others could be marked quickly and mechanically. The most frustrating part is giving them back: the students hardly ever look at her comments, they just want their score out of ten ...

**Mark** can never keep tabs on pieces of paper and cannot lay his hands on record sheets, which is embarrassing in staff and parents' meetings. Students' essays frequently go missing and materials are often out of place ...

The fictitious teachers opposite represent typical situations. Do you recognise them, and to what extent is there a problem?

One common feature of these situations is that the teachers are overloading themselves and underloading the students. Considerable effort is normally required for learning to take place, and the teacher who takes on too much of the burden deprives the students of an integral part of the learning process.

A squash coach is a true MINIMAX artist, taking two steps to send the pupils running all over the court. They wouldn't learn half as much just by watching, so they do most of the work, pay for the lesson and thank the coach.

### Minimising input

Preparation can often be creative and satisfying, and as you prepare you often think about your students, their attitudes, needs and progress. But with a busy timetable it is desirable to keep preparation time to a minimum, so you need to build up a collection of activities which require little preparation, like the ones found throughout this book, and involve your students in your lesson design (see Principles 2, 3 and 4 on page 10).

### Energy

A great deal of energy is expended in class if we always assume a central role. Putting the students to the side in the spotlight will conserve this energy (see Principle 1 on page 10). Also, energy is frequently wasted trying to do those loose ends which should have been done at the end of the start (see Chapter 1 on the importance of starting with a class and getting control of activity and behaviour).

### Spoken input

We use our voices in class for preparing, modelling, giving samples, modelling, drilling, describing, explaining, exemplifying, eliciting, narrating, describing, giving instructions, controlling activity and monitoring behaviour, correcting, giving feedback and conversing. How can we economise on all these?

- Some students will know what we are about to present, we can elicit and enrol their help in the presentation and explanation.
- Eliciting can be done silently, by gestures and drawings.

- Modelling can also come from cartoons, videos and strong learners.
- Drilling often comes too early, and is often wasted. Learners need time for language to settle in before they are forced to repeat it.
- Students can also take part in explaining, narrating, reading aloud, etc.
- Correction and feedback are more effective for the teacher only.
- Controlling activity and time are easier in an organised environment.
- Giving instructions is best done in the presence of silence.
- Most teachers can talk more at conversation pitch; we must avoid training our voices.

### Maximising output

#### Oral production

Students should not be forced to produce new language too often, but with more familiar language the sooner the better. It helps them the better. Teacher-spoken input is an extremely rich resource for the students, but if the teacher dominates the dialogue, inefficiency creeps in. You don't need the practice as much as they do. Passive listeners may become restless and inattentive through lack of involvement. Teachers frequently fill the silences which, in fact, represent thinking space for learners. It is also a strain to keep up entertaining conversation on an hourly, daily basis. But most important, perhaps, is that learning necessarily takes place through trial and error: students need, therefore, plenty of opportunity for such trial.

In a 'question and answer' drill, for example, why can't the students produce both questions and answers as early as possible? If you model 'What's your favourite colour?' yourself every time, you deny the students the practice and the discovery of the information themselves. Instead, elicit the question until they can all say it, then activate the practice. Personalisation (see Chapter 2) allows for creative, meaningful substitution drills perfectly, and you don't have to prepare handouts with the answers or simply allow the class to discover each other's favourite things and report back to you. In the balance between teacher-talk and student-talk it is easy to appreciate that increasing output can be a direct result of reducing input.

**Fewer handouts, more language**

It is tempting to march into class laden with materials, believing this to be in the students' best interests. But effective language learning lies in challenge, engagement and learner activity, so it would be better if the students marched in laden with material! Photocopying usually suggests that you want students to read more text than they already have access to, eg. in their coursebooks or at the newsagent's. Even if there is little text, it still involves reading. But if there is little text, why go to the trouble and expense of photocopying, when you can dictate the contents, giving listening and writing practice as well as the opportunity for language analysis (breaking it down) and synthesis (putting it together)?

Photocopiable materials often involve lists, eg. survey questions and debate topics. Why not dictate one item per student, and then ask all the students to mingle and use that language? They will all encounter the whole list, but by listening and speaking, rather than reading and speaking. The former is arguably more enjoyable, too, and will prepare students better for conversation: it will necessitate requests for clarification, negotiation of meaning and repetitions. Think how dry mere reading sounds by comparison! Furthermore, if they all have a different question each, there will be more surprise elements and a realistic reason to listen (see Activities 45 and 50).

With all materials, the challenge for the teacher is to make the printed word come alive, to get student comment on, copy or say it in a fully engaging activity. Photocopying provides more printed words, but doesn't promise to bring them alive: the teacher provides the same challenge.

**Less mother tongue, more target language**

There will be occasions when it is quite appropriate and accurate to use the students' first language (L1) in class, eg. translation may be the most effective way of explaining an abstract concept, thus saving time and effort. However, there are plenty of reasons to be careful with such an approach: it is inappropriate in a multi-lingual class; translation can be misleading or inexact; it can breed laziness; it robs the students of chances for real communication; it studies the students' thought English through Italian, for example, when learning that English is a 'school hammer' like a hammer, while Italian is a medium of communication. This has the danger that as soon as something is being conveyed, craps up, much time is spent and continuity lost discussing it in the mother tongue, rendering the lesson inefficient.

If everything is done in English, the students are exposed not only to the target language of the lesson but to all the natural language of instructions, progress, explanations, warnings and other exchanges, which is presented in useful, highly frequent and authentic chunks. Students can learn as much from what they notice peripherally as from the focus of the lesson.

**Communicating for a purpose**

Let us take a specific example of a specific teaching point, and look at the wide implications. You want to check the understanding of the words *saw* and *hammer*. Dialogues A and B are typical of classroom dialogues which differ in efficiency (T = Teacher; S = Student):

**Dialogue A**

T: What do you call the tool a carpenter uses to cut wood?  
S1: Parafuso.  
T: What do you call the tool a carpenter uses to cut wood?  
S2: What's a carpenter?  
T: A person, an occupation. Someone who makes things with wood. So what do you call the tool a carpenter uses to cut wood?  
S1: A saw.  
S2: That's right, well done. Now, what do you call ...

What is happening here? In Dialogue A the teacher gets all the speaking practice and encourages only short contributions from a limited number of students. This is good exposure, but if it goes on throughout the lesson the teacher will be tired and the students quite possibly bored and frustrated, with little sense of progress, achievement or involvement.

**Dialogue B**

T: What's a hammer?  
S1: It's a tool.  
T: What kind of tool?  
S2: For hitting ... what are they?  
S3: Ah, those metal things ...  
S1: Yes, in the wall ...  
S3: Nail.  
S2: That's right, nails.  
T: So what's a hammer?  
S1: It's a tool ... for hitting nails ... into a wall.

What's the difference in this example? In Dialogue B the questioning is reversed, and the teacher offers much less and elicits the longer definition. The students work

together, recycling vocabulary and sometimes teaching each other, in order to produce the answer, which is not just one word, but a useful chunk of language. The students have to do quite a lot of thinking, analysing and synthesising. They are involved and engaged. The teacher has stepped back from the action yet still directs, using gestures and contributions where necessary. In Dialogue A the teacher is making a perfectly acceptable start, which can still be developed by eliciting the question back from the students, and making sure that the answer contains a similar stretch of language.

Here is a third dialogue for the same lesson:

**Dialogue C**

T: Imagine you have three tools: a knife, a saw and a hammer. Which would you find most useful on a camping holiday?  
S1: I don't know. I never go camping!  
S2: No, I don't go. But perhaps a hammer?  
S3: I think a knife.  
S4: What is a knife?  
S1: For cutting, you know, in a restaurant, you have a knife, fork ...  
S2: Ah! You prefer a restaurant to camping!  
S4: So a knife is for cutting. But a saw is also ...  
S2: Isn't a hammer also useful ... for camping?  
S3: Not nowadays - tents don't need ...

In this example the students are given a task which requires as much linguistic precision as in Dialogue B, but dialogue has become the communicative framework serving the achievement of the task. In other words, the language has a purpose. They can teach each other, contribute their own knowledge and also find out about each other. Student 3 may know more about camping than the teacher. In fact the teacher may have chosen this topic for that reason, knowing that S3 doesn't usually speak. Dialogue C therefore includes personalisation (see page 11).

**A word of caution**

The emphasis of this book is to make teacher input more effective, not to do away with preparation altogether. Well-planned lessons are essential if a teacher is to be professional. Every step of a lesson must be principled. It is important to understand the rationale behind the MFL principles and activities before trying them in the classroom. Cutting down on some aspects of the workload frees teachers for more effective work in class. There is nothing in this book which advocates wholesale, indiscriminate abdication of authority and responsibility on the part of the teacher.