

Book Review

A Course in English Language Teaching, Third Edition

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As language instruction evolves through waves of technological innovation, English language teaching (ELT) has undergone significant methodological shifts. In response to these developments, Penny Ur's *A Course in English Language Teaching* incorporates theoretical foundations and practical strategies that are immensely valuable for language teachers working with diverse learners in varied classroom contexts. This review not only summarizes the book's key contributions but also critically evaluates its scope, practical relevance, and suitability for different audiences, particularly early-career educators. The first and second editions, published in 1996 and 2012, respectively, were widely recognized as valuable guidance for novice teachers as much as a classic manual for experienced ones. Building on this legacy, the third edition (2024) extends beyond the earlier editions by introducing extensive revisions that make the book more suitable to the contexts of language learning and teaching in the digital era, emphasizing the context of teaching with increasing use of technology, introducing AI tools and technologies that support instruction, while simultaneously tracing the steps back to updating and enriching the original content to better reflect today's educational landscape.

The book begins by pointing out that English is now a global language, as its status has since changed from the day when the first edition was launched. It now serves as a means for international communication and is not “owned” by any nation in particular. As a result of its newly-emerged global status, there have been notable developments in the fundamental approaches to English language instruction. The author does not forget to note that most English teachers today are non-native speakers, which comes with the unique advantage of experiential understanding of how a second or foreign language is learned, hence making instruction more harmonized with learners’ needs and challenges while they are striving to acquire English proficiency.

This strength is particularly evident in the book’s organization. Each chapter follows a solid, easy-to-follow structure that helps readers make a necessary connection between the content of the book and their actual practices. Each chapter begins with an overview, allowing readers to grasp the key themes to be subsequently explored. In addition to evidence-based insights on ELT theories and practices presented in accessible language, there are practical guidelines that, at least to a certain extent, emphasize context sensitivity, illustrative classroom procedures, and “Pause for Thought” sections followed by the author’s commentary. The “Review: Check Yourself” section (called “tasks” in the second edition) includes 6 to 8 reflective questions per chapter that encourage readers to assess their understanding and to critically engage with the content once they finish reading each chapter.

From teaching various English language skills and applying various assessment methods to administering classroom techniques and instructional strategies, each chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of key ELT areas. The book balances theoretical depth with applicable techniques and offers subjective commentary from the author. With its use of clear language and real-world examples, the content thus becomes accessible to teachers at all levels of training and experiences, particularly those that are at the beginning of their

teaching careers, as will be demonstrated with examples later in this review. A defining feature of the book's overall content is its focus on meaningful engagement rather than rote memorization. Personalized learning, tailored to students' unique needs and ambitions, is emphasized as a pathway to maximizing learner potential. The text also highlights the teacher's evolving role as a facilitator and mentor, highlighting the importance of creating a supportive, exploratory, and motivating classroom environment.

This focus becomes clear in the book's inclusion of theories and concepts related to language acquisition, such as Chomsky's (1969) language acquisition device and Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles model. These frameworks help to build foundational knowledge for novice teachers and for more experienced ones that may lack formal training in applied linguistics, thus making the book particularly valuable for early-career educators that can apply these theories to reflect on and adjust the teaching strategies that they currently have adopted and utilize. Such a perspective is especially relevant in EFL contexts like that of Thailand, where student interaction in class tends to be limited due to long-standing teacher-centered traditions and an overemphasis on passive learning. Students often hesitate to speak out for fear of making mistakes or losing face. Moreover, classroom interaction typically involves only high-proficiency learners, while others remain too shy or self-conscious to speak. In this regard, the book's balanced discussion of various classroom organization styles, including teacher-fronted methods, reminds teachers of the value of integrating teacher input with student-centered activities. However, it is worth noting that rather than advocating for a single approach, the book encourages teachers to make informed choices based on their learners' needs and the actual contexts that they find themselves in.

While the author of *A Course in English Language Teaching* highlights the importance of students' first language (L1), this perspective can be extended by incorporating the concept of language transfer, grounded in contrastive analysis

theory (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957). Apparently, raising students' awareness of the similarities and differences between their L1 and English helps them to benefit from positive transfer (i.e. similarities), to recognize the challenges from negative transfer (i.e. differences), and to identify gaps (zero transfer). This not only supports metalinguistic awareness but also affirms learners' linguistic identities.

These reflective prompts presented in the “Pause for Thoughts” section of the book are further enriched by the author's commentary. One prompt asks teachers whether they should prioritize British or American English vocabulary. The author suggests using the more commonly recognized terms in order to avoid overwhelming students and references Google Ngram Viewer to support this choice. While this is a practical strategy, students, especially those preparing for international exams such as the IELTS, may benefit from being exposed to both variants. Although the IELTS accepts both British and American English, inconsistent usage can negatively affect scores under the “Lexical Resource” criterion (British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, & Cambridge English, 2023a, 2023b). Indeed, awareness of both forms is critical for high-stakes contexts.

Another reflective question invites teachers to consider their roles (a term I use here in place of the book's original word ‘function’) in the classroom, whether as instructors, motivators, assessors, or a combination of these. The author asserts that teaching roles are shaped by beliefs and experience, echoing Dina Tsagari's (2021) view that pedagogy is deeply personal. From my experience, teachers often adopt multiple roles based on students' needs. The key is to fulfill these roles in ways that meaningfully support language development.

Chapter 18 marks a significant expansion of the book's scope, as it is dedicated to exploring digital technology and online teaching. It covers essential digital literacies, teaching strategies for online environments, and various tools that support skill development. The emphasis is on thoughtful, pedagogically driven integration of technology, not simply using it without clear educational purpose. The book discusses AI tools such as Fliki and Steve AI for video creation,

and audio/video recording tools such as Audacity, Loom, and ScreenPal. Even though some tools discussed in the book are not new, they serve as useful and readily applicable examples that illustrate how educators can meaningfully integrate technology into their lessons. One standout addition is the treatment of ChatGPT. Rather than banning its use, the author presents ways for teachers to guide students in using it productively. One suggested activity involves students generating a text with ChatGPT, then working with it as a writing partner, exchanging ideas and improving the writing through several self-made edits before submitting the student's own version. This approach teaches students how to engage critically with AI-generated content, but it also assumes academic integrity, without which students might still submit AI-generated final drafts and claim them as their own.

Indeed, even though the book offers valuable guidance for novice teachers, as previously discussed, it somehow falls short in addressing issues of equality and access to educational technology. Many of the recommendations presuppose stable Internet connections and access to up-to-date technologies, which may not exist in some cases, such as under-resourced or rural EFL settings. While the book introduces essential digital literacies (e.g., hyperlink, texting, search, and prompt literacy), further discussion on how these can be made accessible to everyone is necessary in order to ensure maximum benefits teachers can reap. There can be more practical applications tailored to diverse learning situations, for instance, while introducing various models such as blended, hybrid, and flipped classrooms. Further, more examples would be even better. Online group work is briefly mentioned as being more troublesome than in-person collaboration, but the challenges, such as low participation in breakout rooms or technical issues, deserve deeper treatment. These oversights may have stemmed from a more thorough understanding of digital equity or a lack thereof. In other words, many suggested activities assume consistent access to technology, although in reality such access is not guaranteed in all English language teaching contexts.

Consequently, while the book is useful, its relevance may be limited for teachers in non-Western or multilingual contexts, where cultural and institutional conditions differ. The book recommends, for instance, that students keep cameras on during online sessions in order to boost engagement. However, in contexts such as that of Thailand, this might not always be possible as some students may feel uncomfortable showing their faces, while others have to share a single device among multiple group members. Furthermore, a flipped classroom model presumes pre-class preparation, which is uncommon in traditional Thai education except probably at the graduate level. These realities stress the importance of context-sensitive implementation. This recommendation may particularly resonate with novice teachers that are eager to introduce diverse English variants but that struggle to balance this with curriculum demands. While the author encourages a focus on standard English, this is not to devalue other varieties, but instead to make sure that students understand that in today's world intelligibility is as equally important as accuracy and fluency. What is more important is that teachers need to instill in their students the understanding that English that can be used in different contexts such as academic or informal contexts and that they need to use the variety to suit those contexts accordingly.

One major growing concern among teachers these days is the fear that AI will one day, and sooner rather than later, replace human teachers. Todd (2025) reflects this worry, pointing out that GenAI has the potential to disrupt language instruction, which in turn inevitably affect the jobs of teachers. Penny Ur's book helps to ease this concern by emphasizing the important role that teachers still play in utilizing technology wisely; teachers remain the main decision-makers when choosing AI tools that support their teaching goals. AI tools, instead of something that will replace human teachers, are in fact tools for human teachers' that can further improve their good teaching. Teachers still "own" the class and can do a better job than AI when it comes to encouraging creativity, independence, and emotional connection in the classroom.

Overall, the book is definitely a valuable ELT reference, especially as it has undergone several revisions and has stood the test of time. It balances theory and practice, and offers real-world applications that can benefit practitioners in different contexts. Therefore, when looking ahead and seeing that the world is changing rapidly, teachers need to come to terms that English language teaching is also changing and that their students are changing as well. The book has done justice in becoming a reliable and supportive tool that ELT professionals around the world can rely on in order to make their instruction more meaningful and to make their language learners more successful.

About the Author

Poonyavee Navetra is a doctoral student in the English as an International Language (EIL) Program, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University and a part-time lecturer at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. She holds a B.A. in English from Silpakorn University and an M.A. in English in English as an International Language from Chulalongkorn University. Her Master's research focused on avoidance theory, and her current research interests include language acquisition and language assessment, particularly assessment literacy.

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