In the previous chapter I emphasized the variation that exists among TESOL practitioners, but in this chapter we will focus on our common knowledge base: language, teaching, and learning. As noted in Chapter 1, teaching is not simply a matter of imitating or avoiding the actions of other instructors we have observed. Good teaching requires a great deal of technical, specialized knowledge: an understanding of the structure and functions of language, of general principles of learning, of how languages are acquired, and, yes, of pedagogical principles. This chapter will introduce you to a variety of theoretical perspectives and current thinking on language, learning, and teaching.

What is language?

This must seem not only a ridiculous, but a somewhat disappointing question with which to begin, rather like asking students in an MA program in math to begin the course by practicing their multiplication tables. Yet, as it turns out, this is a question to which there is not one clear response, as there is for $2 \times 2$. At the same time, it is important to consider what language is, in order to be able to teach it. Your view of language will have direct implications for your classroom practice. For example, if you see language as a set of rules, you will likely give prominence to the regularities of language, conveying these to your students and perhaps helping them to discover these rules for themselves. Below is a list of definitions of language. Before
considering them, you may want to try to work out your own view of what language is.

1. ‘Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.’ (Edward Sapir, 1921, p. 8)
2. ‘A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates.’ (Bernard Bloch and George Trager, 1942, p. 5)
3. A language is ‘a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.’ (Noam Chomsky, 1957/2002, p. 13)
4. Language is ‘a range of possibilities, an open-ended set of options in behavior that are available to the individual…’ (M. A. K. Halliday, 1973, p. 41)
5. ‘Grammar is…simply the name for certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse. There is no natural fixed structure to language.’ (Paul Hopper, 1998, p. 156)
6. Languages are ‘the sedimented products of repeated acts of identity.’ (Alastair Pennycook, 2004, p. 15)
7. ‘There is, or at least there may well be, no such thing as English….A language, in short, is ultimately a collection of ideolects which have been determined to belong together for what are ultimately non-and extra-linguistic reasons.’ (Timothy Reagan, 2004, p. 42)
8. Language is ‘a process in which we participate.’ (Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynne Cameron, 2008, p. 109)

• What similarities do you see among the definitions? What differences?
• How do the definitions change over time?

The introduction to the history of the field from the previous chapter should have prepared you to make a few comments on these definitions. For example, you may have noticed how they change through time. We begin with language as a pre-existing entity, with the first three focusing on language as an abstract system. Halliday, then, recognizes language as structure, but emphasizes its function, seeing it instead as a flexible resource for making