Do you realise the difference in learning a first language as to learning a second language?
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The first thing to remember is that there is only one English language, but it is used for different reasons, at different levels and for different purposes.
This might be a very obvious statement, but we are often confused by the naming of ‘subjects’ – English first language, English second or additional language etc. I have even had the enquiry as to whether ELSA (our English Literacy Skills Assessment) has a special assessment available for second language users..... now that would be defeating the object.
Let us forgive this mistake in perception and remind ourselves that the language will certainly be taught differently in the case of the mother tongue user and the second or third language user. And this is the critical point to be remembered when seeking solutions in the learning and training arena.

A few interesting facts about the differences:

- The home language/mother tongue was heard from birth. By the age of 5 or 6 these learners know the basic syntax and semantics of the language, has adequate vocabulary and is ready to extend their basic knowledge into linguistic dexterity. (Vocabulary enrichment, cultural refinement, structural perfection and development of creative and critical use of the language).
- Cultural enrichment is the aim of first language use instruction, but not so for the second language user who can never be completely separated from own culture.
- A second (or third) language is learnt for the sake of communication or as a medium of instruction. The fact that the learner knows his/her first language just as well as the English mother tongue user does his own, adds to the fact that he/she has continual difficulty with differences in meaning (semantics), structure (grammar) and sound patterns (phonetics). This could hinder the successful mastering of the L2 if new paths are not found to attain best results.
- It is a fallacy that one could master a second language by just being exposed to it as in the case of a first language – one should then also be able to master the art of drawing by just listening to the artist talking about it.... Informal grammar and vocabulary exercises is needed to drill and practice structures, sounds and the correct selection of appropriate vocabulary.
- Second language users are not continuously exposed to the language as would a first language user be all day. Intermittent exposure therefore requires a different strategy.
- The second language user is also not a ‘clean slate’, but has the principles of his home language deeply entrenched. Young learners copy sounds and sentence structure much easier than after the age of 10 and this need to be factored into teaching language to senior or adult learners.

How should the teaching of the language differ?
L2 Teaching is learning to speak IN the language, not ABOUT the language. Special attention is given to everyday language use and speech. This is accomplished by focusing on engaging all four basic skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – in every possible contact opportunity.
The goal of L2 teaching is for the user to eventually master the language completely and to be able to use it in any situation. It will resemble the use of a L1 user and become second nature. The L2 user will think more and more as the L1 does, in the language. The aim should be COPE: Cognition and Proficiency in English – thinking and speaking all at the same time.
It requires a teaching approach in which the differences between the languages need to be emphasised with lots of practice in mastering such differences.

From: Second language teaching today: Techniques and activities by H Askes.