Basic Terminology in English Language Teaching

All professions have their own special terms and concepts and English Language Teaching is no exception.

Please don't be tempted to lump the following under 'jargon' (which usually means inappropriate use of technical language or a use intended to obscure meaning). We need some technical language to help us handle concepts peculiar to our profession.

What follows is not intended to be exhaustive but if you are familiar with most of the following, then you will not be distracted by unfamiliar terminology on an initial training course, at least.

There are more glossaries at: www.eltconcourse.com/training/glossaries/glossary_index.html

Acronyms and abbreviations	
EAP	English for Academic purposes intended for learners who want to go on to (usually) higher education in an English-medium institution.
EFL	English as a Foreign Language referring to people learning the language to use it for social, travel, business or study purposes.
EIL / ELF	English as an International Language / English as a Lingua Franca. For those learning English to speak mainly to other non-native speakers of the language.
ELT	English Language Teaching. Conventionally, it refers to teaching the language to non-native speakers.
EOP	English for Occupational Purposes. For people who need specialised training in the language used in a range of occupations.
ESP	English for Specific Purposes. Usually area such as Business, technical areas (English for Metallurgists etc.) and other specific areas.
EST	English for Science and Technology. For those involved in or studying in these areas.
Learning and the learner	
Acquisition *vs.* Learning	Acquisition is the 'picking up' of a language through exposure to it and is contrasted with **learning** which involves deliberate study and practice. The distinction is often credited to Krashen.
Bilingual	noun: a person able to speak a second language as well as if it were his or her first language. adjective: describing such a person. There are also trilingual and multi-lingual people. Multi-lingual people outnumber mono-lingual people worldwide.
Competence	Has two meanings: 1. a learner's ability to use the language, e.g., communicative competence (the ability to get and receive messages), linguistic competence (the ability to form accurate language), discourse competence (the ability to handle interaction and text structures) etc. 2. the ideal grammar which underlies all speakers' ability to use language. In this meaning, it is contrasted with performance.
Errors *vs.* Mistakes	Error is usually used to refer to a systematic deviation from the rules of language and is seen as part of the learning process. Errors are contrasted with mistakes which are usually the result of tiredness, distraction or cognitive overload and are not systematic.
First language	conventionally written as L_1 or L1 referring to the (or one of the) language(s) in which a speaker is completely fluent or learnt first. L_2 is used to refer to the speaker's second language and L_T (target language) to the language which is being taught/learnt.

Fossilisation	occurs when a learner's language ability ceases to improve. It can also refer to an error that the learner is unable or unwilling to eradicate. This is often the result of a fall in motivation caused by the realisation that the learner's goals have been achieved.
Generalisation	refers to the learner drawing parallels and making assumption from the evidence available. For example, if you have learned that the past tense is often formed by adding *-d* or *-ed* to a verb stem you can generalise from this fact by guessing that the past tense of a verb you have not previously encountered will be formed in the same way. In the case of, e.g., *dishearten* you would be correct in guessing at *disheartened* but a false generalisation (or over-generalisation) will lead you to **misunderstanded*.
Interference *vs.* Facilitation	refer to the negative or positive influences a learner's first language will have on his/her ability to learn another.
Interlanguage	refers to a learner's current command of the target language. The theory is that a learner moves along a cline from no knowledge of the language to full mastery and at any point on this cline we can describe his/her interlanguage as the current competence.
Learning	see **Acquisition vs. Learning** above.
Mistake	see Errors *vs.* Mistakes above.
Noticing	There are two kinds of noticing: 1. noticing the language one sees and hears. 2. noticing the difference between what one produces and what one sees or hears (noticing the gap).
Over-generalisation	also called ignorance of rule restriction. See **Generalisation** above.
Performance	the actually demonstrated ability to use a language as opposed to the speaker's knowledge about language. The latter is often referred to as competence.
Transfer	Two meanings: 1. the influence of other acquired or learned language(s) on the learning of the target language (positive or negative transfer). 2. the use of skills deployed in one language in the use of another language.

Communication

Appropriacy and Appropriateness	refers to the acceptability in the speech community of certain forms and expressions. For example, *You are plain wrong* might be acceptable informally between peers but wouldn't be appropriate in a formal situation in a work environment with differences in status and roles. (*Appropriacy* refers to levels of formality and register, not simply to whether a piece of material, for example, is appropriate for a particular group of students. In that sense, the correct noun would be *appropriateness*.)
Communication gap	the disparity of information available to people in an interaction. For example, if a speaker perceives a gap of information he/she may well ask for it: *Where did you buy that hat?* In the classroom, it is often necessary to engineer a communication or information gap in order to encourage some real communication.
Communicative activities	activities designed to get learners to use the language for real purposes rather than merely manipulating the forms.
Communicative competence	a measure of a learner's ability to communicate effectively.
Context	the social situation in which the language is used. The nature of the context will affect appropriacy, in particular. It encompasses the topic, the setting and the roles of participants.

	Loosely, the term may be applied to the language around an item, its co-text.
Discourse and discourse analysis	the latter is the study of how language works in real situations which goes beyond considerations of form, pronunciation and grammar etc. The former refers to any coherent and cohesive text, written or spoken, which involves language used for interactive and communicative purposes.
Function	the real meaning of language taking into account its context and the intentions of the user. For example, *Have you got a pencil?* probably is not performing the function of asking for information but that of requesting the loan of one. See **illocutionary force** below.
Interaction	communication between people involving the use of language to maintain social cohesion and rapport. It can be in writing or in spoken language. Compare **transaction**.
Illocutionary force	the purpose for which language is used or the way it is understood. For example, *It's cold in here* is often not intended as a communication of a piece of information about the temperature but as a request to turn on the heating, close the window etc. See **Function** above.

Markedness	An item of language is said to be marked if it distinguished in some way from the normal, taken-for-granted neutral form. For example:
	 The adjective *old* is unmarked but *young* is marked because the usual question is
	    How old are you?
	 not
	    How young are you?
	 The noun *lion* is unmarked because it implies both sexes of animal but the noun *lioness* is marked for gender.
	 Grammatically,
	    I enjoyed the dessert
	 is unmarked, but
	    It was the dessert that I enjoyed
	 is marked by the speaker for special emphasis.

Redundancy	something like half of what we say is actually redundant. For example, in the sentence *I'm going to the party, will you come with me?* the underlined parts are not needed for communication of the essential idea but allow 'information overkill' so that even if the listener misses something, the message still gets across. Redundancy can be lexical (*an added bonus*), grammatical (*He wants*) and phonological (/p/ can be distinguished from /b/ three different ways). Redundancy helps rather than hinders.
Speech act	doing something in language, e.g., arranging an appointment, suggesting something etc. For more, go the guide to speaking.
Transaction	The use of language to achieve an end such as asking a question at a meeting and getting an answer or buying something in a shop. We can transact in both spoken and written language. Compare **interaction**.
Use *vs*. Usage	the former refers to the deployment of language for real purposes, the latter to the practice of language in the classroom in order to get the form right.

In the classroom and teaching

Audio visual aids	equipment such as tape players, CD players, DVD players, smart-boards etc. which help to expose learners to authentic language use or to organise information intelligibly.
Controlled exercises	the type of exercise in which learners know what to do and how to do it exactly. In this form of exercise most learners should get most answers right. See **Guided exercises** below.

Cue cards	cards or pieces of paper used either to guide responses to drills or tell learners their role in more communicative activities.
Drills	repetitive exercises designed to form habits in learners and fix the language so that it can be produced without thought.
Feedback	the final stage in a teaching procedure in which the learners and the teacher can judge its success.
Guided exercises	exercises in which learners are guided (perhaps by a model paragraph or set of examples) but not controlled in terms of what they produce. See **Controlled exercises** above.
Monitoring	1. checking quickly to make sure all learners are on task. 2. moving around the classroom to help individuals or groups of learners while they work on tasks.
Meaningful vs. Meaningless drills	the former require repetition to fix a pattern but still require learners to understand what they are saying and make choices. The latter require no understanding once the pattern has been recognised and may be completed successfully without the learner making any choices or understanding the language.
Noticing	See above under Learning and the Learner.
Presentation	the stage in the lesson in which the teacher introduces or presents the focus through, e.g., explanation, demonstration, elicitation, definition or a combination of techniques.
Realia	something from the real world brought into the classroom to make the teaching more immediate and compelling. Bringing a real holiday brochure to practise referring to preferences and choices is one example.

Methodology, methods and approaches

Audiolingualism	an approach heavily influenced by **Behaviourism** which concerns itself with listen-and-repeat exercises, drilling of form and a focus on accuracy.
Behaviourism	a theory of learning and language which has two strands: 1. that language is a skill acquired through imitation and the formation of habits. 2. that learning takes place through the application of a stimulus-response-reinforcement cycle.
Communicative language teaching (CLT)	an approach to teaching which focuses more on successful communication than structural or formal accuracy. There are two forms: Weak form: in which the study of grammar is combined with a focus on function but communicative competence remains the objective. Strong form: in which there is no study of structure or form at all. Competence in this area is deemed to flow from authentic language use alone.
Cognitivism	an approach to teaching and learning opposed to behaviourism (see above) which focuses on the thinking and problem-solving characteristics of the mind. Theories of cognitivism (as opposed to behaviourism) underlie much of post-behaviourist language teaching. Cognitivism is concerned with the investigation of how people think – their internal mental states. In our field, this means thinking about how people process language and information to construct dependable rules for its use.
Contrastive analysis	an analysis which compares two languages to discover similarities and differences.
Deductive vs. Inductive learning	Deductive: given the rule, learners can deduce how to form accurate language. Inductive: learners can work out the rule from examples of correct usage (see **Cognitivism**).
Direct method	strictly speaking, any approach to teaching a language *through* the language. More loosely, an approach akin to **Audiolingualism**.

Functional approach	an approach to teaching which focuses on language functions (such as requesting, apologising, inviting etc.) rather than on language structures and forms. The approach is akin to **Communicative language teaching**. Compare also **Audiolingualism** and **Structural approach**.
Genre approach	a teaching approach which focuses on the ways in which spoken and written texts are conventionally structured depending on what is being focused on, the intentions of the speaker/writer and the way grammatical choices are made.
Grammar-translation methodology	an approach to teaching in which the learners are given the rule (i.e., a **Deductive approach**) and from that basis can work out how to translate into and from the target language. Originally, the approach was aimed at attaining access to the written literature of the target language rather than the ability to communicate. It is still widely used.
Humanist approaches	an influential range of approaches to teaching which focus on the learners as *people* rather than students. In most, the teacher takes on the role of counsellor rather than instructor and a 'holistic' view of the learners is taken.
Inductive learning	see **Deductive learning**, above.
Learner-centred approaches	include all approaches which are based on the needs of the learners rather than the demands of an externally imposed syllabus. The term also applies to classroom behaviours (e.g., basing feedback on what emerges from the learners) as well as the design of the syllabus and course content.
Notional approach	an approach to the design of a syllabus and teaching that considers the aspects of ideas rather than the functions or structures of the language. For example, the syllabus and teaching focus is on concepts such as *duration of time, size, temperature, futurity, likelihood* and so on.
Structural approach	teaching the grammar of the language and its individual structures rather than focusing on communicative intent. Contrasted with a **Communicative, Notional** or **Functional approach**.
Situational language teaching (SLT)	an approach, first developed in Britain, which focuses on language used in specific settings to exemplify and teach the kinds of language required in different settings, e.g., a customer in a restaurant, an enquirer at an airport etc. The approach is influential in the design of teaching materials.

Testing and Assessment

Achievement / attainment tests	a testing procedure which seeks to determine how much of the syllabus has actually been learnt.
Cloze test	in the strict sense, this means the removal of every 5th or 7th word from a text but is often used to describe a gap-fill test where words of a specific nature are removed for learners to insert.
Backwash / Washback	refers to the effect on teaching that an examination or test can have. For example, the demands of an examination format and type will determine the sorts of practice and language input undertaken.
Continuous assessment	assessing learning on the basis of the learners' achievements during rather than at the end of a course.
Diagnostic test	a test designed to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses in order to construct a syllabus.
Direct vs. Indirect testing	the former refers to testing the skill that is being assessed. For example, if we want to see how well a learner can write an email about a holiday, we get them to do just that and assess the product. The latter refers to testing the skills that contribute to the

	successful product (such as use of the past tense forms, lexis concerning activities and travel etc.).
Objective vs. Subjective testing	the first is a test designed to remove any judgement from its marking. Such tests are usually multiple-choice or fixed-answer tests. The second is a test which requires the marker to judge how well a task has been achieved.
Placement test	a test designed to assess learners' current proficiency and place them in a suitable class. It is often combined with a **Proficiency test** and a **Diagnostic test**.
Proficiency test	a test which looks forward to determine whether a learner has the ability to undertake future tasks in the language, such as studying or working.
Progress test	a periodic test designed to assess how much of a current teaching programme is being learned successfully.
Rubric	the instructions for a test item.
Subjective test	see **Objective testing** above.
Washback	see **Backwash**.
Vocabulary	
Active vs. Passive vocabulary	the first refers to those items which a learner knows and can deploy. The second to those items which the learner can recognise and understand but which are not yet part of his/her production.
Cognate	a word in one language which looks similar to and has a meaning equivalent to a word in another language. E.g. (German/English) *besser/better*. A false cognate is a word that looks similar to a word in another language purely by coincidence. False cognates are not connected in any way or derived from the same source. For example, the German words *haben* and the Latin *habere* both mean *have* but they are derived from completely different sources and not connected. False friends are words derived from the same root in two languages and which look similar but actually have different meanings. For example, *simpatico* in Italian does not mean *sympathetic* in English.
Collocation	the propensity for certain words to occur together such as *torrential + rain, mass + media* etc.
Connotation vs. Denotation	words *denote* certain basic concepts but may also have emotional *connotations*. For example, the word *pig* refers to a type of animal but may also have emotional overtones in different settings.
False friends	Words which look the same as an English word in another language but have, in fact, a different meaning. An example is the English word *actualize* which a German speaker may be tempted to equate with the German verb *aktualisieren*. In fact, the German verb means to *refresh* or *update*.
Idiom	an expression which cannot be understood by understanding its constituent parts, e.g., *a political whitewash, under the weather, black sheep of the family, soul of discretion* etc.
Lexeme	the technical term used to avoid the ambiguous 'word'. It refers to a unit of meaning and can comprise more than one word and include derived forms such as happy, happier etc.