



Michael McCarthy  
and Steve Walsh

# ELT

the basics

ROUTLEDGE



This admirably accessible introduction to ‘the basics’ of ELT provides a review of key elements of English language teaching that is ideally suited to trainee teachers and those early in their career. Drawing on the authors’ wide-ranging knowledge and expertise, this informative text combines real world data with reflective tasks as it outlines key elements of language teaching and learning. With its suggestions for further reading and discussion of pathways for professional development, it provides an excellent overview for those starting out in ELT.

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## THE BASICS

*ELT: The Basics* offers a clear, non-jargonistic introduction to English language teaching for EFL/ESL teachers in training, early career teachers, those considering taking up ELT, and experienced teachers who may want to read about the way the profession has developed and continues to evolve.

Key features of this book include:

- Real classroom data and data from ELT training programmes
- Discussion of a wide range of learning contexts and different types of learners (young learners, adults, third age, academic, refugees and immigrants, etc.)
- Comparisons of different types of syllabuses and methods, and discussion of current technologies
- An emphasis on classroom interaction as the key to maximising learning

Featuring a glossary of key terms, cartoons and illustrations, further reading, personal reflection points, and discussion of the most important and relevant research, this book is a clear and accessible introduction to the complex field of ELT.

**Michael McCarthy** is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Nottingham, UK, and Honorary Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Valencia, Spain. He has (co-)authored and edited 60 books and was co-founder (with Ronald Carter) of the CANCODE spoken English corpus. He has lectured in 46 countries and has been involved in language teaching and applied linguistics for 57 years.

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## The Basics

*The Basics* is a highly successful series of accessible guidebooks which provide an overview of the fundamental principles of a subject area in a jargon-free and undaunting format. Intended for students approaching a subject for the first time, the books both introduce the essentials of a subject and provide an ideal springboard for further study. With over 50 titles spanning subjects from Artificial Intelligence to Women's Studies, *The Basics* are an ideal starting point for students seeking to understand a subject area.

Each text comes with recommendations for further study and gradually introduces the complexities and nuances within a subject.

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ELT  
**THE BASICS**

Michael McCarthy and Steve Walsh

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To the memory of Ron Carter, friend and fellow traveller



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# INTRODUCTION TO THE READER

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT) BASICS

The basics of ELT can be boiled down to a handful of questions: WHAT? WHO? WHY? WHEN? WHERE? and HOW?

- WHAT do we teach? Simple answer: the English language. But there is a lot to say about what seems a simple answer, and that is where we start in this book.
- WHO is involved? We need to know as much as possible about our students to do the job properly. We also need to know what best practice is for a teacher. What does it mean to be a successful ELT teacher?
- WHY? Different students have different reasons, motivations, and goals for learning English. And you may have different reasons and goals for being a teacher.
- WHEN? A long course of two or three years spread over a number of school/academic terms, possibly with some school subjects being taught through English medium, is quite different from an intensive pre-university course for learners of academic English. Primary school learners have different needs from those learning in retirement.
- WHERE? The most common answer would be ‘in a classroom’. The more we know about classrooms, how they work, and what goes on in them, the better. But the physical classroom is not the only place where people learn; online is another ‘where’, as is learning outside of institutions.

- **HOW?** There is no one correct or best way to teach English, though, based on our years of experience, knowledge of the profession, and familiarity with relevant research, we try to guide you to the most appropriate methods and resources for different teaching situations.

Each of these questions could generate a whole book, so in the limited space of this one, we will stick to the essentials. Once you have covered the basics, there is plenty more reading and research available – enough to last a lifetime.



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# THE RAW MATERIAL LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE

## THE *EL* IN ELT

This book is about English language teaching. The English language is the raw material we utilise to impart knowledge of the language and the skills involved in using it. However, the term *the English language* is not as simple and straightforward as it may seem at first glance. It combines two surprisingly complex notions: *language* and *English*.

Language enables us to communicate. For most people, this means speaking and writing, using words. We can also use our bodies and facial expressions to make signs (especially where speaking or hearing is not possible), and we have mathematical symbols to express complex scientific notions, but all types of language exist for communication (Figure 1.1).

Three key features of human language enable communication: **substance**, **form**, and **meaning**. All human languages possess these, and all three are involved in English language teaching.

## SUBSTANCE

### THE STUFF OF LANGUAGE

*Substance* means the media through which we communicate. There are two types: phonic and graphic. **Phonic substance** is sound; we use our vocal apparatus to produce sounds which, when combined in certain ways, create meaning. The sounds leave our mouth and are received by the ears of the person(s) we address, what Peter

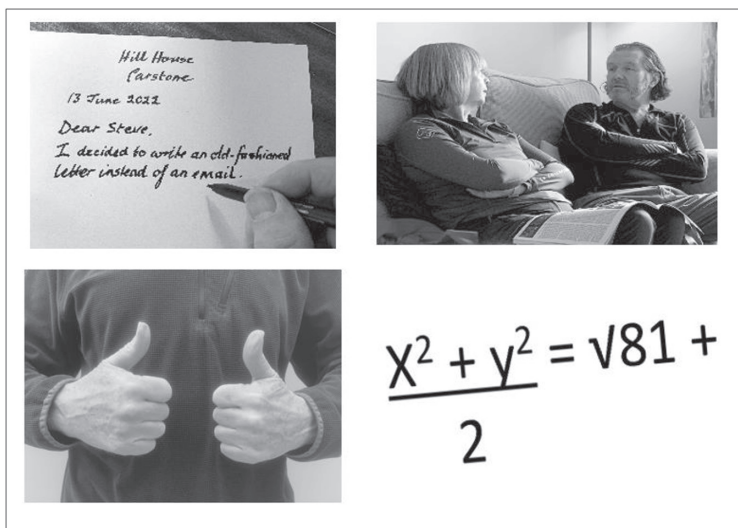


Figure 1.1 Types of language.

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Roach calls ‘the speech chain’ (2001: 3–5). The study of sounds is **phonetics**.

The other type of substance is **graphic substance**; we use sets of letters or other types of symbols to communicate through writing. Speaking is the more basic and most frequent human activity – all languages have a spoken form, but not all have ever been written down. However, as Gerald Knowles points out, a large number of words we know come to us when we encounter them in reading, so the relationship between the phonic substance and the graphic substance is not a simple dividing line (Knowles 2014: 6–7).

## SOUNDS

The phonic substance of English consists of sets of sounds which English speakers of different varieties agree on over time as belonging to their language. The study of how these sounds form a system

is **phonology**. The English set of sounds may overlap with other languages, but there are often notable differences.

Each language has an agreed-upon set of sounds which are the basis of meaningful communication. These sets of sounds are called **phonemes**. Because they are sounds, and because the same letter of the alphabet can represent different sounds in English, we represent phonemes using **phonemic symbols**, not letters. You will often find these listed in dictionaries and alongside each word to tell you how it is normally pronounced. Table 1.1 shows a selection of English phonemes, with phonemic symbols and examples of words which contain them.

The phonemes in Table 1.1 fall into two groups: the left-hand column are **consonants**; the right-hand column are **vowels**. Consonants are made by momentarily stopping the air from flowing in some way, for example, by closing your lips (e.g., p, b, as in *pot* or *big*). Vowels are made by not blocking the air with your lips or teeth or tongue (e.g., e, ɒ, as in *met*, *lot*).

English has **consonant clusters** (consonants which immediately follow one another with no vowels in between), which can be difficult for non-English speakers, for example, *three*, *crisps*, *months*, *strain*. Some languages don't like to start words with certain combinations of consonants: Spanish, for example, doesn't like to start words with s + consonant and uses an e-vowel to begin with, so in Spanish, *Spain* is *España*, and *school* is *escuela*.

We can use our tongue to slide quickly from one vowel to another to produce a **diphthong**, which sounds like a single sound. Table 1.2 shows examples of diphthongs.

Table 1.1 Examples of English phonemes.

Phoneme	Example words	Phoneme	Example words
p	<i>party</i> , <i>cap</i>	i:	<i>mean</i> , <i>feet</i>
k	<i>case</i> , <i>black</i>	e	<i>get</i> , <i>head</i>
b	<i>brown</i> , <i>probe</i>	ɒ	<i>hot</i> , <i>what</i>
f	<i>fine</i> , <i>free</i>	æ	<i>cat</i> , <i>back</i>
tʃ	<i>cheese</i> , <i>much</i>	ʌ	<i>but</i> , <i>fun</i>
dʒ	<i>jump</i> , <i>badge</i>	u:	<i>boot</i> , <i>who</i>

Table 1.2 Examples of English diphthongs.

Diphthong	Example words
əʊ	<i>home, coat</i>
aʊ	<i>house, now</i>
aɪ	<i>ride, like</i>

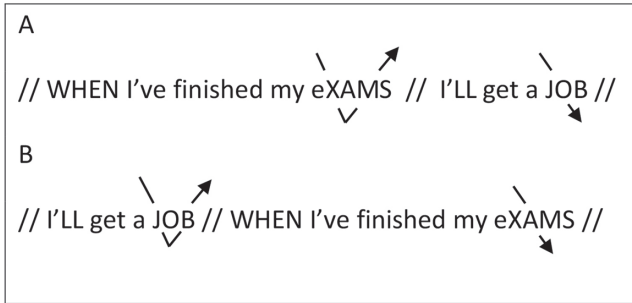


Figure 1.2 Discourse intonation choices.

## INTONATION

Contrary to some traditional views, **intonation**, the movement of the voice up and down, is not so much concerned with either grammar or emotions but with interaction, the central theme of this book. David Brazil's (1997) description of intonation shows how the choice of rising and falling tones reflects the speaker's assumptions about the degree of shared or background knowledge (involving **referring** tones) as opposed to new information (using **proclaiming** tones). This choice is represented in two possible versions of the sentence in Figure 1.2.

The syllables in capitals in Figure 1.2 are stressed. In version A, *exams* has a fall-rise tone, meaning 'context/background to the statement'. *Job* is proclaimed – it is the new/main information. In version B, the listener may have said *Why don't you get a job?* The speaker effectively says, 'I will, but not till I've finished my exams' – *exams* is now new/proclaimed, while *job* is shared (referred).