ideas in ACTION

Activities for Alternative Assessment

Monitoring learning accomplishments in the ELT classroom

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Preface

The DELTA Publishing Ideas in Action series aims to bridge the theory-practice divide in language teaching. It seeks to investigate research in specific areas of language teaching, and to link it directly to practice through example activities and additional suggestions for the classroom. Written by practising teachers who are also expert materials writers, Ideas in Action titles show that theory and practice can come together to make English language learning both effective and enjoyable for all.

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Of all the areas of teaching and learning that have gained in importance over the last 20 years, assessment is arguably at the top of the list, both in terms of how we do it, how we should do it, what impact effective assessment has on learning outcomes, and also the damaging effect of inappropriate assessment practices. Simultaneously, there is a pull in two directions: while governments want to demonstrate learning through easy to interpret statistics and ranking systems (see the PISA international ranking model), pulling us in the direction of summative assessment, researchers and assessment experts are repeatedly stressing the importance of qualitative, formative feedback that can help learners to improve, rather than grades that tend to reaffirm either negative or positive self-images, largely to the detriment of all (see Todd Rose's "The End of Average", 2015 and Ken Robinson's "Creative Schools", 2015).

As a result, there is a bewildering array of messages bombarding teachers with regard to assessment. Teachers are asking themselves: How can I assess effectively, while still meeting expected goals? What's the difference between summative and formative assessment? Can I do both at the same time? And is it really possible to involve learners in the assessment process effectively?

Activities for Alternative Assessment provides useful answers to these and many more questions, as well as example activities that teachers can use in their own classroom to support and improve (if necessary) their own assessment practices. In line with the ethos of the Ideas in Action series, **Activities for Alternative Assessment** also provides insight into the theory and research underpinning recent developments in alternative assessment, and implications for the teacher. What I find particularly engaging about the book is that Leo Selivan interprets this research critically as a practitioner, with regular reference to specific classroom challenges, and how he has overcome these challenges in his own classroom through the use of alternative assessment, often integrated dynamically into enjoyable, effective classroom practices.

To choose just a few of the many activities covering all the major areas discussed in the assessment literature, I found particularly interesting Leo's innovative ways for assessing learners' productive lexicon **6a From receptive to productive**, his strategies for using gap-fill exercises as effective means for formative assessment **6b By ear not by eye**, his many means for assessing receptive skills (see Unit 7), and for integrating assessment into project work (Unit 5). **3c 3-3-3** provides a means for teachers to make task repetition engaging, while also promoting peer assessment, and **5c Show and tell** borrows a common strategy from primary education to enable teachers to avoid 'death by PowerPoint' when assessing learners' presentation skills.

In short, **Activities for Alternative Assessment** provides the teacher with the means to fulfil possibly the wisest adage often quoted with regards to assessment in education: it underlines the importance of measuring what we value, rather than valuing what we can measure.

Jason Anderson
Series Editor: Ideas in Action

Activities for Alternative Assessment – Contents

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0 Introduction

This book is about assessment carried out by teachers themselves in the classroom. After all, who is in a better position to assess the students' performance than those who interact with students on a weekly, or even daily, basis? This kind of assessment is known by many overlapping and

> *Important decisions should not rest on simple test scores.*
> Kathleen M. Bailey (1998)

at times confusing terms: formative assessment, continuous assessment, authentic assessment, performance assessment, assessment for learning, to name but a few. In order to provide some clarity, this introductory unit will try to make sense of the often confusing terminology that abounds in the literature on assessment and outline the principles behind this book.

1. The changing role of assessment

How students should be assessed is a question that has interested educators and students (as well as their parents) for decades. As constructivist approaches to education began to gain ground, conventional testing practices – usually in the form of one-off discrete-point multiple-choice tests – have come under criticism (see Shepard, 2000 for overview). At the same time various alternatives to such tests began to gain popularity. An increased interest in these alternatives was also underpinned by a growing understanding of the limitations of traditional testing techniques, particularly the kind of information they gather. Traditional tests cannot always capture all the areas of a learner's strength. Contrariwise, individuals who are good at standardized tests often cannot demonstrate their skills or apply their knowledge in the real world. Specifically in the case of language teaching, we are all too familiar with students who do well on tests covering grammar, but who then cannot use grammar correctly in real-life situations.

Apart from these deficiencies of standardized tests, the shift towards alternative forms of assessment has also been driven by an increasing realization that assessment is not only a means of establishing whether learning goals have been reached but also a learning tool. These two uses of assessment are known, respectively, as **summative** and **formative**. Are they incompatible with each other or can they be reconciled?

2. Assessment purposes

Ever since Scriven (1967) introduced the terms they have become a staple of literature on assessment but the way alternative assessment – and this book – relates to these is not straightforward. In simplest terms, **summative** assessment is used to judge whether learners have met a certain standard or reached a learning goal, such as mastering course content, while **formative** assessment is used to measure where learners are on the way to achieving this standard or goal. In summative assessment, learners are evaluated at the end of a module, course or a learning programme. The result is a record in the form of a grade or a score, which is often used for administrative purposes, such as reporting to parents or superiors, awarding a certificate (e.g. IELTS or TOEFL) or deciding if students are ready to move to a higher level. The focus, therefore, is on the <u>product</u> of the past learning.

In contrast, the purpose of formative assessment is to gather ongoing evidence in order to monitor students' progress while learning is still <u>in process</u>. Monitoring students' progress on a regular basis gives the teacher an insight into particular areas of difficulty and aids the teacher in planning the teaching process.

Ongoing assessment which takes places during learning is also known as **continuous assessment**, but a distinction needs to be drawn here. Summative and formative refer to the purposes of assessment (i.e. why learners are assessed), while continuous – to how evidence of learning is gathered – in this case, over a period of time. The result of continuous assessment, however, can be used formatively as well summatively, as we shall see below.

Formative	Summative
in-process → *during* the instructional process	product → *after* the instructional process
monitoring progress usually **continuous**	measuring attainment at the end

Formative and summative assessment were later reconceptualized, respectively, as Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL) – two further terms you may have come across. The concept of Assessment for Learning is particularly associated with the work of the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the UK. Although some distinctions can be made (see, for example, Stiggings, 2002), and at the conscious risk of oversimplification, we will say that these are essentially the same:

Assessment for Learning – AfL	Assessment of Learning – AoL
Formative	**Summative**

Admittedly "for learning" is an apt term because it emphasizes the role formative assessment plays in motivating students towards achieving learning goals. The excerpt here captures the essence of AfL.

This implies that formative assessment or AfL is not just provision of frequent in-class quizzes and assignments, but a powerful vehicle of directing teaching and learning activities in order to shape learning. A crucial role in AfL is played by feedback which shows learners how they can develop their learning. Feedback becomes formative, i.e. it promotes learning, when learners are given specific guidance, which relates to strengths and weaknesses of their performance, "not clouded by overtones about ability, competition, and comparison with others", claim Black & Wiliam (1998:6).

> *...the term 'assessment' refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the needs.*
> Black & William (1998:2)

Assessment for Learning – AfL	Assessment of Learning – AoL
Formative	**Summative**
descriptive feedback	numerical grade

In a follow up to Black and Wiliam's foundational publication, a pamphlet published by the ARG (1999) laid out the following five principles at the heart of AfL. Note as the work of the ARG mainly concerns younger learners the original document refers to pupils, which I have replaced with students:

provide effective feedback to students
actively involve students in their own learning
adjust teaching to take account of assessment results
recognise the profound influence the assessment has on student motivation and self-esteem
the need for students to (be able to) assess themselves and understand how to improve

Based on *Assessment for learning: beyond the black box*, Assessment Reform Group (1999)

As the title of the series dictates, let us now look at how the *ideas* discussed above – the purpose and key principles of classroom-based assessment – can be turned into *action*. And why are the activities in this book referred to as alternative?

> Why are the activities in this book referred to as alternative?

3.   Alternative assessment – tools and techniques

The term 'alternative' relates to all non-test forms of assessment, which are evaluated by humans, not scored by machines. It comprises a variety of tasks and techniques which require learners to generate knowledge or demonstrate a particular skill rather than choose a correct response to a question. These include: self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolios, projects, performance-based tasks, checklists, etc. Note that these also correspond roughly to the units in this book.

As a matter of fact, any classroom activity can serve as an alternative assessment activity in that it can be used to gauge learning in real-time, monitor students' progress and help the teacher adjust the next instructional steps. In addition to informing the teaching process, alternative assessment procedures can motivate learners, making them active agents of the learning process and encouraging them to set their own learning goals.

Because there are so many options available to teachers, not all of them being new or radical techniques (as the term 'alternative' might imply), some authors have stated that it would probably be more appropriate to refer to them as **alternatives in assessment** (Brown & Hudson, 1998).

Alternatives

peer assessment	self assessment	'on-the-fly' assessments	learning journals	portfolios	projects	presentation	test
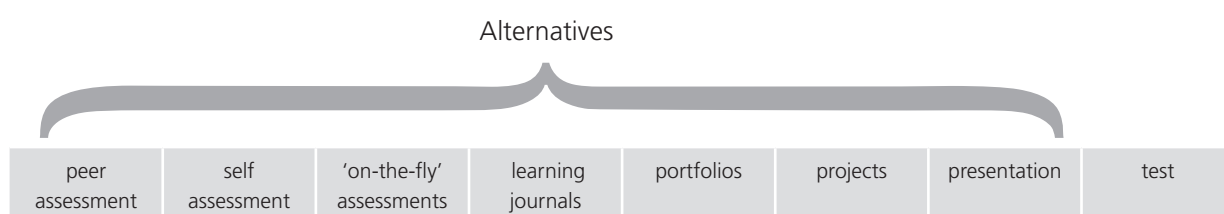
It is important to stress once again that the terms summative and formative or 'of learning' and 'for learning' discussed above pertain to the purpose of assessment rather than specific instruments employed. Both can be used to promote learning depending on how the results are used.

Formative   Summative

peer assessment	self assessment	'on-the-fly' assessments	learning journals	portfolios	projects	presentation	test
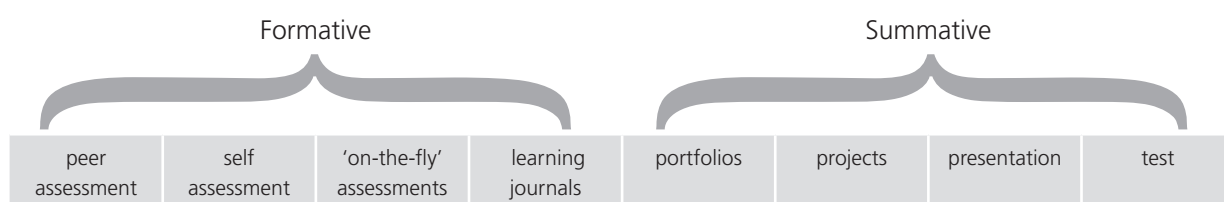
For example, projects and presentations, although seen as alternative means of assessment can be used for summative purposes as an alternative to a final test (see Unit 5). Likewise, the results of ongoing classroom assessments can be used summatively, i.e. they can be added up to form an overall score/mark in lieu of a formal test (see, for example, **Activity 8d Longitudinal assessment of speaking**). The opposite can also be true. Traditional tests used for summative purposes can also serve a formative function if they are used to provide guidance on how students can improve future work or how the teacher can modify their teaching. (See **Activity 6d – Test wrapper**.)

It is due to this potential confusion between assessment methods and assessment purposes, some other 'alternatives' have been proposed in this century, which we will briefly discuss in the next section.

4.   Other 'alternatives'

It has been argued recently that the formative-summative dichotomy is over simplified and overly focused on learning goals, seeing instruction and assessment as two separate, even if complementary, entities. Other conceptualizations have been put forward.

Advocates of **Dynamic Assessment** (DA) see the learning and assessment as inseparable (Poehner, 2007). Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, specifically on the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (see section 5), DA involves observation and transformation of the learner's abilities through a dialogic interaction with the teacher, who acts as a mediator. Indeed, in a classroom based on principles of DA, you, as an observer, would not be able to distinguish an instructional and assessment activity.

Unhappy with the role of the learner in the AfL framework, Canadian researcher Lorna M. Earl introduced the concept of **Assessment *as* Learning** (2003). The change from *for* to *as* might seem superficial, but the author asserts that by blurring the boundary between assessment and learning the role of the learner comes to the fore. The learner is seen not only as a contributing party to the process of assessment but an important link in the complex interplay between assessment, learning and teaching. Earl stresses the importance of involving learners in both assessment and learning, and regulation of their own learning *(self-regulation).*

A similar suggestion to reframe our understanding of assessment has come from the proponents of **Learning Oriented Assessment** (LOA) (see Carless, 2007), who suggest an even more integrative and holistic view of assessment and learning. Not only do they reject the formative-summative dichotomy, they acknowledge the value of all kinds of assessment – whether summative or formative, or formal or informal – and their contribution to the learning process. Redefining the nature and role of the assessment from this perspective also involves recognition that learning is a lifelong process, particularly in the context of language learning, which is increasingly important in professional contexts (Jones & Saville, 2016).

As can be seen from this brief overview, the field of classroom assessment is constantly evolving with a number of conceptual frameworks. What is worth restating is that learning and assessment are no longer seen as separate entities. The approaches to assessment discussed in this section blur the boundary between the two even further by suggesting that when learning and assessment are seen as one and the same, the outcome is greater than the sum of its parts.

5. Theoretical underpinnings

The paradigm shift from conventional testing to assessment that serves pedagogical purposes is grounded in several theoretical perspectives. The most obvious link is with constructivist theory or learning[1].

Although the origins of **constructivism** can be traced to the American philosopher and education reformer John Dewey, our modern understanding of the term essentially blends Dewey's insights with the theory of cognitive development proposed by Jean Piaget and the work of Lev Vygotsky.

As the founder of progressive education in the US, John Dewey (1859–1952) challenged the traditional view that teachers should transmit knowledge – often through repetition or rote memorization (1938). Dewey advanced the view that students should be encouraged to think for themselves. His view of education is based on the idea of learning as problem solving rather than receiving knowledge.

With John Dewey being considered as its early champion, the work of Piaget and Vygotksy is considered to have had the most influence on the rise of constructivism. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) believed that in order to understand the nature of knowledge we should look not only at the end product, but at how one arrives at knowledge. He rejected the notion that children are passive recipients of knowledge. According to Piaget, learning is a dynamic process during which learners construct knowledge based on their existing mental structures *(schemas)*. While Piaget's work concerns mainly the human development in the early years, Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), was interested in the relationship between learning and social interaction. According to Vygotsky's **socio-cultural theory** (SCT), cognitive development lies in social interaction which is mediated via cultural and semiotic tools, the most important of which is language.

Of greatest relevance to the discussion at hand is the construct of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**, which has drawn much attention from psychologists and educators alike. ZPD is the difference between what learners can achieve on their own – the actual level of development – and what they can achieve through mediation[2] – the potential level of development.

According to Vygotsky, learning takes places within ZDP, at the point when learners are cognitively prepared to solve a task but still cannot solve it without guidance, direction or support from a more knowledgeable other – this later became known as *scaffolding* (Wood et al. 1976).

It has to be noted that the teacher should not be regarded as the only source of scaffolding. Vygotsky's concept of "More Knowledgeable Other" has later been extended to include peers. Scaffolding therefore can come from social interaction with peers, for example a collaborative dialog with a peer can help the learner in problem-solving (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). In the context of L2 learning, mediation can also come in the form of dictionaries, corpus or the use of L1.

When the learner no longer depends on the external environment – other humans or tools – and can perform tasks or solve problems independently, the learner is said to be able to self-medicate or *self-regulate*. (Vygotksy, 1986).

Taken together, the work of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky gave rise to constructivism, which rejects the traditional view of learning in which the teacher is a fount of knowledge and the student is an empty vessel to be filled, or as psychologist Carl Rogers put it, 'jug' and 'mug'. Constructivism highlights the importance of interaction and views the learner as an active participant in the learning process who constructs

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1   The term 'constructivism' refers both to learning theory i.e. how people learn and epistemology, i.e. the nature of knowledge. In this section we focus on the latter – constructivist theory of learning.

2   However, Lantolf warns that it should not only be understood as the expert/novice interaction and reminds us that cultural artefacts should be included in mediation.

knowledge. Reflecting this perspective, the learner is also an active participant in the assessment process, not just an object to be measured.Our understanding of the changing role of assessment has also benefited from insights of **Critical Pedagogy**. Founded by Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1921–1997), this philosophy of education challenges the traditional power structures encouraging students to question inequalities that exist in society. In traditional testing there is inherent inequality. Learners are powerless – or even oppressed – subjects and tests are instruments of power "often administered by those in authority as disciplinary tools" (Shohamy, 2001).

In critical pedagogy, education is seen as a form of empowerment stressing the role of dialogue between the teacher and students. Rethinking assessment from a critical perspective enables us to shift the power from a centralized authority into the hands of teachers and students, who both share responsibility for assessment and learning through a continuous dialogue (Ross, 2005).

6. Alternative assessment in ELT

It is important to bear in mind that a lot of literature on alternatives in assessment, including some ground-breaking research cited above, has been written from the perspective of teaching content subjects. Therefore, not all principles of alternative assessment can necessarily be taken at face value for language teaching.

Foreign language teaching is fundamentally different from other disciplines, such as history or biology. It is not about mastery of content and learning to apply the content – it's about using the language. Language teachers are responsible for developing the (traditional) four skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – and linguistic competencies, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation. It is equally important to teach – and assess – learners' sociolinguistic, pragmatic and, often, intercultural competencies.

Many of these competencies cannot be easily captured by tests, which have traditionally measured the mastery of formal aspects of language, such as syntax and morphology, and comprehension. The multi-componential nature of language ability necessitates a skillful use of a variety of teaching/assessment tasks, which you will find in this book. But before you go on to browse and pick your next assessment activity, I'd like to share with you the key principles underlying the implementation of alternative assessment.

🔍 1. The alignment of instruction and assessment

Instruction and assessment are closely intertwined: they continuously interact and cannot be separated. Most learning activities serve as assessment activities and vice versa creating a continuous feedback loop. The simplest way of integrating the two is by embedding an assessment component into existing learning activities or classroom routines. In turn, assessment results are then used to direct future instruction enabling teachers to make necessary changes and adaptations as required.

🔍 2. Student involvement in the assessment process

> *Students should not only be active learners but also active assessors of their learning. Becoming an assessor of their own performance is an essential competence for self-regulated learning, which ensures educational achievement making students masters of their learning. If a student always relies on a teacher or an assessor to judge their performance they remain a passive recipient of the actions of others, which is not compatible with the notion of life-long learning* (Boud & Falchikov, 2006).

Active participation in assessment can start with simple self-grading and reflection on a completed task. From there it can extend to include developing the criteria by which performance is judged, for example composing marking rubrics (see Activity **8e Patchwork rubrics**), analyzing samples of quality work (see Activity **3b Pair peer assessment**) and peer assessment (see Unit 3).
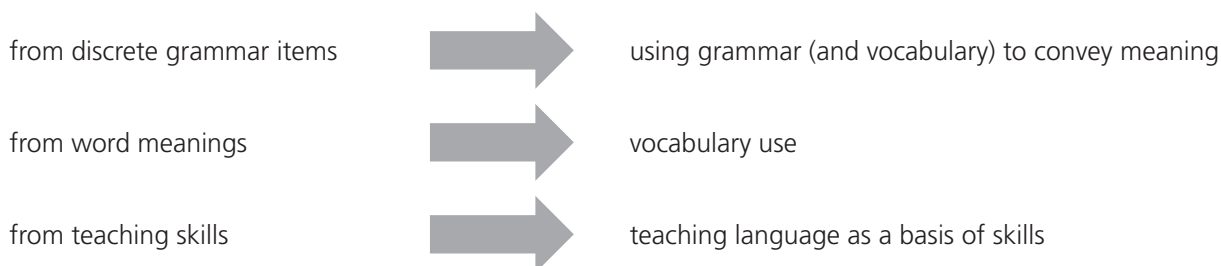
3. Effective feedback feeds forward

Feedback plays a crucial role in the learning-assessment cycle. But in order to be truly formative, feedback should not only include comments on the learners' performance but also provide guidance as to what learners should do next. As the term 'feedback' implies a retrospective review, the term 'feed forward' may be more apt in capturing its prospective or forward-looking function.

To take an example of a writing task, in addition to correcting errors – directly or indirectly, and perhaps highlighting examples of appropriately used language (feedback), try to include some suggestions as to how learners can improve (feedforward). For example, you can suggest that students use a learner's dictionary to look up some common collocations of a word to improve their lexical range and richness or you can encourage them to try to use more sentences with 'which' (i.e. relative clauses) in order to nudge learners towards greater complexity in writing.

It is also important to experiment with different channels of providing feedback/feedforward. Some learners respond better to oral feedback. Instead of always providing feedback in writing you can record your feedback using many audio tools available today.

These are adapted from the three elements of Learning Oriented Assessment (see Section 4) as laid out by David Carless (2006). In addition to these principles taken from the field of general education, implementing the ideas in this book also involves the following transitions:

from discrete grammar items	→	using grammar (and vocabulary) to convey meaning
from word meanings	→	vocabulary use
from teaching skills	→	teaching language as a basis of skills

From discrete grammar items to using grammar (and vocabulary) to convey meaning

In many language teaching methods of the past century, discrete grammar items were presented in a sequential and additive fashion in the belief that learners would acquire these structures in a linear way. Some of the relics of these methods still survive in language classrooms today.

In reality learners acquire various aspects of form and use in a haphazard manner at different stages of L2 acquisition. For example, they can use the irregular past forms correctly in the affirmative sentences *(I saw an interesting documentary.)*, but may make mistakes with this form – past simple – in negative or interrogative sentences *(*We didn't saw it.)*. Alternative assessment, as is understood in this book, would focus on learners' ability to use the target forms in meaningful situations, for example, ask your partner five things about their trip. Note that this would also open up the task to other potential forms (not only with *did you*).

> *Did you have a good time?*
> *Was the weather good?*
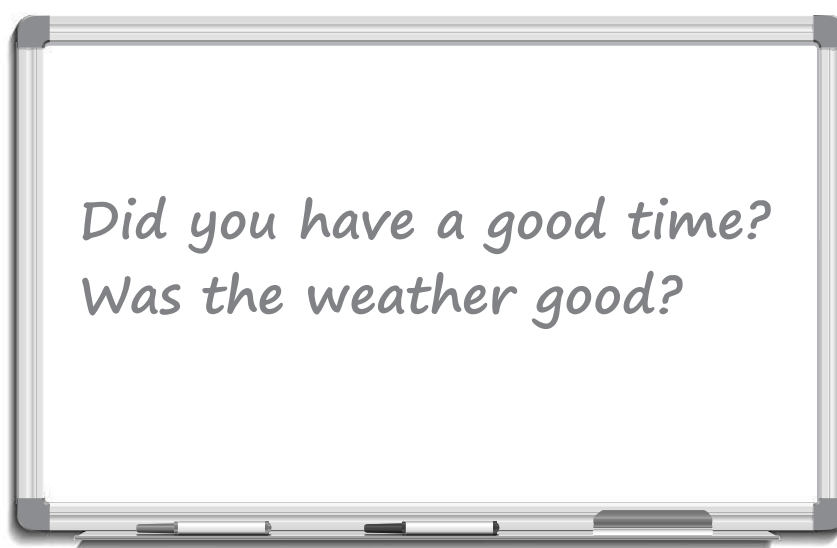
At the same time such assessment/learning activities as *Describe yourself using the Present Simple* are unnecessarily restrictive. They are based on the misguided notion that learners are not yet able – let alone willing – to say something about their past background. But even elementary level learners might say *I was born in a small town* without being formally 'taught' the past tense. I would urge teachers to minimize their use of such overtly grammar-based tasks, or, if possible, abandon them altogether.

From word meanings to using vocabulary

The importance of teaching vocabulary has been reappraised in the last 20 years, but for many teachers – and, sadly many researchers advocating the importance of explicit vocabulary teaching – vocabulary teaching remains the teaching of meanings. Research shows that most classroom vocabulary teaching focuses on teaching meaning and ignores other aspects of word knowledge such as use, grammatical patterns, appropriacy. You will find some alternatives in this book (see Unit 6).

From teaching skills to teaching language as a basis of skills

All too often, large portions of classroom time are devoted to teaching and practising receptive skills, for example reading sub-skills such as scanning and skimming, at the expense of teaching language. Some teachers may argue that with the help of tricks and techniques such as "read the first line of the paragraph" or "look for keywords" they have helped their students get decent scores on exams, such as IELTS or TOEIC. Granted, such coping techniques may help learners 'hack the test', but they won't do them much good in terms of long-term language development, let alone prepare them for reading and enjoying reading in real life!

Quite simply, poor skills are the result of poor language knowledge (Dellar & Walkley, 2016), namely not knowing enough words and how words combine (collocational knowledge). In listening skills this problem might be further exacerbated by not recognizing words – or group of words – in connected speech. This underscores the need for greater focus on bottom-up linguistic processing, which is said to play a key role in reading and listening comprehension (Hinkel, 2006). In Unit 7 you will find activities that assess learners' decoding skills and use of bottom-up processes in reading and listening.