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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of the ways in which teachers of foreign languages (English and other languages) to adults begin their lessons, the purposes that underlie their habitual practices, and students' attitudes to these practices. Among the conclusions reached are the following: (1) in the context described, teachers appear to attach greater importance to affective than cognitive consideration; (2) although individual teachers may operate with a relatively narrow range of activities, there is considerable variation across those involved in the study; (3) despite evidence of a slight preference for more attention to be given to review and preview, students appear to be on the whole quite content with the way in which their lessons begin. (Contains 17 references.)  
 (Author)

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## LESSON BEGINNINGS

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### *Abstract*

*This paper describes a study of the ways in which teachers of foreign languages (English and other languages) to adults begin their lessons, the purposes that underlie their habitual practices, and students' attitudes to these practices. Among the conclusions reached are the following: (1) in the context described, teachers appear to attach greater importance to affective than cognitive consideration; (2) although individual teachers may operate with a relatively narrow range of activities, there is considerable variation across those involved in the study; (3) despite evidence of a slight preference for more attention to be given to review and preview, students appear to be on the whole quite content with the way in which their lessons begin.*

'The danger in trying to set down a plan is that some inexperienced persons may take it to be the plan, and continue to follow it unswervingly from lesson to lesson'

(Rivers, 1968: 375-6)

### **1. Introduction**

This paper describes a small-scale study of the practices of experienced teachers of foreign languages to adults during the first few minutes of their lessons; the thinking that lies behind these practices; and students' attitudes to them.

The study, which forms part of an ongoing investigation at IALS of lesson beginnings and endings, took place between January 1991 and January 1992. For the purposes of the investigation, a 'beginning' is defined pragmatically (rather than temporally)<sup>1</sup> as that part of a lesson between the moment when the teacher starts to interact with students and the commencement of the first major activity. On the basis of the lessons observed in the course of the study, a beginning defined in this way may last as little as three minutes or as long as fifteen minutes and consist of anything between one and six short activities.

### **2. From hypotheses to research questions**

The hypotheses on which the study was based can be summarised as follows:

1. that lesson beginnings can serve a variety of functions. For instance, specific types of activity can be used to:
  - help learners to relate the content of the new lesson to that of the last or previous lessons (cognitive contribution)
  - assess relevant knowledge (cognitive contribution)

- establish an appropriate 'set' in learners: i.e. prepare them for what is to follow (cognitive or affective contribution)
  - allow 'tuning-in' time - which may be especially important in situations where learners have come directly from a radically different environment (pragmatic contribution)
  - reduce the disruption caused by late-arriving students (pragmatic contribution).
2. that learners are sensitive to the contribution of lesson beginnings: i.e. value them and recognise the purposes they serve.

Although certain of the ideas under (1) have been previously posited (see the literature review below), they have not so far as we know been empirically validated. We do not know to what extent teachers of foreign languages to adults use lesson beginnings for these purposes - or, indeed, how their lessons begin. Nor do we know whether students feel lesson beginnings to be any more important than lesson middles or endings.

The hypotheses were reformulated as a set of research questions:

- how do teachers of foreign languages to adults begin their classes ? how do the practices observed relate to a hypothesised 'map' of practices ? which practices are most recurrent ?
- what conscious purposes lie behind the observed practices ?
- are lesson beginnings important in the eyes of students ? to what extent are they sensitive to the various activities of which lesson beginnings are comprised ? are there generalisable preferences across students of different types for particular forms of beginning activity ?
- do teachers seem to be providing the kinds of lesson beginning that students want ?

A further hypothesis, which falls outside the scope of this report, was that through an appropriately structured teacher development programme teachers may be persuaded to attach greater importance to lesson beginnings - if these are shown to be important by the study - and incorporate new strategies into their teaching. (This assumes the existence of mechanisms for the dissemination of the results of the research and a willingness on the part of teachers to reflect on their normal practices and, where relevant, attempt to incorporate new strategies.)

### 3. Towards a system for data analysis

A preliminary survey of the literature on the teaching of foreign languages (English and other languages) had revealed that although lesson beginnings had received some attention, no comprehensive system of analysis had been suggested. Our interest in examining these sources more closely lay principally, therefore, in supplementing and refining concepts derived from our own experience and observation. In other words, we started from our own analytical categories and then scrutinised the literature for further inspiration.

Interestingly, some of the best known EFL methodology textbooks (Allen and Valette, 1972; Harmer, 1983; Hubbard, Jones, Thornton and Wheeler, 1983) make no reference at all - so far as we can see - to lesson beginnings, and a recent article on lesson planning by Parker (1990), ostensibly aimed at newly qualified teachers, contains a blueprint for lesson planning which recommends readers to start their lessons with a 15-minute input stage.

Where advice is given, this may be restricted to the management of resources immediately before the lesson begins - for instance, the importance of checking equipment, the room, the arrangement of the furniture (e.g., Abbott and Wingard, 1981: 266-7). Other writers combine practical suggestions with explanation. Underwood (1987), for example, tells teachers to 'say briefly what the plan for the lesson is so that the students can be aware of the way they are progressing through the work' (1987: 74, emphasis added). Rivers (1968: 376) argues for beginning with a review, a point echoed by Finocchiaro (1974), who makes two further suggestions: that the teacher should 'motivate the need for the new material' (1974: 50) and that the review might be followed by homework correction in the form of a short quiz (ibid: 52). The regular brief quiz, she explains, can serve a number of purposes, among which 'it gives the students a sense of achievement if they've done well' and it gives the teacher 'insight into students' difficulties' (ibid: 127).

Sidwell (1987) and Langran (1987), both writing for the teacher of modern languages to adults (in this case, the evening class student), take a similar position on social interaction. Sidwell, listing the elements that most lessons should contain, starts with 'greetings and general chat' (1987: 6), while Langran emphasises the importance of a beginning which sets an appropriate atmosphere. This atmosphere might be established, he suggests, by playing a song in the target language and by a 'lively warm-up' in which the teacher goes over material from previous sessions (1987: 67).

The broadest consideration of opening activities can be found in Gower and Walters (1983). Like most of the other writers cited, they advise the teacher to arrive early. The few minutes before the lesson is due to start can be used, they suggest, for interaction with individual students, socialising or giving back homework and discussing individual problems. The beginning of the lesson should be clearly signalled, they state forthrightly, after which certain choices have to be made: for instance, between beginning with an inductive presentation, an indication of the topic of the lesson or a brief description of what students are going to be doing in the lesson (1983: 53).

Apart from the fact that they say more about lesson beginnings than others writing from a foreign-language teaching perspective, what distinguishes the treatment of this topic by Gower and Walters is an observation task (an extract from which is given below) which encourages trainee teachers to look analytically at the internal structure of this part of a lesson:

2. Categorize each beginning and end in terms of the following activities:

- |                                      |                       |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| A. Greeting the group                | F. Setting homework   |
| B. Greeting individuals              | G. Returning homework |
| C. Socializing with the group        | H. Announcements      |
| D. Socializing with individuals      | I. Checking           |
| E. Semi-enclosed 'waiting' exercises | K. Time-filling       |
- You may need to add other categories.

(Gower and Walters, 1983: 55)

Such a task has potential value in raising trainees' awareness of the structure of lesson beginnings and endings but since the question that it asks is 'What?' rather than 'How?' or 'Why?' its value is rather limited. For carefully detailed descriptions of what teachers do or why they do what they do we have to turn to the field of general education.

Wragg and Wood's (1984) research into teachers' first encounters with a class focuses on teacher behaviour and characteristics (opening words, means used to secure attention and projecting an image) and therefore provides a useful complement to the study described in this paper. Perrott (1982), on the other hand, offers a relevant framework for a broad-brush analysis of the purposes that drive lesson-initial activities. Writing about presentation skills, she introduces (1982: 21) the concept of 'set' and glosses this as 'pre-instructional procedure'. 'Set induction' (which we have always understood to refer to the procedures teachers use to get learners into a state of readiness for learning) can, she points out (ibid: 21-22), fulfil various functions:

- focus students' attention on what is to be learned by gaining their interest
- provide a structure or organising framework for the lesson
- provide a smooth transition from known or familiar material to new material ('transition set').

Examples are given of procedures (or activity-types) through which these purposes are typically realised.

This survey of literature started from a wish to establish a system for the analysis of lesson beginnings and, as expected, it provided input to the data analysis instruments described below. Incidentally, however, it revealed that in the majority of the EFL/FL texts considered a rather atheoretical approach is adopted to discussion of lesson beginnings. We return briefly to this point in our conclusion.

#### 4. Data collection

Three types of data were collected:

- (1) recordings of classroom lessons
- (2) recordings of interviews with (a) teachers (b) students
- (3) student questionnaires.

This section describes the procedures used to collect the data and the rationale for these procedures.

#### 4.1 Recordings of classroom lessons

In order to obtain a representative sample of languages, levels and teaching practices, twelve teachers, of a full-time teaching staff of about thirty, were videorecorded teaching complete lessons.<sup>2</sup> Recording the classes would, it was felt, provide an objective - albeit partial - record of what happened and would make analysis easier.

Six of the resulting recordings were of EFL classes, these being multilingual groups of adults following a full-time general English course of twenty hours a week; the other six were of once-a-week two-hour 'community' classes in French, Italian, Spanish (2) and German (2) for English-speaking adult learners (hereafter Modern Language - ML - classes).

#### 4.2a Recordings of interviews with teachers

Teachers, all of whom were native speakers of the language they were teaching, were interviewed in English by the researchers as soon as possible after the filmed lesson. The interviews, which were recorded, covered the main events of the lesson and included specific questions on lesson beginnings and endings. The recordings were rough-edited and the sections particularly relevant to the project were then transcribed.

The interviews with teachers were intended to supplement the classroom data in three ways: (1) by offering an insight into why teachers did what they did, i.e. their purposes, explicit or intuitive (these could then be used to test the researchers' checklist of possible purposes); (2) to set the observed lessons in a broader context of self-reported habitual practices; (3) to capture teachers' individual voices: a qualitative (and quotable) dimension.

#### 4.2b Recordings of interviews with students

Six groups of students were interviewed (three groups of EFL students at different levels, a total of eight students; three groups of students of French<sup>3</sup> at different levels, nine students in all). The interviews, which lasted about 20 minutes, were in English and were recorded. A standardised procedure was again followed under which certain questions relevant to the research study (i.e. on beginnings and students' perception of their importance) were asked within the context of a more general interview. The audiotapes were rough-edited and the relevant sections transcribed.

#### 4.3 Questionnaires

To gather a broader indication of students' attitudes to lesson beginnings, a questionnaire was devised (see extract below) and distributed by class teachers to all IALS students (EFL and ML) at a point roughly half-way through a ten-week term. Since teachers were not asked to follow a set script, student briefing will have been variable, a fact which, together with the voluntary nature of the exercise, may account for the relatively low rate of return overall.

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Think about all the classes you have attended at the Institute.  
Please circle your answers to YES/NO questions.

1. How do your classes normally begin? What kind of things do teachers say or do?
  2. Do you think the beginning of a lesson is important? YES/NO  
Please give reasons for your answer.
  3. How do you prefer a class to begin? Give reasons for your answer and examples of any beginning activities that you liked especially.
- 

Extract from student questionnaire

Approximately 160 questionnaires were returned by ML students (31% of the total distributed) and 27 by EFL students (a 72% return). The EFL sample was subsequently enlarged during summer 1991 and November 1991 to bring the EFL total up to approximately 100.

#### 5. Data analysis instruments

Two instruments were designed to analyse the data: a Purposes Checklist and an Activities Checklist. These went through several drafts and the pre-final version was refined following pilot testing on random samples of the data. Even then, as we note below, further modifications proved necessary. Space prevents us from reproducing both Checklists in full, but an indication of their scope can be seen in the tables on p.102 and p.107.

The Purposes Checklist (PC) has two major categories. The first of these, (1) 'to establish appropriate affective framework', reflects the prevalent belief that students will be more receptive if they feel more at ease. The second, (2) 'to establish appropriate cognitive framework', is more lesson-specific, but is also based on beliefs: that students learn best when they can relate new input to what they already know, and that teachers who know what learners know can teach more efficiently. The remaining categories are an attempt to capture other teacher roles and duties. Although designed primarily for use on the teacher interview data, the PC was also used on the student interviews and questionnaires.

The Activities Checklist (AC) was used to analyse the lesson data, i.e. to capture what happened and in what order. The time taken by each of the activities judged to form part of the lesson beginning was also noted. This analysis, and the further use of the AC on the questionnaire and interview data, allowed for testing of the adequacy of the list.

In its most basic form, the AC consists of four categories: 'social interaction'; 'administration and classroom organisation'; 'review'; and 'preview'. Each of these has a small number of subcategories, thus allowing for coding at either a general level only or at both general and more specific levels. Alongside the four basic categories are four further categories. The first of these, 'social interaction with teacher feedback', describes a phenomenon frequently observed in ML classes by one of the researchers, while the second, 'discussion of learner needs and wants', covers first lessons, periodic negotiation of objectives and content, discussion of learner difficulties and other ways in

which teachers involve learners in taking or contributing to decisions about their own learning. The third subcategory, 'activity', caused most heart-searching, since it not only duplicates the global term in the checklist title but is also not easily separable from certain of the other categories - it may, for instance, be the form through which review is realised; the final subcategory, 'other', is a catch-all to include such items as music.

## 6. Findings

Implicit in the hypotheses and research questions is the assumption that foreign language teaching (to adults) is a unitary concept. At a general level, this may be true, but as far as the participants of the present study are concerned, teachers and students of ML on the one hand and EFL on the other, there is one key difference: context. For instance, whereas EFL students have daily classes, ML students on 'community' courses attend classes only once a week (which is likely to have implications for the importance attached by students and teachers to such elements within lesson beginnings as 'greetings', 'social interaction' and 'review'). Moreover, ML students at IALS are taught by a single teacher, whereas EFL students are taught by two or more teachers in the course of a single day, and the focus within each part of the day is different. These and other contextual differences both within and across the ML and EFL samples inevitably have a bearing on the results reported below.

### 6.1 What happens - activities

A picture of the kinds of activity that may make up a lesson beginning, speculatively sketched by reference to the literature and our own experience, was built up from the four sources available: videorecordings of lessons, teacher and student interviews, and student questionnaires. Although one objective in studying these sets of data was to arrive at a comprehensive categorisation of activity types, a further objective was to ascertain how these were distributed across the two major groups represented: EFL and ML classes.

#### 6.1.1 Questionnaires

Since the questionnaires offer the fullest description of typical activities, we present the findings from these first. However, in considering the quantitative results of the questionnaires, several points should be borne in mind: (1) since respondents represent a cross-section of all IALS students the findings from the student data and the teacher/lesson data will be at best complementary; (2) because something is not mentioned, this does not mean that it does not happen: it may seem so obvious as not to be worth mentioning; alternatively, it may be omitted because it does not form part of what the student sees as the lesson (e.g. music) or the lesson beginning; (3) the allocation of student responses to activity categories involves an element of interpretation.

The table below shows the number of references in the questionnaires to global categories of activity, several of which comprise a number of subcategories (hence the total of 172 for ML 'social interaction' - more than the number of respondents). Where more than one category was mentioned in the same questionnaire these are noted separately.

Table 1: Activities mentioned as usual  
(ML: n = 163; EFL: n = 104)

	ML	EFL
social interaction	172	35
social int. with feedback	4	-
admin and cl. organ.	13	4
review	111	13
disc. of student needs/wants	16	3
preview	41	25
activity	55	44
other	-	3

If one takes into account the contextual differences noted above, there is nothing striking about these results. ML figures for social interaction and review (which includes the return of or comment on homework) are much higher than the equivalent figures for EFL presumably because ML teachers feel the need to pay particular attention to these when a class meet only once a week. It follows from this that if the beginning phase of a lesson typically involves a focus on one or both of these activities, there will be less time (since teachers naturally want to get on to what they and students consider to be the body of the lesson) for other activities in the table. What is perhaps a little surprising is that within the EFL sample the corollary does not apply: we do not see a noticeable increase in the figures for 'activity' and 'preview'.

The higher ML numbers also offer the possibility for comparisons to be made across the 25 groups represented in the sample. Again, space does not permit the inclusion of these results, but certain findings stand out: (1) in two groups, social interaction appears to amount to no more than greetings; in others, it seems to be a very significant category (2) despite the fact that 'activity' attracted a fairly high number of mentions overall, ten groups apparently never begin in this way (3) six groups make no mention of review, while in one group this category receives 15 mentions (4) twelve groups make no reference to preview. The incidence of review and preview is a point to which we return below.

### 6.1.2 Teacher interviews

From the teacher interviews, we get some feeling for individual differences within the overall picture. For instance, one ML teacher says she prefers always to start with a social interaction phase: 'I used to do it only once, well, every other week or so, and now I do it every week because I found out that they all have something to say one week or the other that is interesting and that starts a very natural discussion, where the others ask questions and so on'. Another ML teacher says she tends 'to recap ... in some way', a common starting-point for two others: 'if it is the second half of something I have done before then I try and draw together what we did last week, remind them and go on from there...'. The two remaining teachers in the ML sample, on the other hand, might often start with homework, handing it back, going over it, asking if there were any difficulties. One makes the point that although she goes into class with something prepared, she might choose to do something different if she sees that students look tired.

In point of fact, all the major categories of activity were referred to in the course of the ML teacher interviews, with one exception - social interaction with feedback - and this was referred to in one of the student interviews.

In general, the EFL teachers seem to place more emphasis on the main topic of the lesson and see the lesson beginning as an introduction to this. These introductions may take various forms: 'something to discuss which will put them in the right frame of mind', 'tiny video tapes [extracts] ... just to get people started ... newspaper story, or a picture ... photograph ... some kind of hors d'oeuvre ... to feed in in some particular way to the main body'. Two of the EFL sample also refer to the occasional use of physical exercises either for topic-related reasons - 'we did health and fitness 'ast week so that was quite appropriate' - or because 'they can be ... particularly pudding-like when they come back from lunch and erm it's important to set the right mood for the afternoon sessions'. One mentions, in the context of 'light relief' her feeling that she ought to help learners to make the connections between 'the world outside and the language classroom: 'I like to ask them if they've seen any puns on the buses and things like that ... just, er, talk about their experiences in Edinburgh, you know, how they're getting on'. Here, the contextual differences between ML and EFL teaching undoubtedly play a major role, although observation unrelated to the research study indicates that ML teachers also make reference to relevant features of the target culture (films, TV news, etc) that are locally accessible .

### 6.1.3 Student interviews

The student interviews add nothing to the questionnaires as far as the description of activity-types is concerned (but for a summary of student reactions and suggestions, see 6.3, below).

### 6.1.4 Videorecorded lessons

Analysis of the videorecordings confirms certain differences between EFL and ML classes, in terms of activities. In part, these can be attributed to differences in context. For instance, greetings were not a feature of every EFL class, presumably because teachers had seen students earlier that day; similarly, not all EFL teachers paid explicit attention to attendance, perhaps because the smaller classes in EFL allow for registers to be completed at any point during the lesson or even subsequently.

The most interesting difference is probably in the areas of review (including the return of homework) and preview, as illustrated by the table below, where the maximum number of occurrences in each column is 6:

	ML	EFL
review	5	2
preview	2	6

The prevalence of review in ML beginnings (the sixth lesson began with a social interaction phase and game which may have also served this purpose in a general sense) requires no comment in the context of once-a-week classes; similarly, it is no surprise that we find evidence of previewing in all the videorecorded EFL classes. The figure for EFL review is a little surprising, perhaps, but bears out the low frequency of this category (referred to by approx. 12% of the respondents) in the questionnaire; that for ML preview, on the other hand, is rather higher than might have been expected from the questionnaire results (mentioned by only 25% of respondents).

Within ML, only one striking general tendency can be observed: the use of the FL from the outset (a point mentioned favourably in many of the ML questionnaires, but hardly a matter of choice in multilingual EFL classes). For the rest, the picture is rather mixed. There is normally some form of social interaction, preceded by or interspersed with greetings, and review normally takes place, though it may take various forms, from a passing teacher reference or brief summary to an oral practice activity; homework does not always figure - this may have been dealt with in another phase of the lesson, of course.

Apart from the fact that, as previously mentioned, all the EFL teachers provided some kind of introduction to the planned activities, an equally mixed picture emerges. One of the two cases of review, for instance, involved a student telling other learners what had been done in a class they had missed and the other consisted of the teacher giving back homework.

In relation to all the practices noted above, we need to remember that each teacher's lesson is only a sample of their normal practice. Because something did not happen during the beginning phase of the recorded lesson, this does not mean that it does not happen normally. It may occur either later in the lesson or in EFL classes at another point during the day.

## 6.2 Teachers' purposes

What teachers do is arguably less interesting than why they do what they do - their purposes or the desired effects - and the actual effects reported by students.

The summary of purposes in Table 3 below draws on information from three sources: (1) teacher interviews, (2) student questionnaires, (3) student interviews. Strictly speaking, of course, the student-derived data offers insights into effects (of activities) rather than teacher purposes, but since these are often described in rather similar terms and clearly refer to the same concepts, it seems justifiable to treat them as essentially the same phenomena.

Within the table, a distinction is made between the working categories established at the outset of the analysis proper (in bold) and those added in the course of the detailed analysis of the questionnaires and transcripts. A category such as IVd 'facilitate learning' is one way of catching such questionnaire comments as 'if a lesson is not so ... well organised, it will be impossible to follow the entire lesson', but since the facilitation of learning is implicit in the whole checklist, this is not a particularly satisfactory way of formulating a subcategory. It may be that there is also overlap between subcategories. Given our working methods, we have to accept this. Future research in this area may be able to suggest a smaller number of harder-edged categories.

The figures in the interview columns indicate the number of interviews in which reference was made to this subcategory.

Table 3: Teachers' purposes in relation to lesson-initial activities

	T interviews		S qu'aies		S interviews	
	EFL (6)	ML (6)	EFL (104)	ML (163)	EFL (3)	ML (3)
<b>I to establish appropriate</b>						
<b>AFFECTIVE FRAMEWORK</b>						
a		1	2	34	3	
b	1		12	30	3	1
c		2	15	43	2	2
d	3		41	30	2	
e				1		
f						
g	1		21	26	2	1
h		2	1	24		
i			3	27	2	
j		1		16	2	
k		1				
<b>II to establish appropriate</b>						
<b>COGNITIVE FRAMEWORK</b>						
a			1			
1	1			16		
2						
b			11	10		
c						
d	1	2	3	17		
e	3	1		15		
f	1					
g	1			2		
h	1		4	27		1
i		2		59		
j			2	6		
k	1			1		
		1	4	6	1	
<b>III to encourage STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY</b>						
<b>and INDEPENDENCE</b>						
a					6	
<b>IV to fulfil REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL</b>						
<b>ROLE</b>						
a						
b				8		1
c			1			
d	1	1	9	32	3	1
e	1					1
f				16		
<b>V to overcome PRAGMATIC DIFFICULTY</b>						
a					3	

Given the limited nature of the teacher data in particular, any conclusions can at best be very tentative.

On the face of it, there would appear to be marked differences between individual teachers' conscious purposes. It is true that five of the six EFL teachers made some reference to cognitive purposes and that four of these see one role of a lesson beginning as introducing (or 'warming students up to') a topic; nevertheless, the overall picture is a very mixed one, with no more than four of the twelve teachers involved making explicit reference to any of the subcategories included in the table. Again, we should acknowledge that the absence of reference to specific purposes cannot in itself be deemed significant. The picture emerging from the student questionnaires and interviews is rather more uniform. On the basis of this sample, students clearly recognise the affective contribution of certain types of lesson beginning, and this is particularly marked in ML (247 mentions of items in this category by 163 respondents). By comparison, the cognitive contribution is perceived as far less important (it should be noted that of the 159 ML mentions within this category, 59 relate to the use of the TL from the start of the lesson). Other potential functions of beginnings appear not to be very salient, except to students on a course in which announcements are a daily feature.

### 6.3 Student attitudes

Table 4 below shows the aggregated responses of EFL and ML students to the first question on the questionnaire. 'Other' includes responses where YES or NO was selected but with reservations (e.g. that beginnings were not unimportant but simply no more important than the rest of the lesson).

Table 4: Students' views on importance of lesson beginnings

	ML	(n = 163)	EFL	(n = 104)
Beginnings important?	YES	137	YES	91
	NO	11	NO	5
	OTHER	12	OTHER	6
	no resp.	2	no resp.	2

The responses speak for themselves: although one ML student stated categorically that 'what I'm paying for is not so much the beginning or the end, but the bit in between', almost 90% of the total sample felt that lesson beginnings are important (and this does not include the positively disposed dissenting voices). Reasons given include the following:

'to catch your attention'

'it can create a good atmosphere in the classroom. An interesting beginning can motivate and stimulate. It can introduce the main theme of the lesson'

'not to frighten you and vanish little fears'

The questionnaire also asked students what their preferences were with respect to beginning activities. Space does not permit the inclusion of these results, but one

conclusion stands out: on the whole, students are quite content with the way lessons begin. EFL students expressed no preferences for types of beginning different from what they experience as normal (the strongest preference being for an active start) and a large majority of ML students also seem happy to swim with the tide either because they positively concur (64%) with the way lessons are conducted ('I'm happy with the way the global gives way to the specific') or have no strong feelings either way (12%). It may also be the case, as several EFL students admitted, that they have simply not thought in any analytical way about how they are taught; among the minority of ML students who have given the matter some thought, or were prompted to do so by the questionnaire, the strongest calls are for the inclusion in lesson beginnings of review and preview and more variety.

Students' voices are heard most clearly in the interviews, and what comes out very unequivocally in these is the importance of atmosphere and the contribution of a lesson beginning to this. As one EFL learner put it, 'When you are happy you learn very easy'. A positive atmosphere is one in which students feel relaxed in themselves and at ease in the group, such feelings being engendered, they explained, through affectionate greetings on the part of the teacher, set interaction routines such as asking what people have been doing (which, it was recognised, can also serve various linguistic purposes), personally directed questions about known interests, games involving active participation or any other kind of activity in which stress levels are low. Teachers tend to be well aware that establishing the right kind of atmosphere is particularly important at the start of a term or year when, in the words of one ML student, 'everybody is very much "Oh", you know, "who are they?" and, you know, "How am I going to get on with all these people?" You need something ... to break the ice at the beginning' (ML). Although one group of more advanced ML learners claimed not to feel the need for 'warm-up' activities when they were well into the year, this does not seem to be a widely-held view: 'the start of a lesson ... really sets the mood' (ML); it gets you 'in the right mood to start work' (EFL).

An appropriate beginning, it was observed, can also aid concentration. In ML classes, the teacher's use of the target language may in itself be a focussing device: 'from the minute you speak to me in French I am having to work' (ML, inter); 'you may refer to the weather or you may have a cold ... something like that tends to focus us individually to you as you come in, and that helps I think to get the cells, the grey cells turning into French ... it takes me probably twenty minutes to begin to be actually concentrating' (ML, inter).

For EFL students, some form of review involving teacher summary or elicitation or further practice was seen as desirable - 'so you don't forget it' (EFL, inter). An ML student also found it helpful to be given the opportunity to ask questions about points arising from the previous lesson or homework.

As far as previews are concerned, opinions were divided. One EFL student would have liked to know in advance 'what we are going to do exactly', whereas the ML advanced interview group, asked directly if they would feel more secure if a teacher stated her objectives, said they did not feel the need for this information and that it might actually militate against sensitivity to learner interests. The differences between students may be explicable partly in terms of learning styles but they probably also have something to do with the length of time students have been working with the same teacher. The same ML group agreed that they were happy to leave things in the hands of the teacher

because they trusted her and another ML student, while confessing that he often felt uncomfortable because lessons began in an unexpected manner - 'I'm totally unprepared for whatever you are going to introduce ... it's a little frightening', went on to say that 'it's probably better that way than to actually start off the same way each week' (ML, elem).

## 7. Conclusion

At this point, we return briefly to our hypotheses and research questions.

Van Lier (1988: 162) makes the point that lessons are structured (speech) events, but that 'structural statements of the type opening-middle (or main body)-closing do not amount to much, since the same statements can be made about practically any speech event'. He goes on: '...unless the separate sections can be precisely defined in terms of their functions or exponents, the structure is vacuous'.

We have analysed the various functions (or purposes) served by lesson beginnings and described and quantified their exponents (or activities). Incidentally, we have demonstrated that in the context studied these activities are used principally to establish an appropriate affective framework for learning and, to a lesser extent, to establish an appropriate cognitive framework. In this respect, the study also makes a limited contribution, we believe, to current work on teachers' decision-making processes (see, e.g. Lynch, 1989 and Woods, 1989). The teacher sample is, of course, too small to permit of generalisations, but certain contextually-determined tendencies can be observed.

We have shown, as hypothesised, that learners are indeed sensitive to the contribution of lesson beginnings in general terms and that such preferences as they have tend to be more or less satisfied by teachers' existing practices.

We have also made one or two discoveries. In the first instance, we were surprised by the atheoretical nature of most of the writing on beginnings in the EFL/ML literature. This gives rise to the question of whether in the subject-specific training of EFL/ML teachers more use should not be made of insights from general education. Other discoveries are reflected in the changes we were obliged to make to our checklists. However, on the face of it, the most striking result of the study is the extent to which teachers differ.

We wish to make three points in relation to this. First, there is the issue of context. It is possible that if the study had been designed to serve a different purpose, i.e. to compare teachers teaching lessons with similar objectives at the same time of day, it would have produced much more similar results (though for counterevidence, see Peck, 1988). The second point concerns the value that one places on difference. We find no evidence that there is a mismatch between students' wishes and teachers' different approaches to lesson beginnings. Indeed, there is some indication that variety across lessons taught by the same teacher is preferred. Our third point embodies the strong view of this: the diversity represented here, we would suggest, is actually a rich source of ideas. We hope that those teachers involved in the study, and others with an interest in their own further professional development, will feel stimulated to consider which of the practices employed by other teachers might be incorporated into their own repertoires either to

serve their existing purposes or other possible purposes on which the study has shed light.

They might also like to consider the insights provided here into learners' attitudes, from which we single out five:

- the importance attached to the use by the teacher of the target language;
- the value placed on a good atmosphere;
- the preference for a beginning activity which involves everyone;
- the need felt by some students for review and preview activities;
- the liking for variety.

We began with a quotation from *Teaching Foreign Language Skills* in which Wilga Rivers argues implicitly for variety and flexibility in lesson planning, an argument endorsed by students' comments in this study. We conclude with a checklist in which beginning activities have been related to a reduced set of purposes. This will, we hope, be of help to teacher educators and to those seeking by independent means to develop further their own professional competence and flexibility.

#### Notes

1. Obvious problem: do you define a beginning temporally or in some other way? The observation task in Gower and Walters - reproduced on p.95 - suggests ten minutes as a cut-off point, but from the teacher's perception the end of the beginning phase is more likely to be defined in terms of e.g. change to or from activity of a specific kind.
2. If the research had been more concerned to obtain a representative sample of each teacher's practice, one snapshot would not have been sufficient, of course.
3. French was the language taught by one of the researchers, and therefore afforded easiest access for research purposes.

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Table 5: Planning lesson beginnings: relating activities to purposes

PURPOSES	ILLUSTRATIVE ACTIVITIES
<b>I to establish appropriate AFFECTIVE FRAMEWORK</b>	
a create friendly, relaxed atmosphere	music, introductions, greetings, joke, chat (personal, topical)
b create suitable physical environ.	get ss to arrange furniture
c focus attention	greetings, listening activity, visual stimulus (incl. video)
d make class enjoyable	game, lighthearted oral activity
e get everyone involved	game, pairwork activity, go over homework
f raise confidence	chat (familiar questions, topical issues), controlled activities, review, homework (because prepared), plenary choral activity
g stimulate interest	anything lively or unusual - vary the beginning !
<b>II to establish appropriate COGNITIVE FRAMEWORK</b>	
a provide organising framework	make connections with last lesson, describe activities or objectives for part of/whole lesson, introduce topic
b stimulate awareness of need (ling/cult.)	questions (e.g. based on picture), quiz
c elicit relevant linguistic knowl.	brainstorming, oral activity
d elicit relevant experience	questions
[And to help Ss think in TL/adopt 'right frame of mind', use the TL ! This, together with a brisk start, can 'set the tone' for the whole lesson]	
<b>III to encourage STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY and INDEPENDENCE</b>	
a make Ss aware of learning skills and strategies	consciousness-raising activity (e.g. memorisation game), elicitation of ss' individual strategies
<b>IV to fulfil REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL ROLE</b>	
a give feedback	go through (previous) homework
b check on previous learning	quiz, game, brainstorm, ask for summary, questions, check homework
c give value for time/money	[This has more to do with how you start - e.g. punctuality and relevance - than what you do]
<b>V to overcome PRAGMATIC DIFFICULTY</b>	
a minimise problems of (and for) Ls arriving late	short (e.g. revision) activities, chat

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