

Small Changes

BIG RESULTS?

Activities and essays to stimulate fresh
thinking about language learning

by

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Forward: ? vrthng

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effective is not and to what extent what we think is not beneficial is.

? vrthng.

Sandals? You're kidding.

I wore shoes till I lived in Nigeria. When I got athlete's foot during hot and humid summers in Chicago, I bought off the counter ointments and they relieved the symptoms somewhat. In Nigeria the temperature and the humidity were much higher than those I had experienced in Chicago. The off the counter ointments had very little effect. So I went to a doctor and asked for a prescription ointment. He said there was no need for ointment. All I had to do was wear sandals. Well, as I said, I had worn shoes all my life and I thought of all sorts of reasons why sandals would not be a good option. They would not support my arches well, my feet would get dirty from the dust in the places where I walked, insects would bite my toes, they seemed too casual to wear with the shirt and ties that I wore when teaching, and people would smell the odor from my feet.

The doctor refused to prescribe ointments and insisted I try his suggested alternative. So I bought a pair of sandals. None of my fears materialized. My feet had no odors, the small amount of dust that accumulated I could shake off in a heartbeat on my doorstep. The sandals I bought had strong arch support. My students said they thought that sandals were more stylish with shorts and in the tropical rainforest. They said they had thought it strange for me to wear shoes.

I continued to wear sandals after I returned to New York because my feet continued to be so healthy. When I went to buy a new pair my wife, who is Japanese, was with me. The salesperson asked me whether I ever visited Japan. I said I often did. He said that he would like me to try on a pair of sandals without straps. He knew that the Japanese remove their shoes before entering their homes. "You won't have to bend over or sit down each time you enter and leave the house to strap and unstrap your sandals if you use these sandals with these with no straps."

I said that the sandals would fall off. He said they would not. I said that when I drive they will not stick to my right foot and as a result I will not be able to brake quickly. He kept saying that there is no difference between sandals with and without straps as far as keeping them on goes. I said I found this hard to believe.

He got up abruptly and returned with a pair of sandals without straps. He gently removed my sandals with straps and put the sandals without straps on. He said, "Please walk."

I walked. They did not fall off. They were just as secure and comfortable as those with straps.

Skepticism

We are all creatures of habit both inside and outside of our classrooms. We follow rules that we have unconsciously learned. We get used to doing things in a particular way that we feel comfortable with.

One result of this is that just as I first resisted sandals and then sandals without straps, when people suggest alternative activities for our teaching we conjure up all sorts of reasons why the alternative activities will not work. When we feel comfortable doing what we do, we continue acting the same way.

I wrote this book to provide activities that are very different from many widely accepted practices in the field of language teaching, which I consider past their use by and expiration date. Many of these 'expired activities' are based on claims rather than proven effectiveness.

My suggestion is for you to be as skeptical about your present practices as you might be about the alternatives I will urge you to try in this book. Ask yourself how widely advocated pre-reading activities such as brainstorming, scaffolding, and predicting what a text is about might not only be useless for language learning, but also detrimental to learning.

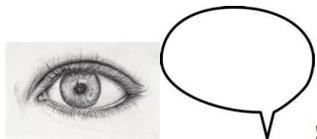
Question the value of memorizing individual words on note cards with the first language equivalent on the back of the cards. Consider ways that asking students to define words, or use new words in sentences, repeating words in isolation, memorizing rules in either English or students' first languages, having students in pairs talk about their favorite songs, sports or whatever might be detrimental.

A singular message

I have never seen anyone else share this message at the beginning of each class or at the beginning of workshops or presentations that teacher educators make:

B e _ _ _ _ e

n _ t _ _ _ g



But if I am true to the question I started with, '? vrthng', then you must not only not believe anything I say but also anything anyone else says. Do one of your usual activities, make a small change, and compare the results, over and over and over. If you follow these steps you will see how much more both you your students are capable of. You will discover that inertia can be overcome with often exhilarating results.

The changes I suggest are small, just as changing from shoes to sandals with straps to sandals without straps are small changes. But the results can be very big. They are also easy to employ, as easy as changing what we wear on our feet.

892 words

Preface

How it all began.



My first full-time teaching position was in Nigeria. In addition to teaching English to primary school teachers in a teacher training college, I was required to supervise their practice teaching. Two problems: 1. The teachers I was supervising each had from four to twenty more years experience than I had; 2. They were teaching Nigerian history, the currency system adopted from England—pounds, shillings, pence; British systems of measurements such as poles, rods and perches; etc.—information that was all new to me.

Fortunately for me, in the primary schools where the teachers with much more experience and knowledge than I had were practice teaching, there were two primary 1 classes, two primary 2 classes, all the way up to primary 6. Also, the timetable mandated that each stream study the same subjects at the same time each day.

I decided that only way I could be the least bit useful would be to observe the first 20 minutes of the first period in one stream and the second 20 minutes of the first period in the other stream. I wrote down as much of what each teacher said and did as I could with the intention of sharing what the teachers did with each other.

As it turned out, I was able to write down more than 50% of the interactions. One reason I was able to do this was because the teachers wrote a lot on the board for students to copy. Had they spoken more, I would not have been able to take such copious notes.

At the end of the day, when I met the two teachers teaching primary one, for example, I would say, “Okon, Benedict wrote the date and all the directions on the board and had the students copy them as they looked at the board. You said the date and had the students look at the board, then look only at their notebooks and write what they remembered.”

“Okon, tomorrow do what Benedict did. And Benedict, please do what Okon did.”

The next day, I asked them to describe what differences the small changes I had suggested had made. In some cases, they didn’t see any differences in the results. In other cases, they saw big differences.

When students wrote from memory rather than copied, for example, they made more mistakes. When the teachers saw the mistakes, they realized what they had to have their students practice more.

Imagine all the possibilities

As you know, the number of radii in a circle is infinite. But as every analysis of classroom interactions and textbook activities has shown, the number of activities done in classrooms is almost always very, very limited. The white portion of the circle below shows the usual range of interactions and activities. The rest of the circle, in blue, shows the range of interactions and activities that are possible but often not attempted.



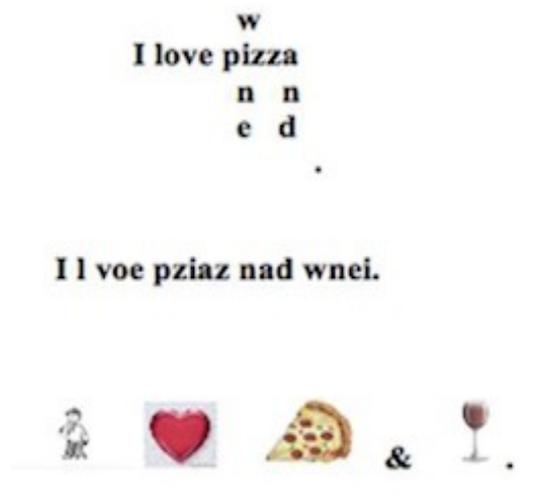
I wrote this book to show you ways you and your students can expand the range and type of interactions and activities you experience, so you can expand your white piece of the pie.

Here are two examples of ways to expand the activities beyond the white piece of the pie.

Asking students who erase any/all the mistakes they make to keep their erasers in their pencil cases is an activity that is unusual in some countries. Mariko thought that when she gave dictations, all of her students wrote exactly what she said, because there were never any errors in their notebooks. However, when she looked at a video clip of her class, she saw that the students were erasing and writing while she wrote the correct sentences on the board. She had told them to compare what they wrote with the sentences on the board. But instead of only comparing, they were rushing to “fix” without time to process or question.

The next day Mariko asked them to keep their erasers in their pencil cases. After she said, “I like ice cream.” three times, she did not write the sentence on the board. The next time she checked the students’ notebooks, only 10 out of 40 students had written, “I like ice cream.” Instead, she read such phrases as “I cream; I ice; I spring; like ice.” After that, she asked the students to correct what they had written with a different colored pen. This would allow the students to compare their mistakes with what was correct later on and allow the teacher to find out what the students could understand and not understand.

Ali who believed that students should read, write, listen to and say the same patterns many times found that after students experienced a text two times they became bored with the activity. So he asked his students to present the same text in different formats. Here are three versions of one sentence, created by his students:



I think that these activities also illustrate the play spirit of language. Playfulness is very important in all learning.

Make nice, criticize and prescribe, make claims using jargon and general terms

In Nigeria, as you just read, I did not say how nice the teachers were with the students nor did I say that what they did, they should not have done. Almost all conversations after supervisors observe practice teachers, or after principals observe teachers, consist of only three types of conversations. In one, the person in charge says how lovely the teacher’s rapport was, how the students were so enthusiastic, how good the lesson was. I call this the “Make nice” conversation.

Another type includes critical judgments by the person observing the class and suggestions/prescriptions for how to do things better. The supervisor selects examples to fit the judgments. “Your rapport was great, but you failed to notice that the three

students in the back of the class were text messaging when you stated the goals of the lesson. You must be more attentive to your students!”

The third type consists of the supervisor and teacher making claims using jargon and general terms. “You used *scaffolding* and *brainstorming* and *ice breakers* in the beginning of the lesson which activated the students’ minds so they understood more. You had them do *communicative activities* in pairs after they listened to the recording so they could better understand what they had heard.”

“I loved your comprehension questions because the students could answer them all correctly.” Is ‘What was the author’s name?’ a comprehension question? Is ‘When was the book written?’ a comprehension question? Synonyms for *comprehension* include *grasp*, *perceive*, *interpret*, *be aware of*, and *understand*.

Many so-called comprehension questions are similar to the two I just wrote. They ask for the recall of facts. It is of course possible to know the name of an author and the date of a book without having any understanding of the title much less any of the text.

What did the students and the teacher actually do?

Scaffolding, *brainstorming*, *icebreakers*, *communicative activities*, *comprehension*—these terms mean totally different things to different people. I think using jargon and general terms to make claims is detrimental to teacher awareness and development. Instead, as you just saw, in my discussions of teaching I focus on analyzing what students and teachers actually do. If you record students doing pair work and see they make two to five errors in each sentence you realize that so called communicative activities more deeply ingrain errors rather than develop students’ language. If you see that in a class of forty students it is always the same 5 students who answer the teachers’ so-called comprehension questions, you cannot continue to claim that the questions were effective because the students answered them correctly.

In Nigeria, I described in detail one or two actions each teacher carried out and asked them to try the other’s activities, which were alternatives for them. And in our next discussions, I asked them what differences, if any, the small changes had made. Because they were busy teaching, they often could not notice any different results. But since all I had to do was observe and write notes, I could notice different or similar results. When I shared descriptions of what they did as well as the results of small changes, both the teachers and I were often surprised.

Medical staff and economists describing in detail, making small changes and comparing the results

Nurses and doctors make mistakes when treating patients. Like students they often try to hide their errors. The nurses at one hospital were told that if they made a mistake and reported it, they would be given \$200.00 with the condition that they would then agree to be video recorded while working.

One nurse reported that she miscounted tablets for a patient, a not uncommon error. Later recordings revealed that as she was counting at the nurses' station, visitors came and asked her for patients' room numbers. "One, two pain killers, one muscle relaxant, Oh, Mr. Gray? in 205, two muscle relaxants."

As a result of seeing how the miscounting was being caused by interruptions from visitors, the nurses decided to put a sign on the desk: "Please do not disturb. I will answer your question as soon as I finish counting these pills." This small change reduced the number of mistakes by 90%.

Many economists have claimed that the more choices consumers have they more they buy. A few economists decided to find evidence to support or refute this claim. They placed 5 brands of strawberry jam at the entrance of a supermarket for a few days. They tallied the number of jars consumers bought.

A couple of weeks later they placed 25 brands of strawberry jam in the same location. After a few days they discovered that the number of jars of jam that people purchased was much, much lower than when consumers had only 5 choices.

Another claim that economists questioned was that if unemployment counselors asked the unemployed they were helping to find jobs to detail what they had done the previous week to find a job, they would more likely find a job. A few counselors had told their director that few of the people they asked details about what they had done the previous week could remember. Hardly any of the unemployed had a notebook in which they noted what companies they had visited and when.

The director gave the counselors permission to change what they were doing. Instead, they jointly made plans for what the unemployed were going to do the following week rather than interrogate them about what they had done the previous week. "On Monday, you can visit Seiji in the morning. In the afternoon, you can visit Rosen, which is close by." The unemployed person wrote down the week's schedule, which was jointly planned with the counselor.

Asking what people were going to do rather than what they had done decreased the time it took people to find jobs and increased the number who found jobs by a very large percentage.

Small changes, big results occur not only in language teaching but also in most areas of our lives. Observe, change just one factor, and compare the results. Nothing new, just a short version of the scientific method. William Blake, the English poet, print maker and painter advocated focusing on details and pointed out the danger of general claims.

He who would do good to
another must do it in Minute
Particulars.

General Good is the plea of
the scoundrel, hypocrite, and
flatterer;

For Art and Science cannot
exist but in minutely organized
Particulars,

And not in generalizing
Demonstrations of the
Rational Power.

Jerusalem, (f. 55, ll. 48–53,
60–6.)

Easier to see what we are doing now than when I was in Nigeria

These days, just as hospitals can record what staff members do to better understand how they make mistakes, we can record what we and our students say. We can take digital photographs of the board, and pages from student notebooks, and students can record pair work on their cell phones. As a result, we have much more accurate data available to compare the results of making small changes than I had with only a pen and notebook when I observed practice teachers in Nigeria.

Making small changes and comparing the results

In these readings I illustrate ways you can compare the results of activities you presently use and small changes you make as you experiment with your teaching and question the value of widely accepted practices as well as your preconceived notions or assumptions about teaching.

On page 3 you just read that when Mariko told her students to put their erasers in their pencil cases, when she said sentences she wanted them to write, she realized that when she had previously dictated sentences they had erased their errors before she could see them. So she of course assumed that they wrote what she had said correctly.

Ali's students were bored when he asked them to read the same text more than once. But when he asked his students to produce the text in different formats as shown on page 3, they were keen to re-read the material.

So not having students use erasers and inviting students to produce texts in different formats are two small changes that produce quite different results.

You see that these conversations do not make nice, criticize and make judgments, or use jargon and general terms rather than actual communications. They are based on the analysis of transcriptions, video clips and pages from student notebooks—data, not perceptions of what teachers and students did.

In **Part 1 Making small changes to develop self-reliance in language learning and teaching**, the first book in this series, I present assumptions that underlie the practices I suggest. If you use the list of assumptions as you create alternative practices, you are likely to introduce activities that are more powerful than if you just produce new activities at random, as I did in Nigeria.

In **Part 2, Exploring and analyzing the results of small changes**, the following book, I will present assumptions that underlie the suggestions I make for analyzing your teaching. If you try to understand what you are doing, what you want to do, and what you think you are doing, using the assumptions I base my suggestions on, you are more likely to see things you did not see before, than if you just look at what you are doing in random ways.

As you and your students explore distinctive activities, you will realize that as helpful as what others tell us is, we each have to discover new ways and worlds on our own. Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) said this more powerfully.

*I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!).
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and
The public road.
Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you.
You must travel it for yourself.*

2,585 words

1. Part 1 Making small changes to develop self-reliance in language learning and teaching

Making changes related to assumptions about learning and teaching practices

As I said in the Preface, I made changes at random in Nigeria. But if we make them related to assumptions about learning, the results are likely to be more powerful and the activities more engaging.

On the left hand side of the continuum below, I have listed 5 widely believed assumptions about learning and teaching practices. Most textbooks are based on the assumptions on the left hand side. Analysis of classroom practices for the last 100 years have shown that the practices on the left hand side are the most widely used.

Activities based on the commonly held assumptions stifle curiosity and as a result are detrimental to learning.

On the right hand side of the continuum below, I have listed assumptions that are less widely believed and practices that are less frequent. Those on the right are assumptions and practices on which I have based the suggestions I make for ways to experiment and play with your teaching in this book. These assumptions nurture curiosity and independent learning.

However, as I say many times in these readings, you should not believe what I say, or whatever anyone else says. Rather, you should try alternatives I suggest, compare results, and judge for yourself what seems more engaging and productive.

I use the word *continuum* because many activities are not based completely on one assumption or another. Asking students to memorize can require some thinking, for example. And some activities that integrate grammar and vocabulary can require a focus on word meaning for a few seconds.

The words I and others use for each assumption are like all labels, slippery. They mean different things to different people. So it is crucial to match the labels with what you and your students say and do and compare your matches with at least one other person.

It is also crucial for you to compare where you placed what you and your students said and did on the continuum with at least one other person. When there are disagreements, you can select another sample from a recording and place it on the continuum and after you and your partner state reasons for why you each placed the samples of teaching where you did you can adjust your ratings

Next steps

If you print this continuum, you can choose a different item you are interested in creating an alternative activity for every few days. Obviously, there are too many assumptions to deal with all together on any one-day. Selecting one and generating activities related to it is the way that the continuum can be made use of. Of course, there is overlap, so you sometimes have to deal with more than one assumption at a time. But you can select one assumption to start with.

In 1.1a. “*Albabka fur*”, for example, you can see to what extent the 4 skills are integrated—e.

Exploring is continuous

As you compare activities with the assumptions about learning, you will make a discovery or two each time you look at teaching and learning moments and make small changes in them. But the alternatives, like antibiotics, become less effective over time. Additionally, the range of what we and our students can do is much smaller than the range we use. So exploring has to be continuous both to expand the range and to overcome our doubts about some potential alternatives.

Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* reminded us of how failing to continuously explore can be stultifying.

“Our doubts are traitors, And make us lose the good we oft
might win By fearing to attempt.” *Act 1 scene 4*.

I know you have restraints that make it difficult for you to try alternatives: textbooks, tests, supervisors, and colleagues. But these restraints can be overcome by introducing alternative activities for just a few minutes each day. No one is likely to notice that you deviate from the usual expectations for just a few minutes a day.

Most of the activities I suggest are also ones that students can use on their own outside of class to develop their English language abilities. So though you only try them for a few minutes now and then in class, you will enable those who want to learn on their own outside of class to do so.

Finally, as you explore, you will sometimes discover that what you want to do, think you do, and actually do are sometimes different. This discovery can be very enlightening and exhilarating.

1,150 words

1.1a. “*Albabka fur!*” Making use of the positive feelings some have for the common activity “oral reading” and overcoming the dread other students have of engaging in the same activity

Reading aloud and remembering

In language classes, students hear “Let’s read the text aloud.” a lot. Whether they are asked to read aloud single words, groups of words, sentences, or paragraphs; and whether the texts are biographies, song lyrics, ads, or poems, many students and their teachers think the activity of reading aloud is beneficial. Yet, some students find it boring to read aloud and some others find it agonising, especially if they are forced to read alone in front of the class. And of course, some find it difficult to maintain concentration, or even stay awake, while listening to others read aloud.

Below I describe a technique that enables you to take advantage of the positive feelings many students have about reading aloud and to mollify and win over those students who find reading aloud a dreadful experience for one reason or another. Once you introduce your students to this type of oral reading, your students can use it both inside and outside of class and with their own choice of materials, making them more independent learners.

One reason many learners have a positive feeling towards oral reading is that they have been able to say lines from songs, poems, etc., over and over again as they look at the printed versions. It becomes routine and easy to do. This type of oral reading can lead to memorization even if it does not necessarily lead to understanding. I have seen six-year old children in Somalia memorize verses of the Koran by rote, repeating them after their teacher as they looked at a written version on wooden tablets. My students in Nigeria memorized lines from *Julius Caesar* and said them with a range of emotions during a performance of some of the play’s scenes in spite of the fact that they understood only parts of each line they were saying. During practice, they listened to a recording of the scenes played by famous actors as they looked at the lines and said them over and over and hence knew how to say each line regardless if they knew what the words actually meant.

I am sure you can write a list of things you have memorized in your life such as telephone numbers, addresses, quotations, parts of speeches, poems, and songs, to cite just a few. But it is clear this is different from using language to express or to understand our immediate individual personal feelings and meanings, which is one outcome of the reading activity I will describe.

One of the reasons I titled this reading *Albabka fur!*, which I am pretty sure you can read aloud if you try, is to remind you that we are able to read aloud words and sentences in many languages as long as they are written in a script we know, even if we have no or only partial understanding what we are saying. (*Albabka fur!* is Somali for “Open the door!”) We can also memorize and say aloud words and sentences we read or hear without understanding them. Of course, we cannot say *Albabka fur!* the way a Somali would. Nor can we necessarily pronounce certain sounds, like the rolling *r* in Spanish or the click in Hausa, but we can say and remember things we read and hear.

If you ask your students to read aloud in class, write a few beliefs that have led you to use this activity. If you don’t have students read aloud in class, write what you think might be reasons why teachers ask students to read aloud. (Be sure to do this before you continue reading so as not to be influenced by ideas from others.)



Here are some reflections others wrote.

- “I think it is important to have students do what they enjoy. My students say they enjoy saying sentences as they look at the words. They also like routine.”
- “I can check to see how I connect the printed words with the correct pronunciation when my teacher asks me to read aloud.”
- “To be honest, it is, in a way, convenient for us teachers to kill some time during class. Teachers, as well as students, think they are ‘leaning’ and preparing for tests ‘properly.’ We will not be blamed when students get bad scores because we used what we have been told is an appropriate teaching method.”

An alternative way to read aloud

An alternative way for learners to read aloud, so that they can begin to master and use the language rather than just say the words or memorize texts, is to look at what is written on the page, or on the computer screen, cover it for a few seconds, and then say the meaning, not just the words and not necessarily the same words, to another person. In this way, the words, phrases and/or sentences move from the page or screen through the readers’ eyes to their minds and then out of their mouths as meaningful groups of words: as ideas, not just as the exact words. The pause between reading silently and speaking requires thinking of and imagining the meanings. So the speakers say what they read with understanding, not just with understandable sounds.

When we keep our eyes on the printed page or screen, the words pass through our eyes and out of our mouth without stopping in our mind. If we do not in any way engage our mind, we are less likely to understand, much less remember, even if we can change the printed letters into sounds that we can say and others can hear.

Michael West introduced me to this alternative in a book with one of my favorite titles: *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances*. Here is what he claimed:

“Of all methods of learning a language *Read and Look Up* is, in our opinion, the most valuable. It is possible to master a language by this method alone, carrying a book in the pocket. You read a little [silently] and then look up and say it to someone. Gradually you are able to take in larger and larger units, at first only a line, later two or three lines . . . as you become more and more proficient, you paraphrase more and more, until eventually you are gathering the ideas from the book and expressing them in your own [words].”

Write some ideas you think Michael West had about reading when he described *Read and Look Up*. (After doing this, continue reading to see what others thought.)



Here is what others wrote.

“Albabka fur!”

• “He thought that it was crucial for students to see their progress—seeing how they could read larger and larger groups of words as they became more familiar with the reading passage.”

• “It is illuminating that West believed that we can learn a language solely through *Read and Look Up*. Most importantly, I was amused/surprised/gratified to know paraphrasing is welcome rather than needing to follow and say the exact words when doing *Read and Look Up*.”

I wonder whether you find West’s claim as compelling as I did when I first read it 50 years ago and even more so after following his suggestions with hundreds of learners.

Though I find Michael West’s description clear, like most activities, it can be done in ways that engage learners and meet the goals or in ways that it does not. Try the steps below, which are just one way to do this activity, with another person before you introduce them to your students. As a result, you are more likely to realize some of the potential pitfalls beforehand. Initially, you might hear a lot of *Huhs?* from your students, but after you ask them to follow the steps a few times, the *Huhs?* will decrease and the number of *Ahas!* will increase.

Introducing Read and Look Up

Read aloud *A short trip in 1800*, printed below, to your students as they look at the text. Tell them to draw a slash like this ‘/’ between words each time you pause between sense or breath groups. Though the terms sense groups or breath groups are not familiar to many people, everyone communicates with breath groups in their first language all the time. When exchanging phone numbers in spoken English, almost everyone says 212 / 666 / 1727 rather than 2126661725. When we introduce ourselves we say, Hello / my name is / John Fanselow. I have marked a few sense groups in the first sentences of the *A short trip in 1800*.

How many times you pause will depend on how familiar you are with the text and how many words you think your students can understand at one time, and later read silently and say without having to look at the text again and again. Over time, as your students become more familiar with the material they read, the length of the sense groups will increase.

The location of the pauses is more important than the number of words between pauses. Pausing at these slash marks in the title is not correct, NOT OK: *A short / trip in / 1800*. This is OK: *A short trip / in 1800*.

A short trip in 1800

The three men dismounted from their horses / as soon as they arrived / at the fisherman’s house. / After they took the saddles off of their horses / and tied their reins to a tree, / the fisherman’s son / gave water and food / to the horses./

“*Albabka fur!*”

The fisherman asked, “Do you want water and food now before you go to the island?” The oldest man said, “No, we must get there before dark. We can eat and drink as we travel.”

The fisherman then ran to the beach with the three men. The four men quickly pushed a currach from the beach into the water. They jumped into the currach, and the fisherman and the youngest man started to row away from the beach to an island one kilometer away.

When they arrived at the island, a black guillemot flew over them very quickly. It made very loud sounds from its throat, and then it swooped down close to them.

You do not have to use *A short trip in 1800*. I would urge you to use materials your students are currently using in class because I believe that we can develop our language when we read, write, listen to, and talk about any text. My choice here is not important. Also, even if you have to use a class text for the Read and Look Up activity, your students can select any text that they want to use when doing the activity outside of class. Regardless of the text, students can learn most patterns and tenses and frequently used words from almost any material as long as they understand at least 90% of the words—98% would be better.

Graded readers are particularly useful because they contain a range of topics but are written at many levels of proficiency: some printed with only the 300 most frequent words using only the simple present, others with the 2,000 most frequent words and using a range of tenses.

Eye to mouth reading versus eye to brain to mouth to ear to hand reading

When we read aloud as we look at the black letters on the page the letters move from the page directly to out of our mouths. When we do Read and Look Up, the letters on the page move from the page to our brain, stop for a moment, and then move out of our mouth and into our ears as we listen to what we say. It is in this moment of stopping that sense groups—often times phrases and chunks of frequently used language—have a chance to be understood and remembered by our students.

Flesch Reading Ease 65% Grade Level 9.3 1,997 words

“*Albabka fur!*”

1.1b. “*Albabka fur! 2*” Further options for read/t/_listen/write

Ritual reading or reading for meaning? Adding writing to Read and Look up

Michael West’s main interest was the development of speaking and listening abilities through the use of a beneficial reading activity he called *Read and Look Up*. When I watched students doing *Read and Look Up* in pairs, I noticed a few wrote down what their partners had said. After class, I noticed that these same few were comparing what they had written with the original text and erasing any differences and copying omitted or substituted words from the text.

Bringing their written version in line with the original suggested that they may not have understood what I, echoing Michael West, had said was a central purpose of *Read and Look Up*: understanding and saying sense groups in a natural and meaningful way rather than just saying the words and sentences perfectly as a ritual.

When I asked them why they corrected their versions, they confirmed my suspicion. They said they thought that they always had to say exactly what was on the page. But as West said, paraphrasing and substituting different words is not only allowed, it is even to be encouraged.

Of course, students might not paraphrase because they have been traditionally been taught to say only the words on the page. Many will have a limited vocabulary and as a result will not know any words to substitute for those in the text. One option is to write some words on the board that they can substitute for those in the passage. For example, for the sentence, “The three men dismounted from their horses. . .” we can write *got off of* on the board. We can write *travellers* and *friends* on the board which some might substitute for *men*.

In addition to providing words students can substitute we can provide words that they can use to embellish the passage. With words such as *tired*, *exhausted*, *hungry*, *thirsty* on the board some students might say sentences like “The three tired men dismounted from their hungry horses” or “the three hungry men dismounted from their tired horses.” Such options provide practice in putting adjectives in the correct slot in sentences.

Sketches representing different feelings can be used as well which will require more thinking on the part of the students as they will have to access words to match the sketches representing *got off*, *travellers*, *friends*, *tired*, *exhausted*, *hungry*, *thirsty*.

As a result of my observations and the students’ comments, I started to have students expand the use of *Read and Look Up* to include writing rather than to focus only on reading, listening and speaking.

But just having your students write what they say and hear is not necessarily useful by itself. They have to notice differences between their versions and the originals. Then they have to learn how to determine which differences are acceptable or not to reach West's goal of reading and then speaking with meaning in contrast to exact word reading. After years of being told only to say the words on the page while looking at them rather than being told to express the meanings that one has read, this is a big adjustment for the students and often takes time. Being told that reciting words is not reading is a shock to most learners and teachers. The first time students who say "before night" rather than "before dark" (Line 7 in *A short trip in 1800*) are told "It's OK," many are bewildered! But they can only say the alternative word—*night*-- if they understand the meaning of *dark* in this context. In *Read and Look Up* the focus is on understanding meanings, not just translating printed words into sounds.

Talking with our hands

When students look at their partner and say to her/him what they just read silently, the students should be looking at each other and their hands should be free as they say the lines. In this way you can see students moving their hands or heads as they do *Read and Look Up*. These movements show comprehension and are the same movements we use when chatting with others or speaking on cell phones. Those who have had strokes often cannot move one arm and have difficulty speaking as well. In Japan people often bow slightly when speaking on their cell-phones. But it is not just in Japan, all over the world people nod, shake their heads, and wave their free hand while talking on the phone. We do not use our hands and heads when speaking on the phone to help the receiver understand us, but rather to help us express the messages we are saying. Speaking requires more than vocal cords and mouths. If your students do not make any movements when engaged in the *Read and Look Up* activity, it is likely they are just saying words, not expressing meaning.

Surprises

Here are some comments from teachers who were surprised by some of the outcomes and from discussions with their students after they did *Read and Look Up* in a variety of ways. (In some discussions, students and teachers used their first language. These have been translated into English. Students can usually discuss reasons for activities and reactions to them in a more sophisticated way in their first language.)



Others' Reflections

- "Even when I wrote directions on the board, in English and our first language, few of those who said the lines wrote them initially. So, I walked from pair to pair, and after a student finished saying a group of words, as you suggested, I

reminded the student to write them just as her partner had. After the third day, when we re-read the same passage for the third time, all the students wrote, drew slash marks and kept their hands free by putting the paper on their desks as they said the breath groups. But, some still looked up at the ceiling, the board, out the window or at the floor as they said the words rather than at their partners.

Until the third or fourth experience with the method, more than half of my students started to write as soon as their partner started to say the words. I reminded them to keep their pens on their desks until they had listened to all the words their partner was saying to them before writing. I urged them to count to ten to ensure there was a sufficient pause between saying and hearing the words and writing them.”

- “A few students whispered the words rather than reading them silently before saying them. However, as they whispered or mouthed the words, they paused at natural breaks in the passage. So, I did not say they could not say the words audibly during this step.

More troubling was that some began to say the lines in a singsong chanting rhythm just as they did when they did choral reading. I recorded some readers who said the lines mechanically and others who said them as if they knew what they meant. Then, I played some of them for my students and asked them for words to describe the various spoken versions. Here are some words they said and I wrote on the board: *natural, not natural, shows understanding, does not show understanding*. Here are some others: *singsong, like 5 year olds, zombie like, nice to listen to, like a conversation.*”

- “After class, during conversations in the hallway on the way to lunch, my students said ‘I am amazed how much I learn from other students. I am so used to thinking that I can only learn from you that it took me a few days to realize that we students can learn from each other. We each understand different things because we have different experiences. But like two blades on a pair of scissors, when we share and compare and correct each other, we learn loads!

Moving on

Sometimes, a few students become so obsessed with doing the steps of an activity in a particular way that they lose sight of the activity’s purposes. They forget the bigger picture and confuse the means with the ends. Often, steps become rituals, followed for their own sake.

To the extent that students follow, or start to follow, the steps in a mechanical way with no variation, they will not, or will cease to, develop their mastery of the language they are keen to learn. In the case of *Read and Look Up*, the goal is learning to speak and write fluently and accurately by independently mastering grammatical patterns, recognizing more vocabulary items and integrating the two, as well as remembering

information more efficiently by integrating silent reading, speaking, listening and, in my version, writing. The goal is not to quickly look at a page, cover it and quickly say what one can remember without any understanding. The activity is not meant to be a race.

Other purposes of reading

Important as *Read and Look Up* is for developing language abilities, if our reasons for reading were only to develop our skills, we would be missing out on other essential purposes of reading. Each successive silent reading, hearing, writing or saying of a passage not only develops our ability to produce and understand the language in the text and to use it accurately in other settings, but also enables us to move beyond the literal understanding.

Once we overcome being distracted by unfamiliar words and word order, when we read non-fiction, we can evaluate the truth of the information and claims authors make and consider alternative ways to make the arguments or phrase facts or claims.

When reading fiction, not only can we compare our feelings about the points the authors are making but we can also discuss emotions the characters evoke. And we can relish original uses of words such as *swooped down* in contrast to *flew over* in these sentences: “The black guillemot flew over them very quickly. It made very loud sounds from its throat when it swooped down over them.” We can see what phrases authors use to keep us in suspense, to describe the feelings and reactions of the characters, to help us sense the mood of a scene or the moral lesson of a story. Students can be asked to identify groups of words that depict such things. In *A short trip in 1800*, students could be asked to identify phrases that suggest urgency—*dismounted as soon as they arrived, must get there before dark, ran to the beach, quickly pushed*.

I think it is tragic that neither of the two most widely used standardized ESOL tests, TOEIC and TOEFL, have even one question asking learners about emotional responses to what they read! It is as if the only purpose of reading is to fill our minds with directly stated information, as if we had no feelings.

Even more tragic is that neither of these commercial products—yes, commercial products—that measure people in such a narrow, one-dimensional way contain any imaginative writing! It is as if fiction, drama and poetry did not exist and the only reason we should read is to gather facts as quickly as possible.

This tendency to ignore our emotional reactions to what we read is common in textbooks and graded readers as well. The exercises in only a few textbooks and graded readers recognize the importance of our emotional responses to what we read. Questions such as “What did the fisherman’s son see?” rather than “How did the fisherman feel?” or “How would you feel if you suddenly saw three men on horses stop at your house?” abound, unfortunately.

PS As I said, *Read and Look Up* should be done, like all language learning activities, only with language that the students understand at least 90% of—98% would be better. And the students must be familiar with the material, having previously read the text silently a couple of times, at least.

2,020 Words, rounded

Flesch Reading Ease 64%

Grade Level 9.7

1.1c. The sound of silence: *Taking a look at how altering time can hinder and/or help, language production, practice, and, by implication, learning*

Varying the length of time between reading/speaking-listening/writing

One option to keep students engaged in doing Read and Look Up with the same text many times is to have students vary the length of the pauses between reading silently and speaking and/or between speaking and writing down what is said and listened to. If they pause for, say, 10 seconds between their reading and speaking and/or between their speaking and writing on one day and then pause for, say, 20 seconds on another day, it will challenge them and they will be able to compare the length of their sense or breath groups during the two activities and see what effects longer pauses have on substitutions and changes. Shortening the length of time will challenge them in other ways and have other effects.

Kumiko's students have a copy of *A short trip in 1800* on their desks. They have read the text before. Kumiko tells her students to read as much as they can silently as she looks at the second hand on the classroom clock.

After 15 seconds she says, "stop and look at your partner." After another 15 seconds, she says "speak." After another 15 seconds from when the speakers stopped talking she says, "write."

The next day, she asks partners to switch roles, with those who read aloud listening and those who listened reading silently, and then saying the sense groups. But this time she allows 30 seconds between each step.

Noting differences in length of sense groups and number of substitutions with different pauses

After your students have written what they have read with different lengths of pauses, have them do these tasks.

1. Count the number of words you wrote in each of the sense groups after the 15 second pauses on one day, indicated with one slash mark, /, between sense groups, and the 30 second pauses on another day indicated by two slash marks: //.
2. Write down substitutions and count the number of substitutions you made on the two separate days
3. Draw an x over the substitutions that do not fit grammatically or meaning-wise.

Write some lessons you and your students learned from trying this alternative.



Here are some lessons others learned.

- “I noticed Ali made more substitutions when he paused 30 seconds than when he paused 15 seconds. One of the goals Michael West—the person you learned about this activity from—had for learners to move from word perfect oral reading to the production of correct sentences in speech that expressed the same meanings as the original but in the learners’ own words.

I see why you added writing to West’s suggestions. It is easier to notice substitutions as well as the length and correctness of the sense groups when students write what they say.”

- “Though I had read the text a few times before, at first the 15 seconds between reading and speaking and then writing seemed a very long time. I am used to saying what I read quickly because I try to memorize the words. I was initially very nervous. But each time I paused between reading, saying and writing, I become less nervous. I realized that if I thought of the meaning rather than the words I could say and write what I had read silently.”

- “I was astonished to see that the 30 second pauses led to longer sense groups. I would have thought that with so much time between seeing the words and saying them Jama would remember only the first few he had read. But the opposite was true.”

- “I had nervous feelings when my teacher asked us to pause for 30 seconds. But since she said we could look as many times as we wanted, I became calmer and calmer. I realized that I understood more since I had more time to think about the meaning of what I was reading. I am beginning to realize that trying to memorize—to say exactly what I see—distracts me from understanding what I am reading. When I try to say just what I see, I focus on words rather than meaning.”

- “I saw that Juan had written many more words in each sense group during this third reading in the same amount of time than in his earlier reading. He also made more substitutions. So I guess that during each reading the language and meaning has been more deeply stored in his mind.”

Another way to alter time

If coaches and their runners depended only on a stopwatch to improve their running, they would settle into a routine that would stop their development.

Though Kumiko's directions to pause for 15 seconds and then 30 seconds, and many different numbers of seconds in between, challenged her students in different ways, they became accustomed to her directions and a bit bored because they were basically the same day after day.

When Christopher saw Kumiko's alternatives, he created a new variation. He decided to hum between saying read silently, think, speak/listen and write. Another teacher, hoping to further gauge if students were really understanding what they were reading added a few unnecessary words to sentences in a text.

Observing results and discussing alternatives with students

In my writing and in live workshops I remind teachers that they/you should not believe anything I say or that anyone else says. Rather, you should look at the results of various alternatives. When I suggest to teachers that they hum while their students are reading silently, many say that this would have a negative effect

Because of their preconceived ideas about what is effective, some resist trying the alternative. But when they do, they see that there are some positive outcomes, and then they will use the alternative again.

Even if the outcomes of an alternative are positive, we need to pay attention to student reactions. If students are not comfortable, an approach may be less effective than we think. When you try an alternative, ask your students for their feedback. As well, ask them for suggestions, for other options that may help meet the learning goals. Many times they will come up with excellent ideas that work and that they are comfortable with.



Here are reactions to the alternatives and some suggestions from students.

- “I always listen to music when I do my homework. So when you hummed while I read, I was fine. It is normal to me.”

- “I felt like I was in a race when you said, ‘read, speak, write.’ I like to read at my own pace. My partner does also. I understand that you want us to see that we can understand more if we pause longer. But this is obvious and I do not need you to tell me that short pauses are not as good as long pauses.”

- “If you turn off the lights in our classroom, we will not be able to see the reading passage as well. We will have to guess more. So this is an alternative you should try.”

• “We can all see the clock on the wall in our classroom. We all read at different speeds. So rather than you telling us when to pause between silent reading and saying the sense groups, one of each pair can write the number of seconds our partner takes to read silently before speaking. This way we are more independent and as I said, we can do the activity at our own speed.”

• “When I read the lines with the extra words silently and then covered the page and said them quickly without pausing as I looked in a mirror, I could say all of them, even those that made no sense. But if I paused I was able to say only the words that made sense. So I think that adding words is an easy way for me to see how much my students understand. If they say all the words, they obviously do not understand.”

I have been trying to walk with my left foot facing forward rather than pointing at a 45 degree angle to the left. This is so much simpler than trying to master language and though I try moving my foot differently each day for at least 15 minutes, I have still not changed my way of walking completely. Changing the way we read is a much more complex activity. So if you and your students are initially confused by reading extra words in the text, only initial letters of words, etc.—having *Huh?* moments—make sure try the tasks a few times.

1,456 words

1.1d. thesoundofsilence/t _ _ s _ _ n d . . . : Taking a look at how novel formats and deletions hinder and/or help, language production, practice, and, by implication, learning

“Albabka fur!” revisited

In “Albabka fur!” I describe an alternative way for learners to read aloud, so they can master and use the language rather than just say words as a ritual, practice pronunciation, memorize texts or prepare to answer questions about a passage. In the alternative way, I have students read groups of words silently, cover them, pause to think of the meaning, say them to another person and then along with the other person write what the reader said and the fellow student heard. Here is a short version of the steps:

Read silently

Pause to think

Say what you understand to another student and record it

Along with the other student, write what you said

Compare what you both wrote with the text and with the recording

Note differences that are acceptable and not acceptable

The purpose of this alternative practice is to help ensure that the words of a text are in the readers’ mind as well as in their mouths. The goal is to have the reader engage with meaning. If that doesn’t happen, the text will be of no value. The reader will be just mouthing words—reading aloud as a ritual.

In the picture on the left below, Miwako has looked at a sentence and is trying to recite it word for word, without understanding the meaning—reading as a ritual.

In the picture on the right, Miwako has looked at a sentence, read it silently, and paused for around 10 seconds before saying it. This encouraged her to focus on the meaning, not just the words. It gave her time to think about what she had read and to unconsciously take in the grammar, the vocabulary, and their interrelationship.



Oh. . .



Aha!

To master the language in a text, students have to use Read and Look Up with the same passage many times. But students may be reluctant to do this. They might say things like, “We already read this, why are we reading it again? We already answered all the questions and know what all the words mean.” And even if they are not reluctant, they will lose interest if you ask them to re-read the material in exactly same way every time.

Keeping the text fresh by altering it

Here are two ways you can use the same text and still keep Read and Look Up fresh and engaging.

1. Alter the type and amount of information provided. Here are some examples, using the title ‘A Short Trip in 1800’ which I introduced in “Albabka fur!”:

asti1800

ashorttripin19800

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A short
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1 19 25 15 21 11 14 15 23, 13 24 14 1 13 5 9 19 10 15 8 14.

2. Delete words or letters from the text. You can use the cloze approach or the C-test approach.

In a cloze passage, every *n*th word is deleted, often excluding names of places or of people. There are a number of Internet sites which allow you to produce scores of variations of cloze passages in a heartbeat. The Lextutor website has a fairly advanced version of a close test creator with drop-down options, <http://www.lex Tutor.ca/cgi-bin/cloze/n/>, and a simpler version of a cloze test maker is available on the Close Test Creator site, <http://l.georges.online.fr/tools/cloze.html>.

Fill-in-the-blanks or gap-fill exercises in which all examples of one type of word or certain key words are deleted, are not cloze passages.

C-test passages delete the same portion of every *n*th word, usually the latter half of every 2nd word, for example, A short tr_ _ in 18 _ _ . If a word has an odd number of letters, the author of the C-test passage has to decide to exclude or include the extra letter. The writer also needs to make decisions in regards to one-letter words, initials, acronyms, and proper nouns.

Outside of class, we experience variations of C-tests and cloze passages when some letters are obscured, as in this photograph:



I base these two options on two assumptions:

1. Novel structuring, formatting, limiting, and restricting is more engaging, requires more mental activity, and leads to more remembering and learning than doing activities using material that looks the same and follows the same rules.
2. Routine—doing the same activity in exactly the same way each day— deadens our natural curiosity.

A friend sent me a photograph of this license plate as I was writing this—quite a coincidence. Mirror writing is obviously another way to vary the format.



There are often free mirror image fonts available on the internet. Here is an example of a mirror image font available for free at the FontPalace site: <http://www.fontpalace.com/font-download/MirrorImage/>

Reactions to altering the format of texts and amount of information provided

Regardless of the modifications we may make to a text, it is important to discuss reasons for re-reading with our students. Many, for example, think they must learn to speak only by speaking, with no attention to listening or silent reading. Listening to student objections may provide useful ideas for modifying an activity. And some will perceive benefits in an activity that we have not seen.

Write your reactions and your students' reactions as they experience reading texts with different formats and deletions.



Here are comments others made about the value and lack of value in re-reading the same text with the variations that I am introducing.

- “I play the guitar and I re-play the same tunes over, and over and over again. If I played the notes one time it would be a waste of time. But until I was asked to write why reading a text more than once might be useful, I did not see the connection. Re-reading with or without modifications I find valuable.”

- “My students made more substitutions in the modified version—maybe because they focused on the meaning since they could not always get the words from the initial letter, for example.”

- “I frequently ask my students to read a new text each week. But after seeing they misread a lot when they wrote what they said after they read silently, I am beginning to question the value of reading a text only once.”

- “When I had to read silently, pause, and then say what I had read and then pause again before I wrote, I realized I was practicing language rather than just saying words and trying to remember information which I had no interest in. But I have to think more when I re-read the text in modified forms.”

- “After my students read sentences silently, said them and wrote them, I realized that having them read sentences orally probably has almost no impact on their language learning. They really need to practice reading, saying, hearing, and writing the same grammatical patterns and vocabulary over and over again to master English.”

- “When I realized that LOL was ‘laughing out loud’ and BYOD was “bring your own device, I realized that the alternative formats you suggested were not at all radical. My students have been doing this type of playing with the language for a long time. I was the one who was fearful that they would be confused when in fact they have been doing more complex variations than the ones I introduced for months.”

- “I have been teaching for 30 years and the idea of asking my students to read a passage with no upper case letters or spaces between words or punctuation seemed ridiculous to me. But when I asked my students to tell me their reactions, most were positive. In many of my students’ languages, they do not use upper case letters and do not have spaces between words. So ironically, some of them felt more comfortable with what I thought was a novel text than with the normal text. To many, the novel was normal!”

- “My supervisor has always told me never to do anything to confuse students. I showed only the first paragraph with no upper case letters, spaces or punctuation. I did the activity near the end of the period when I had finished the regular lesson a bit early. When my supervisor heard about the text with no spaces, etc., he was very upset. I mentioned that the students alter so called Standard English when they do text messaging. And I mentioned that the students enjoyed it. But he was still very upset and said ‘Do not do strange things!’”

- “My students have been taught to just get the main point from a paragraph—the gist. So they do not notice details. As a result, they miss a lot of grammatical points when they see the words in the normal way. But when they try to read a passage with no spaces, upper case letters or punctuation they say they have to notice grammatical details to guess the main point. Many now realize that they can improve their English by reading, as well as enjoy stories, learn new information, or master songs.

- “I took pictures with my cell phone as they read the alternative text. At first, they closed their eyes after looking at the text or rolled their eyes up toward their forehead, as if they were trying to picture the individual words in their head. But when they looked the second or third time, they were moving their hands, smiling and nodding as this picture shows.”



A few reminders

As you observe your students, focus on the degree to which they are sharing meanings, not whether they follow the steps exactly as I suggest.

We can say lines naturally and use gestures as we look at the page. Authors who do public readings often read their poems or stories while looking at the lines, yet they sound as if they are speaking. This is because they are truly conveying meanings they intend to, using language they created. Conversely, a student can take his eyes off the page and say the words mechanically, rolling his eyes towards the ceiling or closing them. Both are sure signs of attempting to say the lines from memory rather than to express meaning.

The steps I suggest are means to an end, and so can be varied. The end is for learners to master and integrate the vocabulary and grammar of the passages they are studying and to be able to use them later.

Using this technique with a dialog might seem more realistic since we say lines to people face to face, while we rarely read orally except at a church service, wedding or retirement event. However, the main purpose of reading lines silently, understanding their meanings, saying them with changes, writing them and comparing the written versions with the originals is to master the integration of vocabulary and structures and to develop fluency and accuracy in speaking and writing, not to practice having a conversation.

Having said this, of course spoken language is very different from written language. That is one reason textbooks have reading passages and dialogs in each lesson. Using read and look up

with reading passages is a way for students to master structures which they can in turn use in composing short pieces of writing.

The mastery of dividing sentences into sense or breath groups is necessary for both spoken and written language. Ditto intonation and rhythm.

1,941 words

1.1e. The origin of cloze tests: *Incomplete versus complete information*

A T & T: *The origin of cloze tests*

One of the things people who create, produce, and sell telecommunications equipment are particularly interested in is how much of a message needs to get through and how much can be lost and still have the message be understood by the receiver. If too much is lost, the receiver won't understand the message correctly. If more than is needed for understanding is received, then the message will have taken longer and cost more to send than necessary.

Thousands of relay towers are needed to transmit the digital signals that enable us to use cell phones because the signals weaken as they travel. When telephones were first introduced and the sound signals were transmitted through copper wires, the question was how many transmitters were needed so that the signals would be strong enough to deliver signals carrying enough of callers' words so that customers would be satisfied with what they heard.

Transmitters are and were very expensive, so the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (*AT & T*) wanted to find out how many they needed to transmit enough words so people could understand each other. The engineers asked, "How complete does the information our customers hear on their phones have to be for them to be satisfied with our service?"

To explore this question, *AT & T* developed a series of dialogs to use with customers on their phones. In order to determine what customers on one phone heard in contrast to what customers on another phone said, *AT & T* sent representatives, with copies of the dialogs, to the places where the customers lived or worked. After the person answered the phone the *AT & T* operator said a line and the customer was asked to repeat what was said. The *AT & T* representative wrote down what the customers said they heard.

Here are a few examples of what *AT & T operators* said and what customers reported to the *AT & T representative* who was writing down what the customers said they heard.

AT & T operator: Good evening.

Customer: Good afternoon. (If in fact the time of the day was before 5 pm.)

AT & T operator: It's a nice day.

Customer: It's a nasty day.

AT & T operator: Is your brother home?

Customer: Is your sister home? (If in fact the person answering did not have a brother.)

AT & T operator: How many dogs do you have?

Customer: How many daughters do you have? (If in fact the person answering did not have any dogs but in fact had daughters.)

AT & T Operator: Thank you. We hope we can improve our service.

Customer: I hope you can improve your service.

Since so many customers projected meanings that fit their situation rather than repeating the words that had been said exactly, *AT & T* decided to delete words and see what would happen. Well, whether they said the entire greeting “Good evening,” or just part of it—“Good”—the people who answered the phone said what fit the time of day.

AT & T concluded that they could use fewer transmitters since whether the people answering heard 100%, or say, 90%, they heard what fit their situation rather than what was said.

The customers were able to complete what they heard even with words omitted because all communications contain numerous but different signals that express the same meanings for each of the various ideas included in what is being said and are set in specific contexts. When hearing, “Is your brother home?” we might miss *brother* but hearing *Is* and *home* and knowing that we are being asked about a person with us, we respond with what makes sense to us. In this particular situation we create an answer to the question in our minds based on what makes sense to us from what we heard.

The fact that everything we experience is communicated with multiple clues is called *redundancy*. This feature and our capability to use it are very beneficial aspects of communication, though many nowadays associate the idea with losing a job: *being made redundant*.

Redundancy appears in many circumstances. Here is one place redundancy is use



If a person is illiterate the sketch of a person moving through a door opening towards the arrow might suggest that the person should move left to leave the room. If the person knows English the word EXIT might be what the person focuses on. And if the person knows Chinese characters the person might notice the kanji and ignore the word EXIT as well as the green used for all the visual information.

In almost all countries of the world, though not in the United States, different denominations of paper money are produced in different sizes and printed in different colors and often with different pictures. If we miss the numbers, we can recognize the different colors and size

Because US paper currency is all the same size, an organization representing blind people in the United States has sued the United States Treasury to try to force the American government to print different values of paper money in different sizes so that blind people, who need this extra redundancy, can check to see whether the change they are given is correct. If a ten dollar bill feels the same as one hundred dollar bill and is the same color they are hard to distinguish even for seeing people.

Modifying the amount of information provided in reading passages

Here are three versions of the same text:

Complete *John's Introduction—Incomplete Information Version*—below by filling in each blank with a letter. Notice any *Aha!* moments. If you ask your students to do the same activity, using your name and personal information, compare your thinking with that of your students.

John's Introduction—Incomplete Information Version

H ____! A_ y__ k____, m_ n____ J ____.



_____ b____ i_ C_____, I_____, s, t__ h__ e



o_ t__ C____ B__ l s b____ t__ m ____

&

t__ n__ e o_ a ____ z m____ l.

Now, try your hand at this version.

John's Introduction—Less Incomplete Information Version

He ____! As you k ____, my na _e is J ____ . I was bo __ in Chicago, Illinois, th
_ hom _ of the Chic____ Bulls ba _____ t__m a __ the n ____ of a j _zz
musical.

Next, silently read this *Complete Information Version*. If you had your students read the other versions, have them read this version, too.

John's Introduction—Complete Information Version

Hello! As you know, my name is John. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, the home of the Chicago Bulls basketball team and the name of a jazz musical.

People are able to understand incomplete communications because as long as the reduction in redundancy is less than the critically required amount of information in the particular situation, readers or listeners can complete an incomplete message they read or hear.

Confusing, boring, challenging or fun?

Which version did you find more challenging? Which easier? Boring? Fun? What enabled you to fill in the blanks—*Aha!* moments, Which blanks did you find the most puzzling—*Huh?* moments?

If you had your students read the three versions, ask for their thoughts. Provided you understand it, invite them to write their reflections in their first language. If they worked in pairs, what did they learn from their partners?

Some people have said that they were helped by the word order; or by knowledge of what people say when they introduce themselves; or by linkers and structural words (*in, the, of*); or by stock expressions (*As you know*); or by experience—they've watched Michael Jordan play basketball or have seen the movie *Chicago*.

Of course, sometimes experience or lack of it can mislead. An Irish teacher initially wrote *Cork, Ireland*. And some students who did not follow basketball or movies had many blanks unresolved.

Complete words can mislead, as well. When some read the *Complete Information Version* aloud, they pronounced *Illinois* with a final *z* sound.

Some people have also told me that they preferred reading the *Complete Information Version* with all the words spelled out, with no pictures and no symbols for words. Some said they would first ask students to read the *Compete Version* and then do one of the *Incomplete Versions*. But others said that though the *Incomplete Versions* were at first very puzzling, they were ultimately more rewarding as well as memorable.

As people completed the less incomplete information version, some realized how frequently the letter *e* appears and that sometimes consonants are the distinctive features that help us understand, such as the two *z*'s in *j _ z z*.

I have asked teachers and students of different ages in many different countries to do the 3 introductions. The younger ones have been most engaged with Option 1. They prefer clues. If I say "Chicago" as they are mulling over what to write in the blanks after C, they are disappointed. Many students who like sports know about basketball and so if I mention M. Jordan they say, " 'Aha!' Chicago." If I mention a movie about jazz, students who love movies and musicals say, "Aha!" and guess *Chicago*.

Students who have studied in Canada first guess *Canada*. But again, if I say, "Not Canada, Chicago" rather than say, "A city not a country," they tell me they prefer the clue rather than the answer. I am certain this is because they have a chance to make use of their personal knowledge and thinking skills.

When the deletions are optimum for a learner, he or she will find the exercise challenging and interesting. They can fill in the blanks and understand the incomplete information in the texts. If the deletions are too easy, a learner will find them unchallenging and boring. If they are too difficult, the same person will be unable to fill in the blanks or understand the meaning of the incomplete information.

1,726 words

PS The 1,700-ish words in this reading are at a grade level of 6.4 and at Flesch Reading Ease of 71%. I mention this to remind you that the options I suggested in this reading, and other readings are useful only when your students recognize 90% to 98 % of the words.

Further Reading

I discuss which changes are to be encouraged and those that are to be discouraged in 1.7b.OK or NOT OK?

1.2a. “How’s that again? Easy keys?” *Exploring a word from the past and a word from the present: Dictations & Active Listening Activities*

What’s in a name?

Some teachers and students associate the word *dictation* with the word *dictator*. They consider listening to what a teacher says sentence by sentence and having to write it autocratic and dictatorial—far removed from student centered learning. The origins of the two words are actually the same, though their meanings have grown apart. Still, because of the negative feelings some people have toward dictations, I will call dictations *Active Listening Activities*, *ALAS* for short. However, the exact terms I and others coin about what we do are unimportant, so please feel free to call them whatever you want. Use words you and your students find engaging, memorable and novel. The same goes for the word *transcriptions*.

The labels are less important than what actually happens. The jargon in any field, including TESOL, is difficult for others outside the field, and some in it, to understand. It also distracts us from seeing and hearing what is actually happening. Technical terms, such as *transcriptions*, *dictations*, *active listening activities*—whatever—often prevent us from carefully observing the reality of what is going on and from dealing with events.

I am often asked whether transcribing and doing a dictation are different, and if so how. Here is one answer I give to distinguish *dictations* and transcriptions. *Dictations* usually refer to activities in which a teacher says sentences for students to write and then has students compare what they wrote with the sentences said and a printed version of what was said. They are often used to test spelling, word order, etc. A printed version of what students need to write is available to compare with what they wrote.

Transcriptions, on the other hand, usually refer to texts, which have been written down, of things that were listened to but were not initially intended to be written down, such as the news from television or radio broadcasts, what we say in our classes, or conversations at a bar.

However, *dictation* also can refer to the action of saying words one wants in a letter, for example, and having another person write them. Yet, some people use *transcription* rather than *dictation* to refer to a secretary writing a letter based on what a manager says. So, there is overlap both in the history of the terms and in what people visualize in their minds when they hear the two words. I say again, listening and seeing what people do is what is central, not the terms used to try to pigeon hole various activities.

Arguing about how *dictations* and *transcriptions* are similar and different reminds me of discussions about how many angels could fit on the tip of a pin hundreds of years ago. What we and our students do has to be the focus, not the terms.

How’s that again?

Each teacher below refers to what is done as a *dictation*. But as you read, you will discover that the label, like most, is almost meaningless since the teachers and students in each example do completely different things.

BEWARE OF *JARGON*. IT OBSCURES REALITY NOT ONLY IN TEACHING BUT ALSO IN ALL SPHERES OF OUR LIVES. (ONE ORIGIN OF THE WORD *JARGON* IS *GIBBERISH*: unintelligible or meaningless speech or writing; nonsense.)

Rating multiple kinds of *Active Listening Activities*

No matter what we call the process of having others write what we or others say, there are ways that the activity can be more teacher- or student-centered and more helpful or harmful, just as there have been both benevolent dictators, who thought of their subjects first rather than themselves, and ruthless dictators, who have only thought of their own power and benefits.

Here are a few Active Listening Activities--*ALAS* options.

- Write an **S** next to those you think are student-centered teaching.
- Write a **T** next to those you think are teacher-centered teaching.
- Write one to three plus signs (+) to indicate the degree to which the listening requires thinking rather than memorization or recall; the more plus signs, the more thinking.

Option 1 Word by word. Elsa

Elsa, a teacher in Nepal, says each word in the sentence word by word with a 3 second pause between each word. After she says each word, she tells the students to write the word. For example she says, “These. Write the word these.”

THESE/ TWO/ KEY/ WORDS/ ARE/ NOT/ EASY/ TO/ UNDERSTAND./

Option 2 Saying sentences to indicate sense or breath groups with pauses. Maria

Maria tells her second grade students in New York City to put their pens on their desks. Then she says the sentence pausing at the slash marks:

THESE TWO KEY WORDS/ ARE NOT EASY/ TO UNDERSTAND.

Next, she points to a student and says, “Please say what I said.” The student says, “These words . . . are difficult . . . to understand.” Then, Maria gestures for all the students in the class to write.

How’s that again?

As her students write, Maria writes the sentence the student said on the board. She also writes what she had said:

Student: These words . . . are difficult . . . to understand.

Maria: These two key words/ are not easy/ to understand.

She also writes O.K. next to each sentence. Then, the students edit their sentences. While they are doing this, Maria walks up and down the rows of desks and says “Yes” when a student’s sentence is correct and points to any places where a sentence has to be changed in a student’s notebook and then to the correct sentence on the board that matches the student’s attempt.

Option 3 Mouthing words and writing the first letter of the words on the board. Alex

Alex writes these letters on the board:

T t k w / a n e / t u.

Next, he mouths the words pausing at the slash marks. Then he gestures for the students to write.

As the students write, he writes the sentence he said on the board:

These two key words are not easy to understand.

Option 4 Students saying the sentence and making changes between their versions and the original. Roger

Roger asks Juan to say to the class a sentence on a piece of paper he has handed to Juan. Juan says the sentence word by word as he looks at the sentence:

These two words are not easy to understand.

Roger whispers to Juan to look at the words on the piece of paper again, then cover them and say as many as he can. Then, Juan says, “These two words are not easy.”

Next, Roger whistles a few seconds after the student says the words and then writes on the board: Write. Some students shake their heads. Others write vari-

How’s that again?

ations, such as: “Two words difficult” and “These words not easy.” Students then look at what other students near them wrote in their notebooks.

After this, Roger has Juan pass the paper to Fatima and asks the class to listen to her say the sentence again and then to write what they hear, using a different colored pen or pencil. And, Fatima says the sentence, followed by students writing what they hear.

Then, Roger writes the sentence on the board and also writes:

If your sentence does not look like this, change it.

Use a different colored pen for the changes.

Option 5 Rapid speech. Roger again

A week later, Roger has his students open their notebooks and put their pens on them. Then, he moves to the back of the class and says very quickly, “These two key words are not easy to understand” followed by, “Write!”

Almost all of the students write the sentence he said. Next, he asks Okon to write his sentence on the board and tells the others to compare theirs with Okon’s version. Then he says, “If your version is different, raise your hand and I will check to see if your version is acceptable or not.”

Option 6 Listen carefully. Gillian

Gillian tells her students that she is going to play a CD so they can hear people say the dialog in their textbook. Before she pushes the play button, she says, “Listen very, very carefully.”

Then, she pushes the play button and the first thing that is said is: “Listen carefully. Write down the first word in the sentence you hear. Here is the sentence. These two key words are not easy to understand.” Some students write *These*, some *this*, some *two*.

Next, Gillian writes *These* on the board and says, “The person said, “These.” Repeat, “These.”” Some students repeat, “These.”

How’s that again?

Option 7 Extra words. Julio

Julio writes these 2 steps on the board:

1. Put your pens on your notebooks.
2. Write what you hear me say that makes sense.

Next, Julio points to step 1 on the board. Then, pausing at the slashes, Julio says:

“These two key words/ chalk / are not easy / to up understand.”

Following this, Julio points to step 2 on the board. As students write, there are many *Huhs?*—expressing wonder and mystery mainly, though a few are turned off.

Next, Julio taps the board with a metal pointer, and students look at the board. Then, he points to step 1 again and says, “These two key words chalk are not easy to up understand.”

Following this, he points to step 2 again. Then he writes this on the board:

-----e --o --y - - - - s - - - - k --e --t
---y -o -p - - - - - - - - - d.

Julio says, “I said, 2 extra words. Cross them out if you wrote them.”

Ratings others made

Here are some ratings by other people.

Option 1 Word by word. Elisa **T ++**

Option 2 Saying sentences to indicate sense or breath groups with pauses. Maria **S +**

Option 3 Mouthing words and writing the first letter of the words on the board. Alex **T +**

Option 4 Students saying the sentence and making changes between their versions and the original. Roger **S +++**

Option 5 Rapid speech. Roger again **S +**

How's that again?

Option 6 Listen carefully. Gillian **T +++**

Option 7 Extra words. Julio **T +**

1,691 words rounded

Flesch Reading Ease 70%

Grade Level 7.2

How's that again?

1.2b. Next steps to explore listening *Rating multiple kinds of Active Listening Activities*

Views about teaching listening

Each of the seven ALA options from the previous chapter reflect quite different ideas about how we can activate our students' listening skills so that they can accurately write what people say and so that they can see ways they can develop their language skills on their own.

I wrote, "Write what people say" rather than "Write what they hear" purposely. What we hear and what people say are often quite different. Unless we have the sounds, patterns and information already in our minds, we cannot write what others say.

Read the brief descriptions of each of the seven options of giving a dictation again and this time write what you think each teacher's assumptions are about learning how to listen and about student-centered learning.

Please do this before reading further because I have printed some assumptions others connected with these ALA options below the brief descriptions. If you read others' ideas first, it will be difficult for you to come up with your own ideas.

Assumptions and practices

[The T and S with + and – signs show how teachers rated each option on the extent to which each option is teacher- or student-centered. The more plus or minus signs the stronger the activity is teacher- or student-centered.]

Option 1 Word by word. Elisa T ++*

Most think that saying sentences word by word is useful. But when Elisa listened to a recording of her speech and her students' oral production, she heard word-by-word speech. She found it difficult to understand herself. The sentences sounded like digital English, with no reflection of the natural rhythm, pausing and rise and fall of the voice that they hear in conversations and on television.

Though this option of repeating sentences word by word is widespread, no one considered it beneficial in developing listening skills or independent learning.

Option 2 Says sentences with pauses to indicate sense or breath groups. Maria S +

“Modeling ways we divide sentences into breath groups--how obvious, easy, useful and yet rarely done!”

Option 3 Mouthing words and writing the first letter of the words on the board. Alex T +

“At some point I remember you said that incomplete information is more engaging than complete information.”

Option 4 Students saying the sentence and making changes between their versions and the original. Roger S +++

“I think you must like this one, John. I had a lot of *Huhs?*, as did the students. But I had many *Ahas!* also. I used to be nervous and anxious when my students did not immediately understand what I said or told them to do. Now I think that waiting—whistling—to give them more time to puzzle things out is more productive. They realize they can do more than they think. They do not need me to spoon feed them.”

Option 5 Rapid Speech. Roger again S +

“In 100 years, I would not have asked my students to write something a week after I had asked them to write it. And I would not have said the sentence very, very quickly the second time in 1,000 years! But now I ask myself, why not? The students were able to write what Roger says.”

Option 6 Listen carefully. Gillian T +++

“I have never heard a newscaster, a movie director, or a politician, or anyone else other than myself say, ‘Listen carefully’ or ‘Listen up’ before they speak. After I read about Gillian, I had a couple of students take photographs of fellow class members as they wrote after I said ‘Listen carefully’ and when I did not say ‘Listen carefully.’ Of course, after a moment’s reflection I might have realized that we listen carefully or do not listen carefully not because of a command to do so but because what we are hearing is or is not, for whatever reason, fascinating, challenging or worthwhile.

I wonder to what extent such a comment is patronizing, implying that if we do not say it, our students will not listen because we do not think they are curious, eager to learn or ready to be challenged.”

Next steps to explore listening

Option 7 Extra words. Julio T +

“Julio believes in explicit feedback. Sorry. I mean he tells students in detail or graphically how many words they should have written. He also seems to believe that students can overcome initial confusion. The extra words raised many questions. But they also clarified the meaning and structure of the sentence.”

Confusing students can be counter productive. On the other hand as students realize which extra words do not make sense they learn that meaning comes from phrases or breath groups not words. The extra words at first are noise and interfere with understanding but over time they can exclude the extra words just as they exclude motorcycle engines gunning when they are having a conversation on a street where a motorcycle raced past during a conversation.

They realize the meaning is partly in their head already and so they can understand even when noise seems to interfere.

There are scores of other options besides the seven I presented. If you search the Internet, you will find *running dictations* and *dictoglosses*, to name a few. But each of these can be done in ways that are helpful or harmful, that help develop listening or do not, that show students how much they can learn on their own or not.

Let the data speak

This aphorism is not as easy to follow as it would seem. In Kurosawa’s movie *Rashomon*, each character gives a completely different account of an attack. One way to let the data speak is to record what we do and transcribe 1 to 3 minute segments. But all too often the video camera or the recorder is focused on the teacher rather than the students.

If you want to learn and to develop, your eyes and ears have to be on video clips or recordings of your students as well as on yourself. Your voice will be heard when the camera is on the students. Of course you need some shots of yourself to see your gestures, facial expressions etc.

But you have to let the data you see and hear speak by describing what you and your students are doing rather than labeling what you see. “There I am scaffolding; there I am giving positive feedback; my recasting was consistent.” are the types of comments that are dangerous because they blind us to what we and the students are actually doing. We have to focus on what students actually say, write and do and what we say write and do, not on labels. We have to ignore the claims embedded in the labels about the success of this or that variation of having students write what others say. We

Next steps to explore listening

have to substitute what students do and say for formulaic words like *dictations*, *Active Listening Activities* and *transcriptions*.

When we say, “It works,” there are multiple meanings of both *it* and *works*. *Dictations* is a dangerous word not only because some associate it with rulers with total power but also because it does not accurately show what students are doing and producing and what teachers are saying and doing. Ditto for almost all other labels we use when we talk about our teaching.

A different pair of glasses

We all view reality through a particular pair of glasses. Some people see everything in a positive way, looking at reality with rose colored glasses. In order to let the data speak we have to put on a new pair of glasses to symbolize the fact that we are trying to look at reality in a totally different way.

Here is a photograph of me wearing novelty glasses to symbolize attempts to see what we observe in a new way.



The Internet

There is a wide range of options available on the Internet for giving dictations. There are many video clips on You Tube. But wide as the range is, I did not find any options that provide intermediate steps for students to take; students were expected to write all the words a teacher says. In your textbooks, you probably have seen some intermediate steps such as exercises that require students to provide one-word responses during listening activities. “How many words were not easy to understand? What was not easy to understand?”

Next steps to explore listening

But these questions do not provide ways for students to eventually write all the words that are said. Nor do they provide learners with ways they can learn about the features of the language that they hear. Many learners have no idea where one spoken word ends and another begins. They have been told to listen for so called *key words*—usually what some call content words: *two, easy, understand*. We usually stress these words. But in fact, at least half of the words in sentences have only grammatical meaning, are not stressed and so are rarely heard: *these, are, to*.

Students have found the activities below useful to learn characteristics of what they hear.

A. Identifying the number of words in a sense or breath group and first letters of words

1. **Teacher:** (Writes **a** on the board and gestures to students to copy the **a**.)
Write down the number of words I say:
“These two words”
2. **Students:** (Some write ‘3’, some ‘2’.)
3. **Teacher:** (Writes ‘3’ next to **a** on the board.)
4. **Teacher:** Listen again and write down the number of words I say and the first letter of each one.
“These two words.”
5. **Students:** (All write ‘3’. Some write ‘*d, t, w*’; some write ‘*t, t, r*’, and some write ‘*t, t, w*’.)
6. **Teacher:** (Writes **b** on the board and gestures to students to copy the **b**.)
Write down the number of words I say:
“are not easy”
7. **Students:** (Some write ‘2’, some ‘3’.)
8. **Teacher:** (Writes ‘3’ next to **b** on the board.)
(Writes “are not easy” on the board.)
9. **Teacher:** Write the first letter of these 3 words: ‘are not easy’
10. **Students:** (Some write ‘*a, e*’; some ‘*a, n*’, some ‘*n, e*’ and some ‘*a, n, e*’)
11. **Teacher:** (Writes **c** on the board and gestures to students to copy the **c**.)
Write down the number of words I say:
“to understand.”

12. **Students:** (Some write ‘2’ next to **c** on the board, some ‘1’ and some ‘3’ and one student writes ‘4’.)

13. **Teacher:** (to student who wrote ‘4’) Why 4?

14. **Student:** *to plus un plus der plus stand.*

We say words in groups and do not pause between individual words as the spaces between words we write suggests. See if your students find it useful to note the number of words that are said or the initial letters of words they hear. These intermediate steps can help your students see, through what they write on their paper, what they can and cannot hear.

B. Other characteristics

Instead of having students write down everything a teacher says, you could have them write down all the words that are a certain part of speech. You can also ask students to listen to a dictation and write down and group words based on personalised labels in addition to the standard ones. Students might listen and write down ‘person words’, ‘place words’, ‘thing words’, ‘actions’, ‘positive feelings’, ‘negative feelings’, ‘numbers’, and even ‘grammar words’ such as *these, are, not, and to* in “These two words are not easy to understand.” ‘Two letter words’ and ‘three letter words’ are other possible categories.

Why? Well, first, students who cannot write all the words we say can focus on what they are able to write—the first letters of some words, the number of words, etc. Second, students can begin to see that they understand meaning from sounds, word order, pauses, stress, types of words—short or long, things or actions or feelings—not just from so called key words.

In this section of the book, I have explored some different ways for students to listen and write what they hear. But as always, do not believe my claims. Ask your students how identifying characteristics of sounds and words they hear enables them to better understand and develop their ability to listen to what they hear.

2,065 words

1.2c. Twose key words other understand: *Transcribing in the 16th and 21st Centuries*

Before you read any further, take a few minutes to recall and write down a recent instance of your or a friend's or one of your student's misunderstanding of something you or s/he heard. What do you think caused the mis-hearing?

My Claim

WHAT A PERSON WE ARE TALKING WITH SAYS AND WHAT WE HEAR ARE FREQUENTLY DIFFERENT.

Others' Examples Illustrating My Claim

In a restaurant, a fast food chain, at the post office and in class

I wonder if the instances you thought of are similar to those I hear in workshops. The two most frequent ones I hear outside of class are ordering food or buying stamps. In a Starbucks Coffee Shop, I sometimes hold up the index and middle finger of my right hand to indicate a *V* for *Venti* as I say the word. About 25% of the time, I see on the cash register display that the waiter thought I said and signalled *two* and has charged me accordingly.

Though many waiters and waitresses repeat what diners order after they write the requests down, there are still many times when the wrong food is served. Some restaurants and fast food chains have electronic devices so customers can touch the items they want to order, partly to decrease the number of misunderstood orders. Post office clerks sometimes give stamps that are different from those customers need.

In class, hearing "Please start" when teachers say "Please stop" was common. Ditto for page numbers teachers said and students heard. "Forty" for "Fourteen", "Thirteen" for "Thirty" "Festival" for "First" to name just a few.

Some Personal Examples Illustrating My Claim

Walking and chatting in a park

One morning, I was walking with Ken and Marjorie, who have been married for 50 years. During our walk, we saw a food stand with a sign that said *Curry for lunch* and another with this notice: *Enjoy a freshly brewed cup of coffee!* Marjorie asked Ken, "Would you like some coffee?" Ken said, "It's too early for curry."

After listening to each other for 50 years you might think that Ken and Marjorie would not have any misunderstandings. But they did!

Twose key words other understand

If Ken could mis-hear Marjorie after 50 years of talking to each other, it should come as no surprise that non-native speakers of English mis-hear much of what their English teachers and other students say. It does not matter whether they are speaking English or the students' first language or another language. Nor does it matter whether the teachers are native or non-native speakers of the language(s) spoken. Misunderstandings happen. Communication is a miracle is what Caleb Gattegno, the person who developed The Silent Way, a method for language teaching in which the teacher never spoke, constantly said.

Engaged in an ESOL class

Each afternoon, for 5 days, Marion said a variation of the message below before the reading section of her lesson. On the 5th day, she recorded her class. Later, she asked her students to listen to and write the comment she had made each day before they started to read the text for the day. Here are 6 students' transcriptions after listening to the recording three times.

99. Twose key words other understand.

97. Key words very easy understand.

95. Two have very easy key word.

93. To the key word is the understand.

91. Tou the easy key word is understand.

89. To the key word is understand.

So, did you understand what Marion had said? She said, "These two key words are not very easy to understand." Of course, she did not say *two* everyday. The number she said was the number of words she thought her students would find difficult

Participating in a TESOL methods class

I often mention the importance of looking at what we do in a different way in our classes, through different pairs of glasses. In fact, I mention the idea so much that it becomes trite. To compensate for the repetition of the same image, I often give examples of people who have discovered something that they were not looking for.

One day in a class of teachers in an MA program, we read an obituary of a person who had received the Nobel Prize in medicine for discovering a vaccine for hepatitis. Each teacher had a copy of the article.

Twose key words other understand

But to highlight the point, I read these sentences aloud: “He wanted to understand hepatitis because more and more people were developing the disease. Though he had not set out to find ways to prevent it, he did. He saved millions of lives because he discovered a vaccine for hepatitis.”

I ask teachers in my MA classes to transcribe a page from recordings they make of each of our classes. Because a few of the teachers were intrigued by this researcher’s life and they selected this part of the class recording to transcribe. Here is what one teacher, Jovi, wrote: “ He said? millions of lies? because he” but this is what was said and printed in the reading: “He saved millions of lives because he discovered a vaccine for hepatitis.”

In this same class, for the first 3 sessions, I said *Jodi* when I asked *Jovi* to do something. I have a couple of friends named *Jodi*, so this name unconsciously came out of my mouth. When I heard the name, which sounded like a name I was familiar with, I projected what I knew onto what I heard. When I finally saw Jovi’s name written down, I had an *Aha!* moment.

In the case of the conversation about *curry* and *coffee*, Ken only heard Marjorie’s question once. And the signs *Curry for lunch* and *Enjoy a freshly brewed cup of coffee!* were on food stalls right next to each other. I asked Ken why he heard “curry” rather than “coffee”. He said he had been reading the sign on the curry food stall as Marjorie asked him “Would you like some coffee?” So it was natural to project curry into the meaning of the question as curry and coffee sound rather similar. Marion’s students, on the other hand, wrote what they had heard after listening to a recording of her comments three times.

The teachers in my class re-listen to their recordings at least twice as they transcribe. But you cannot hear what you do not already know. Jovi could not hear “discovered a vaccine for hepatitis” because the sounds and meanings for this phrase were not in her head. Without knowing the sounds and meanings of these words, she did what we all do. She tried to match what she knew with what she heard. If I say *saved/said* and *lives/lies* in isolation, it is difficult to distinguish the sounds because they sound similar. We can only be sure that I said *lives* from the information in the phrase that the teacher could not hear.

Jovi had even read the obituary, which contained the sentence that I read aloud. But she and the other teachers were so intent on trying to understand what I had said in the recording that she and others forgot that a printed version of part of what I had said was available to check with, even if she or they did not know what all the words meant. You probably noticed that she wrote question marks after the words she had transcribed. She knew they did not make sense but did not have the meanings in her mind to write down what was actually said.

Input/Intake, Listening/Hearing

Those who write about teaching listening have coined terms such as those in the subtitle of this section. While learning these terms might be helpful, I think devoting time to transcribing a page from a recording of your class every few days, and together with your students noting what enables you to write what you hear and what blocks you from writing the correct sounds, can be more helpful.

The same goes for reading about theories of listening. After you transcribe a lot and, along with your students, write ways you are able to understand and not understand, when you do read about listening, all the ideas and activities that authors suggest will make more sense. I am not against reading. I am hoping you will read what I have written here. But one of my goals is to remind you of how much you already know, to realize how much awareness you have and can develop by simply carefully observing in detail what you and your students do, making small changes and comparing the results.

Let the data speak! Counting words per minute

On DVDs produced by major publishers to illustrate “exemplary teaching,” teachers speak from 110 to 140 words per minute. I know this because as an exercise in my MA classes, I had teachers transcribe some of the DVDs. After you transcribe parts of some of your own classes, you can compare your words per minute with theirs. And you can also notice the number of words your students say and their errors. Every teacher who has transcribed their students’ comments has been astonished at the number of mistakes their students make which they had not heard in the midst of teaching. It is only when listening and transcribing that we notice how what our students say is different from what we hear in class.

Why is this so? Well, just as Ken projected *curry* after Marjorie said *coffee*, we project the correct form. When a student says “We saw on Internet” we hear “We saw it on the Internet.” and when a student responds with 1 word, “newspaper” and we say 6 words, “Yeah, it could have been a newspaper.” what are we hearing? Because we have the correct pattern so deeply etched in our memory and because we have in our mind what we might hope a student would say, we say many more words than we have heard in our reactions.

But in my experience, unless students listen to a recording of the 6 words we say after they say 1 word, they do not know at the moment in class that we have said 6 words or in the case of *newspaper* versus *a newspaper*, 2 words rather than 1. Why would we act different from waiters, postal clerks or couples married for 50 years? Trying to accurately hear what 15 to 40 students are saying in class is infinitely more complex than hearing what one’s partner says in a quiet park.

You can also compare how many times you have to replay your recordings of your class to transcribe them with how many times teachers and I had to replay the

Twose key words other understand

commercial DVDs to transcribe them: two to six times. We had to stop after each teacher and student utterance. When we did the transcribing alone, we had to stop and replay up to a dozen times!

Also, as you transcribe and count the number of words you say in comparison with those the DVD teachers say, you can see how close you are to the norm. Almost every study of classroom interaction in all subjects at all levels in most countries of the world has revealed the same phenomenon for at least a century: teachers' voices fill a minimum of two thirds of each class.

If Ken and Marjorie misunderstand one question and ESOL students cannot figure out "These two key words are not very easy to understand." after hearing the comment 5 times and listening to a recording over and over, and if a teacher mistakes *lies* for *lives*, or Jodi for Jovi, what can our students understand much less learn from what we are saying? I would claim that unless we ask them to transcribe recordings of what we say, they can learn nothing from what we say. And unless we transcribe what we and they say as well, or with them, we will have a very faulty understanding of how much they are following us.

But do not believe my assertion. Rather, record one of your classes and with your students play, re-play, re-play and write what you and your students say. One page is more than enough to start with.

Much of what we say during the 66% of class time that we fill with words is natural English. "These two key words are not easy to understand." is not only natural English but is a structure that is very useful. Here are just a few variations:

These X important words are not easy to write.
These X new words are easy to pronounce.
These X fascinating sentences are important to learn.
This word is difficult to spell but easy to remember.
That title is hard to forget.

So I am not telling you to go cold turkey and talk a lot less immediately. One of the occupational hazards of being a teacher is getting into the habit of talking a lot. What I am suggesting is that you provide opportunities for your students to master the rich language you use by recording what you say and having the students in pairs or groups, both in class and outside of class, transcribe what you say, as well as what they say.

But given history, initially the bulk of what they write will be your speech. All the better since you speak English more fluently and accurately than they do, whether you are a native or non-native speaker of English.

Twose key words other understand

Preparing for transcribing

The first time most students try to write what they hear on a recording, they are very, very frustrated. The students who transcribed, “These two words are not easy to understand.” felt very discouraged when they compared what they had written with what the teacher showed them she had said. Asking a student to transcribe with no intermediate steps is like telling a person to run a marathon without any training.

In the 16th century, no one wrote what others said. Rather *transcribing* meant looking at a line from a book, often the Bible, and then copying the line. Even in this original form of transcription there were many discrepancies between what was in the book being copied and the copied book.

Since writing what others say—transcription in the 21st Century—is more difficult, without a number of intermediate steps, all you will get is 10 times more discrepancies than transcribers of old—usually monks—produced. So, you should not feel surprised, or discouraged, by what you see written in your students’ transcriptions and by the difficulties your students have transcribing.

Selecting materials to transcribe, or dictate

1. Ask yourself and your students to select what you both want to transcribe or have dictated to them. You might want to transcribe or dictate an excerpt from class. They might want to transcribe or have you dictate a song, commentary on a soccer game, dialogs from a soap opera, etc.
2. Start with recordings or dictations that take one to three minutes.

Encourage students to select recordings or passages for dictations that have printed versions available for two reasons:

First, they can determine the difficulty level (if they do not understand 10 words out of 100, they should select another script).

Second, they can that have printed versions to compare what they write with.

If you select a recording of your class to transcribe or dictate to them, collecting students’ notebooks that contain things you have asked them to write down will enable you and your students to transcribe or write a dictation of the class in less time and more accurately.

In the case of songs, almost all lyrics are available on the Internet. Many movies have subtitles mandated by governments so that deaf viewers can follow them. Ditto for many TV programs. Many Graded Readers are produced with a CD so students can

look at what they hear when they play the CD or you or students dictate a passage. And recently, YouTube has an option for subtitles for many of the videos on the site as well.

Guidelines for Students Transcribing or Doing Dictations

1. Silently read the text of what you are going to transcribe or have dictated at least two times before you listen to the recording of the passage. As you read, check the meanings of any words you are not sure of in your bilingual or monolingual dictionaries.
2. As you listen do not look at the written version. Look at the written version again after you finish transcribing or writing what someone has dictated to you.
3. Listen and write in pairs or groups of three to five. One of you will hear some things and others will hear other things.
4. Leave space between the lines you write so you have blank areas for adding words and editing when you listen again.
5. Take turns pushing *play*, *rewind*, and *pause* when transcribing. And during dictations, ask the person saying the lines to say them again and again till you get them.
6. Limit the time you transcribe or write a dictation to around ten minutes or what you can write on a half a sheet of paper.
7. Sometimes listen and then write after a short pause, and sometimes listen and write at the same time. Think about the benefits of these two ways.
8. For words you are not sure how to spell, write an approximate spelling. Later compare how you spelled the words with the written version. Eventually, standard spelling has to be used, but not initially.
9. Except for frequently used names of people and places, there is no need to spell out names; writing the first letter is sufficient. "O was born in U" vs. "Okon was born in Uyo."
10. If you cannot understand a word or group of words after listening three times, you should just write a line to indicate a blank and move on.
11. As you transcribe or write what a person dictates, pause and write what prevents and enables you to get some lines and not get other lines. Use whichever language you feel most comfortable writing in.

12. When you finish writing what you think you heard, compare what you wrote with the original texts and circle differences.

13. Write *NOK* for *Not OK* above differences you think change the meaning or are grammatically incorrect.

14. Check with me to see which *NOK* differences are in fact *NOK*, and I will tell you how to change them, if necessary.

15. After you transcribe in class half a dozen times, transcribe outside of class. Then we will just do suggestion 14 in class. You can follow suggestions 1 through 13 on your own outside of class, in a park, at a coffee shop, in each other's living rooms, in the library, etc. (It is best to do this with others, if you can. But when you cannot, please do it alone.)

In the case of dictations, you can do these outside of class also. Just listen to a friend saying lines rather than a recording.

If you think transcriptions will be too much of a shock to your students and want to provide some activities to decrease the shock, many teachers say that starting with dictations, which as you just saw you can do following the same suggestions for transcribing provides a bridge. I tried to show that most of the suggestions apply to both, transcribing and giving dictations.

3,300 words, rounded

Flesch Reading Ease 67%

Grade Level 8.5

1.2d. Talking about a *sign* in a commercial DVD demonstrating ESL *Techniques*: *Noticing that the obvious can be difficult to see*

Some reasons for transcribing commercial DVDs

I have shown scores of teachers a video clip Jeremy Harmer produced in which a teacher called Laura illustrates teaching activities. Almost all of the teachers find Laura very engaging, energetic and pleasant. They comment on how involved the students seem to be as well. In short, almost all those I show the clip to respond to it very favorably.

When I ask teachers to transcribe some of the interaction, they still react favorably to Laura and her students. I ask teachers to transcribe the interactions because I believe we cannot understand what we are doing unless we have a printed version as well as a visual and oral version. When we observe a class on a DVD or live it is easy to become distracted by the emotions of the teacher and students, the movement of those in the class, the background noise, to name a few different kinds of information that any DVD or live observation contains.

When we have a transcription we can analyze the interaction because we can read and re-read what everyone says and does. No one tries to analyze a report, a speech or piece of literature by hearing a person say the lines once. We have to have a printed copy of anything we want to analyze. Even just a simple analysis such as counting the number of words each participant says is impossible by just listening to what the participants say.

Though computer applications are available to change spoken words into printed words, the process of playing a DVD or audio recording, pausing it, writing what we hear, rewinding and replaying to check what we think we heard can be useful for noting details that computer applications might miss. When you read the partial transcription below, you will notice that I did not write in comments about the teacher's emotions and those of her students, but this is something else we can experience when we transcribe but which computer applications that change spoken words into printed words cannot illustrate.

I did not write comments about the emotions of the teacher and the students in the transcription because without looking at the DVD yourself and comparing your interpretations with mine, I think I would be in some cases misleading you. Emotions are not easy to describe accurately so having at least a few people, including the people we are analyzing write the emotions they feel are being expressed will lead to more accurate descriptions.

A partial transcription of Laura using a reading text to create the conditions for a speaking activity

Laura starts the class standing up next to a white board.

Laura: Right, good morning everyone.
I'm going to show you a sign.

(Said as on the board Laura draws a square on the board to represent a sheet of paper with a dot in each corner to represent 4 tacks or pins, which were used to attach the piece of paper to a surface. She writes the words *WIFE WANTED* in the middle of what now looks like a sign.)

O.K. This is a sign that I saw somewhere in London. O.K.

I'd like you to try to imagine /with your partner, try to think about where I saw this sign. O.K. So where did I see it?

Laura: O.K. Can I hear some of your ideas?

S: We think you saw on Internet

Laura: O.K. On the Internet.
Yeah so on the Internet. So did you have any other ideas?

S: Newspaper.

Laura: Yeah, it could have been a newspaper.

Laura: 79 words Students: 8 words

Like Ken, who thought he was being asked about *curry* when in fact Marjorie was asking about *coffee*, there was a discrepancy between the words Laura said and her students heard.

Laura said she saw "a sign" 3 times. And she drew a sign on the board and said she saw the sign in London. Yet when the students responded to "Where did I see it?" they not only made grammatical errors but their responses show they did not hear what Laura had asked them. The responses "on internet" and "newspaper" are unrelated to a *sign* Laura said she saw in London, which as I said she even drew on the board. And "On the internet" and "In the newspaper" are the correct forms.

If students respond saying that a sign their teacher saw in London, which she drew on the board, was on the Internet or in a newspaper and the teacher, perhaps incredulously, repeats “On the Internet” and “Yea it could have been a newspaper” after drawing a sign and saying *sign* 3 times in the lines you just read and 3 more times in lines which follow the ones you just read, I think the exchanges illustrate my claim that we cannot understand what is actually happening in a class unless we have a printed version as well as a visual and oral version of what is happening.

Of course since the teacher ignores the incorrect grammar of her students as well as the incongruent information, one wonders whether she heard the errors at all. She adds the two omitted articles and one preposition, which seems natural for her. I have seen scores of teachers, myself included, who only notice such omissions when listening to a recording. In class we project what we think we hear on what our students say just as Ken projected *curry* after Marjorie said *coffee*.

So becoming aware of the differences between what one person says and others hear is crucially important for both teachers and students. For teachers, learning how what they think they are saying is different from what they are saying helps them become more effective teachers; for students, recognising the differences allows them to become more accurate users of the language they are learning.

In this brief transcript of the DVD, I have cut out some other lines where one student says “wife look for husband” rather than “WIFE WANTED” and “The husband looking for a wife.” Was the wife lost? So the lack of understanding of *sign* was only part of the miscommunications that took place. And the 2 responses without the article and 1 without a preposition were followed by many other sentences that were incorrect in content and linguistic accuracy.

Let the data speak—what happened versus what we think happened

During a discussion of the video clip, the teacher and the author of the book the DVD was part of make no mention of the fact that what teachers and students were saying to each other and what they were hearing were different! They make no mention of the fact that the students did not say one correct item during the beginning of the class. They do not mention the fact that Laura spoke 10 times more than her students—79 to 8--in the part of the class I showed the transcription of.

When I was introduced to the wife of a friend whose name was Jovi, but heard Jodi, I had the same experience Laura and her students did. In order to hear *Jovi*, a name unfamiliar to me, and have it become part of my memory, I had to notice explicitly, either by myself or after having had it indicated by someone, the difference between what I was hearing and what the actual sounds were that had been said. To use Jovi when needed, I would then need to access it correctly. This is the same series of steps that we need to take when we are doing listening activities.

I advocate having teachers and students transcribe recordings during part of each class and for out of class work a few times a week as well. Without this activity the mismatches between what is said and heard cannot be discerned.

Laura is not unique in not hearing what her students said, leaving out articles and not responding to her question about a sign. Waiters usually restate what we order to ensure that what we say and what they heard is the same. Very often they have to cross out what they originally wrote and write what we had said originally and had to repeat.

I got the idea for the subtitle of this reading—*The obvious can be difficult to*—from Gregory Bateson. He wrote about the complexities of conversations. Here is his reason for my hearing *Jodi* for *Jovi* and Ken hearing *curry* for *coffee* and Laura's students not hearing the word *sign*:

“[People often miss the obvious] because people are self-corrective systems. They are self-corrective against disturbance, and if the obvious is not of a kind that [we] can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, [our] self-corrective mechanisms work to sidetrack it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, or shutting off various parts of the process of perception. Disturbing information can be framed like a pearl so that it doesn't make a nuisance of itself...” (Bateson, 1972, p. 428. *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine. GN6.B3 & 504.B78)

I do not remember where I found the statement to let the data speak but I find the quote very convincing. Scientists look at data over and over and analyze the data from many perspectives. Why should we not do the same?

1,595 words

1.2e. People hearing but not listening: *Teaching content in English to non-native speakers of English*

Hearing does not necessarily result in understanding

When Simon and Garfunkel wrote *The sound of silence*, which includes the line, “People hearing but not listening,” they were not thinking of teachers of various content areas teaching non-native speakers of English. But the line describes what happens in thousands of classrooms around the world in which content teachers assume that speaking causes listening; and further, understanding.

Retention of content from lectures by native speakers of English is around 10%. Concerning most non-native speakers, measuring the retention rate is ridiculous because most of the language the teacher uses is far beyond their comprehension. Students sometimes copy down the individual words the teacher writes on the board, which, when looked at later, are close to meaningless because they are out of context.

Integrating content with English has great potential when the students choose what they wish to study about. But all too often, the gap between the level of English comprehension of the students and the English their teachers use is so great that students neither develop their English nor learn the content they are interested in.

Evidence

Here are four students’ written versions of six simple statements their teacher made in a tourism class about an upcoming field trip. Try to figure out what the teacher said based on what the students wrote. She did not ask the students to transcribe her greeting and statement of purpose, which preceded these six statements. She transcribed those herself.

As you try to figure out what the teacher said from the students’ attempts to write it down, you will somewhat experience in print what the students experienced in speech.

Good morning, I want to say some things about our field trip next Wednesday.

Teacher’s 1st statement:

1. What going do next Wednesday
2. Youll going to go to Wellington on next Wednesday.
3. We’re going to Wellington on next Wednesday.
4. We go Wellington Wednesday.

Teacher's 2nd statement:

1. Visted. . .i. . .con. . .hote.
2. Education. . .continental Hotel.
3. One intercontinental Hotel.
4. We wanna visit Intercontinental hotel.

Teacher's 3rd statement:

1. What is. . . nynk?
2. You very fortunently
3. We are very fortunate to get through.
4. We get throw. . .

Teacher's 4th statement:

1. you have to make presentation
2. You have to make a good presentation
3. you have to make a good presentation
4. You have to be good presentation.

Teacher's 5th statement:

1. The hotel have dress paud
2. The hotel has a dress cort
3. The Hotel has dress court.
4. the hotel is gre cool.

Teacher's 6th statement:

1. We leave a 9' oclock
2. Will lease at 9 o'clock
3. We leave here at 9:00 on o'clock
4. We will be here 9 o'clock.

The power of transcribing and comparing

It is a great advantage when students are interested in what teachers are talking about. It is also a great advantage when the language teachers use is natural. But as you just saw, the gap between what the teacher was saying in her tourism class and what students understood was huge.

If a content teacher shares a recording of each class with the language teacher, it provides the language teacher with potential listening material, which can also be converted into reading passages. When students transcribe what they hear and

compare it with a transcription of what the teacher said, over time they will become more and more familiar with the content teacher's language.

Transcribing alone is not enough to enable students to understand what they hear. But if the language teacher uses recordings and transcriptions of what the content teacher says as material for exercises like those I describe in 1.1. and 1.2., students then will begin to understand the content as well as develop their language abilities.

What the teacher said

Here is a transcription of what the teacher said.

1st statement: *We're going to go to Wellington next Wednesday.*

2nd statement: *We're making an educational visit to the Intercontinental Hotel.*

3rd statement: *We're very fortunate to get through.*

4th statement: *You have to make a good presentation.**

5th statement: *The hotel has a dress code.*

6th statement: *We will leave here at 9:00 o'clock.*

* The students had heard this statement in all of their classes, but it had referred to oral reports they had to give in each class. So, though they all wrote this statement more closely to the teacher's statement than any other, the meaning they attributed to it was different from the intention of the teacher's statement. The teacher wanted to remind them that they had to dress well to make a good impression. None of the students had to make any presentations at the hotel; they simply listened to what the hotel manager told them.

Content as a rich source of language

Many institutions are under the delusion that their non-native English speaking students will learn both content and English if they take content courses. Some realize that students need language support and have ESL teachers sit in the content courses to see what language they need to teach to help the students understand the content. Some schools have workshops for content teachers to illustrate activities that are used in language classrooms. But many content teachers resist teaching content plus English because they are not interested in teaching language. Some simply do not have the ability to do it.

Though the six statements you just read about a field trip are not content rich, many of the other comments content teachers make are, for example when they focus on air pollution, exchange rates, and the degradation of the countryside caused by tourists.

People hearing but not listening

But if the students cannot understand directions about taking a field trip that contain no content-rich vocabulary, how are they able to understand *environmental tourism*, *reasons people travel*, *package tours versus individually planned tours*, etc.?

On the other hand, English teachers often say they cannot teach the language the content teachers use because they do not know details of the content well enough. But the ESL students who are beginning their degrees are taking introductory general courses, not advanced specific courses. Much of what content teachers talk about in introductory courses is information that newspapers, magazines, and TV news reports. So most English teachers really can understand the content.

Accurate content and language

Many content teachers say that their job is only to teach tourism, environmental studies, business or whatever. The ESL teacher is paid to teach language. “As long as I think they get the meaning in their written assignments I do not deduct any points for incorrect language.”

Consider this sentence: “Boyle experiment give blood to animal human” Did Boyle do one experiment or many? Did he do it recently or in the past? Did he give blood to only one animal or many? Did he give blood to many humans or one? Did he give both an animal and a human or many of both blood to drink? Did he ask the human or humans to sprinkle the blood on a boil they had on some part of their body?”

When students write or talk about content in English inaccurately, it means they do not understand the content. And if they cannot write or say the content accurately it means they are not reading or listening to the content accurately either.

Every sentence a student writes or says incorrectly about tourism, environmental studies or whatever deepens their misunderstanding of the topics they are trying to learn about and makes it more and more difficult for them to produce accurate language.

If students write, “the change rate between the dollar and yen was 1.21 on the 10th of February 2015” when in fact it was 1.15 on the 10th of February 2015, the person teaching economics is going to correct the incorrect numbers. Is the misspelling of *exchange* and the month—*February*—just as egregious? For content teachers to ignore language errors I think is irresponsible.

When students apply for jobs and talk about exchange rates in broken English, saying *change* for *exchange*, they are not going to be hired

Not only in content classes

Hearing but not understanding also occurs in ESL classes. Here are 11 students' transcriptions of the following two sentences:

“We're going to brainstorm. *Brainstorm* means telling me words that are related to *horse*.”

The ESL teacher started each class with this explanation of *brainstorm* for 10 days, of course using a different word to brainstorm about each day. *Horse* was used on the first day only. On the 10th day, she asked the students to transcribe a recording of what she had said on the first day.

Here are the results:

Z. We going bringston, bring stone means. . .

Y. Where going. . .

X. I'm goin to. . .brainstorm mean. . .

W. Bringstorn. . .bringstorn mean. . .

V. I will briengston. . .briengston mean. . .

U. We brainston. . .Brainstorm's mean is

T. We going to bring stone means. . .

S. Were goin to start Blemstorm. Blemstorm means. . .

R. Be stome. . .bestone num. . .

Q. Where going to?

P. Im' going to Brinstorm.

In *W*, *S* and *P* the students started their rendition of *brainstorm* with an upper case letter. The teacher asked them why, and each one said it was because they thought it was the name of a place that the teacher was saying they were going to take a field trip to, a place that started with the letter B! Of course 'going to' can mean "what we are going to do next" or it can mean "travel." But after hearing "going to" ten times with no information about a planned field trip, we are reminded of the fact that students often think of the meaning of individual words rather than sentences.

When the teacher asked the students the meaning of the word *brainstorm*, none knew what it meant after 10 days! They said they had no idea what the word meant when

she wrote it for them. All they knew was that when she wrote a word on the board, they were supposed to say other words.

They did not know that they were supposed to be words related to the word on the board. This was revealed in a discussion of the meaning of the word *brainstorm* done in the students' first language and interpreted for the teacher.

What to do?

Most students taking ESL classes cannot understand English with only one exposure. Hearing (or reading) a song, a lecture, the news or anything else one time has no effect on language development. Learners have to hear recordings of what is said (or read a text) over and over and over. And the students should be in control of pauses and hearing or reading again. They have to write what they hear or read and compare it with complete printed versions. They have to write questions about each sentence, because unless they manipulate the sentences, they will not understand them nor learn to use the integrated words and structures correctly and they will not be able to paraphrase them either in speech or writing.

Unless they do these activities, and do other language activities with the rich material, they will not only not develop their language abilities but they will not learn any content, either.

Song lyrics etc. BUT MORE THAN ONCE!

I started this reading with a line from a Simon and Garfunkel lyric: *People hearing but not listening*. I did so both to remind you that it is dangerous to assume that others hear, much less understand, what we say and to remind you that the content of songs is just as powerful as the subject content of environmental studies, tourism, or business, to name just some.

But whether the content is more on the academic side or on the popular culture side, represented by song lyrics, movies or TV news (even with subtitles), ESL students cannot listen much less comprehend with one hearing (or viewing). Multiple experiences with the same language is necessary.

PS As an aside, a couple of years ago *The New Yorker* published an article in which Jonah Lehrer reviewed the research about the value of brainstorming. *Groupthink—The brainstorming myth*. The conclusion: it is a total waste of time—no effect on thinking skills or creativity! Companies and classes which did brainstorming and did not showed no differences in any measures. (January 30, 2013). The article is a reminder or wake-up call that jargon we use is not only often misunderstood by our students but also the activity represented by the jargon might not be effective.

People hearing but not listening

Analyzing transcripts and video clips of what we and our students do and say can reveal more than describing what we and they do using labels.

2,200 words

People hearing but not listening

1.3a. Here is an important rule—*A few usual ways of teaching grammar*

Grammar 1, 2 and 3—*Exploring different meanings of grammar*

The most common reaction I get when I meet people and say that I teach English is, “I didn’t do well in grammar in English class.” I can understand these people say perfectly and most have jobs in which they write, read, listen to and speak English all day long without any problem! But they feel they have a deficiency. I think two of the reasons for this are that they did not enjoy memorizing grammar rules and that they did not see the point of learning the difference between a gerund, an infinitive and a participle or that words like *is, are, do* and *will* are anomalous finites.

Grammar has a much richer and wider range of meanings than most people usually consider when they use the word, especially in a comment like, “I was never good at grammar”. These are some of the things people have written when I ask them to write down the first words that come to their mind when I say the word *grammar*: *the way a language works, attempts to describe how language works, how we should speak and write in formal situations, word order, syntax, morphology, illocutionary force, clear writing style, rules to memorize, difficult subject, structural words, and sentence patterns.*

When I use the word *grammar*, I refer to the way a language works in all areas: word order, function or structural words like *of, is, a, when*, various forms of content words such as *walk, walked, walks, walking*, taking turns in conversations, the conventions of writing stories and different types of essays or letters, intonation, stress and rhythm, punctuation and spelling conventions, to name just a few. Grammar in most textbooks refers to rules, such as how to use the past perfect, *could* versus *should*, verb and subject agreement, the use of *a* with count nouns like *pineapple* and no article with so called non-count or mass nouns like *rice*, the alternative pronunciations of the *-ed* in *waited (id), combed (d) and walked (t)*, etc. (Most people just pick these different pronunciations up unconsciously and are in fact surprised when someone points out the differences. In fact, until teachers take a course in pronunciation or phonetics, they are also often unaware of the fact that what we see and say are very different.)

Many believe that if students memorize rules for using the *past perfect*, they will be able to write, say or understand the past perfect correctly. This is in spite of the fact that to produce or understand any sentence in any tense requires us to access at least half a dozen rules. Our minds cannot work that quickly in conversations and even have great difficulty juggling and choosing from all these rules to write one good sentence. Writing, “I had just finished the conversation.” requires us to deal not only with *had finished* but *just*, word order, the meaning of *conversation* and *finished*, to name a few items.

Here is an important rule.

We store memorized rules in a different part of our mind from the ways we actually **use** our mother tongue and foreign languages. We might be able to access these rules to write or edit individual sentences. But if we are trying to write or speak or listen or read fluently, we have to think of meanings first. To consider the content of what we want to express or understand and to access memorized rules at the same time is very, very difficult, if not impossible.

Language fluency comes about in a different way, because for one thing it is a skill. We can improve skills only through practice that requires thinking and use, practice that requires thinking and use, and more practice that requires thinking and use. I say “practice that requires thinking” because repetition or copying sentences is what many consider practice. But such mechanical practice does not improve language ability. It is a waste of time.

Reading and memorizing language rules is like reading and memorizing rules about how to play the piano, rugby, or play a video game. They are no substitute for practicing and doing these activities. Language all too often is considered a subject to study rather than a series of skills to develop.

Some usual ways for teaching how language works

The following dialog has been written on the board in 3 different classrooms.

Two friends talking about exercising

1. **Akiko: I like to swim.**
2. **Do you like to swim?**

3. **Juan: No, I don't like to swim, but I like to play basketball.**
4. **Do you like to jog or to dance?**

5. **Akiko: I like to jog and to dance and to play basketball.**
6. **Do you like to jog or to dance?**

7. **Juan: I like to do judo and to play baseball.**
8. **and I like to jog and to do exercises, but I don't like to dance.**

4 Scenarios showing teachers using this dialog.

Scenario 1: Melissa asked her students to draw lines to form 3 columns in their notebooks and to write, “to swim” on top of one, “to do judo” on top of another and “to play baseball” at the top of the third.

She then asked them to write other activities that match the underlined phrases that are on the top of each column.

Here is an important rule.

Scenario 2: Colin pointed out that we use *play* only with sports we do with others like *basketball, baseball, volleyball* or *tennis*; that exercises such as *swimming, jogging, skiing, boxing* and *running* that we can do alone or with a partner, we don't use *play* with; and that *judo, tai chi* and *karate*, maybe because they are not English words, we precede with *do* or *practice*.

A student said she wanted to share some rules she found in a grammar book she had bought. Colin was delighted and asked her to the front of the class where she read these rules:

“Play is used when we talk about sports we use a ball with, or something similar to a ball like a shuttle cock we use when we play badminton. Sports like skiing jogging and race walking are verbs, so we do not use play with them. Sports that do not have an -ing form like kendo, karate and aerobics we have to use do or practice with. Bowling is an exception. Even though we use a bowling ball, we do not say ‘play bowling’ but ‘go bowling’, different from practice or do kendo and different from play badminton.”

Colin thanked her and said, “So we need only a few rules and one exception to be able to use these words correctly. I will write these on the board later so you can copy them and memorize them.”

Scenario 3: Joel asked his students to read the dialog silently. Then he asked them to write why they think we use *to* with some physical activities, *to play* with others and *to do* or *to practice* with others.

Scenario 4: Here is the type of table and explanation that commonly appears in textbooks. Akiko, after telling her students to open their textbooks and look at Table 2, read aloud the words in the title of the table, the words in the table and the reminder under the table.

Table 2 Like versus Like + s

Ali	likes + s to play	basketball.
Alice		
Some girls	like to play	volleyball.
Some boys		

Remember that we use *like* with plural and *likes*, the base form plus *s*, for singular. *I, Ali* and *Alice* are singular. *Girls* and *boys* are plural.

Here is an important rule.

She then asked individual students to read aloud the words in the table to form sentences: “Some girls like to play volleyball. Some girls like to play basketball. Ali likes to play volleyball.” etc.

The teachers did what they did because . . .

Task: write at least two beliefs you think are held by the teacher in each scenario. The scenarios are summarised below. When you are finished, you can read what other teachers thought in section V v.

Scenario 1 Asking students to write words that fit each form. Melissa

Scenario 2 Explaining why we use *to*, *to play* and *to do* or *to practice* with different sports and physical activities. Colin

Scenario 3 Asking students to write why they think we use *to*, *to play* and *to do* or *to practice* with different sports and physical activities. Joel

Scenario 4 Teacher reading sentences in a table aloud and then asking students to say sentences from the table.

V v



Others' reasons

Scenario 1 Melissa

“The teacher believes that students need to see and produce examples of patterns to say the patterns correctly. She probably based the lesson on hearing students say “I like to play swimming.” or “I like to play judo.” so she also believes in basing her lessons on student needs rather than a syllabus alone. I guess this teacher believes in the title of this reading as well.

Scenario 2 Colin

“Sounds like the teacher thinks grammar rules are important. Or, he might simply be following the teacher’s notes for the textbook he is using. He might be explaining because his students like to hear explanations, believing they can learn them more easily than how to say different sentences correctly. They might have to take tests in which they are asked for the type of explanations the teacher is giving, so he believes he is being responsible.

Scenario 3 Joel

“Perhaps this teacher believes in having learners suggest reasons rather than telling the students reasons and in tapping students’ thinking skills. The teacher probably also

Here is an important rule.

thinks that the more descriptions students hear about reasons for using different words with different sports and physical activities the more likely students are to remember how to use *to*, *to play* and *to do* or *to practice* correctly. Student centered activities seem important, as well.”

Scenario 4—Akiko

“Most textbooks I have used contain the type of table Akiko used. The idea seems to be that showing the patterns in a table highlights them and the reminders under the tables are meant to draw attention to features the students should notice.”

1,712 words

Here is an important rule.

1.3b. Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks yuor stutends to.
Tapping the richness of sketches/images//icons for generating language

An Alternative way of teaching grammar--Asking students to draw images of each word in target sentences.

We often ask students to draw sketches of words like *baseball, swim, dance* or *jog*. In dictionaries it is also common to see sketches of words like these. But I have never seen teachers ask students to draw sketches or icons for words like *I, to, do, and, but, or, don't*. These words are much more abstract than *baseball* and as a result much more difficult to learn to use correctly.

Here is a way for you to have your students integrate experiential words such as *baseball* and words with grammatical meaning such as *I, to, do*.

The teacher wrote this dialog on the left side of the board.

1. **Akiko:** I like to swim.
2. Do you like to swim?

3. **Juan:** No, I don't like to swim, but I like to play basketball.
4. Do you like to jog or to dance?

5. **Akiko:** I like to jog and to dance and to play basketball.
6. Do you like to jog or to dance?

7. **Juan:** I like to do judo and to play baseball.
8. and I like to jog and to do exercises, but I don't like
9. dance.

The teacher drew this visual on the right side of the board.

Columns to draw sketches in

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
? word	person	+/-	2 letter word	3 choices	exercises	a,b,o	?/.

(1.3b table 1)

The teacher wrote these directions under these 7 columns.

In your notebooks, students in rows 1, 3 and 5 draw one sketch for each word in lines 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the dialog. Students in rows 2, 4 and 6 draw one sketch for each word in lines 5, 6 and 7.

Draw sketches with as few lines as possible. This is not an art class, so draw your sketches without many details and as quickly as you can.”

When you finish your sketches, substitute your names for *Akiko* and *Juan* and substitute exercises you like and don’t like for those that Akiko and Juan mention in the dialog.

On subsequent days, he asked his students to do their drawing outside of class so they had more class time for translating the images into language.

Task: write some reactions to the teacher’s alternative way to teach grammar and then compare your reactions with those from other teachers below.



Other teachers’ reactions:

Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks your stutends to

- Ali: “The teacher has to be thinking that we get meaning more quickly from images than from letters. He might also believe that all students can draw quickly but not all can write quickly. He believes that experiential words like *love*, *play*, *basketball* and structural words like *to*, *do*, *and*, *but* are of equal value since she asks students to draw both kinds. This was new to me.”
- Maria: “I have never seen structural or function words represented in dictionaries or on flash cards. In fact, under pictures of words like *apple*, only *apple* is written, not *an apple*, though we cannot use *apple* without an article. So, he is doing something different from authors of dictionaries and producers of flash cards. He also believes in student-centered work. Novelty in teaching has to be another belief.”

An Alternative, continued

As the students drew the columns and the sketches in them, the teacher walked around the room. When a student drew a sketch of an exercise in the wrong column, he pointed to the column where it belonged and indicated that the student should redraw the sketch in that column and cross out the sketch drawn in the other column.

He had students copy sketches from their notebooks in the columns onto the board.

Here is the completed table that was on the board.



Nveer epxainl gammr relus or aks your stutends to

He then tapped a sketch in each column and pointed to a student to translate the sketches into speech. He asked others to write what each student said in their notebooks.

Here are transcriptions of some of the sentences and questions from the table that students generated and wrote in their notebooks.

Some transcribed sentences and questions generated from the table

- I love to play volleyball but I hate to sing.
- I like to dance, swim and jog, but I don't like to play baseball.
- Do you like to swim or do judo?
- I like to play baseball and ping-pong but I don't like to dance or sing.
- Ichiro loves to play baseball but he doesn't like to do judo, swim, dance, sing or jog.
- Michael Jackson used to love to sing and dance, but he did not love to do judo, play baseball, swim or jog.
- Michael Jordon loves to play basketball, sing and dance, but he hates to swim.
- Do you like to swim and jog?
- Does Maria like to play baseball or volleyball?
- Akiko and Junzo like to do aerobics and they like to dance.
- Matsui loves to play baseball. He used to like to dance but he doesn't like to dance now.
- Does Ali love to play baseball?

From mechanical to meaningful and personal

In the beginning, the teacher had his students stick close to the original names of people in the dialog. But he soon encouraged the students to relate the sentences to their own experiences. This is why we see *Michael Jackson*, *Michael Jordon*, *Maria* and *Matsui*. Saying the names of people students do not know is not as meaningful as saying their own names, the names of their friends, and the names of people they talk about who they see on TV, read about in magazines, or watch on YouTube.

The goal is not just to repeat sentences mindlessly without context or meaning or to memorize. Rather, it is to say sentences accurately and fluently that are true to the students' experiences so that they are processed and absorbed by the learners' minds. One reason for using symbols and sketches rather than words is because saying words we see requires no thinking while changing images into words requires some type of mental activity and picturing the meanings in our minds.

Possible objections to the alternative

Some teachers initially feel that asking high school, college or adult students to draw sketches is beneath their dignity. However, when teachers ask older students to write some negative and positive reasons for drawing sketches to represent all of the words in sentences, a few students point out that they not only feel comfortable using symbols in physics, math,

Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks your stutends to

chemistry, and physiology classes, but they believe that using these symbols enhances their understanding in both English and content classes. And not surprisingly, art students say they are thrilled to be able to connect images of reality with words that represent reality in a different way. They also soon realize that drawing symbols for *I*, *she*, *to* or *but*, is a different experience than drawing sketches for words like *tennis*, *judo* or *baseball*.

Content words convey experiences of the world and are nearly infinite in number. However, there are relatively few words that convey grammatical information. We can fit them all on one sheet of paper. The usual term for words like *to*, *she*, *but*, is *function words*. When I have asked students to name these words some have called them the *in between words* and others *mortar words* in contrast to words like *baseball*, *like*, *play*, which they call *brick words*.

Task: Write at least two beliefs you think the teacher using this alternative has.



Other teachers' reflections

- “The teacher must feel that the small number of examples in textbooks is totally inadequate for learners to master any pattern. And though there is one contrast in the table, in Column 4—*no word*, *play* and *do* (some added a sketch for *practice*)—he keeps the rest of the pattern the same. In textbooks there are usually loads of differences between the examples used to illustrate patterns.”
- “The teacher has confidence that when students project language from images they will avoid translation. He also thinks it is better to use student’ sketches than his because their sketches will be closer to their perceptions of the lexical meanings for words like *love*, *baseball*, *play* as well as grammatical meanings such as *to*, *do* *she*, *but*.”

Many teachers have their students substitute words in sentences, listen to grammatical explanations, write explanations and memorize grammar rules. But a table of columns with sketches in each column is a new experience for most.

In trying this alternative, as in making any changes, discussion of the pros and cons with the students very often not only leads to understanding of the new option but also to acceptance--from *Huh?* to *Aha!* Many realize that it is crucial to practice the short words like *but*, *I* or *to* with the longer words like *baseball*, *tennis* or *judo*. So in addition to writing your reflections, ask your students to write their reactions to the activity.

What level are the students at?

“I like to play baseball, but I don’t like to dance.” would be too easy for many advanced classes and a bit difficult for some beginning classes. Cutting the conjunction would decrease the difficulty for beginning classes. Changing the tense and diversifying the patterns would increase the difficulty for advanced students, as these examples illustrate:

Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks your stutends to

- I used to like to play tennis, but now I am a lot older and my legs are too weak to play.
- I would like to play tennis, but I am too busy with my work.
- I loved to play tennis when I was young, but I don't like to play now because I get too exhausted.

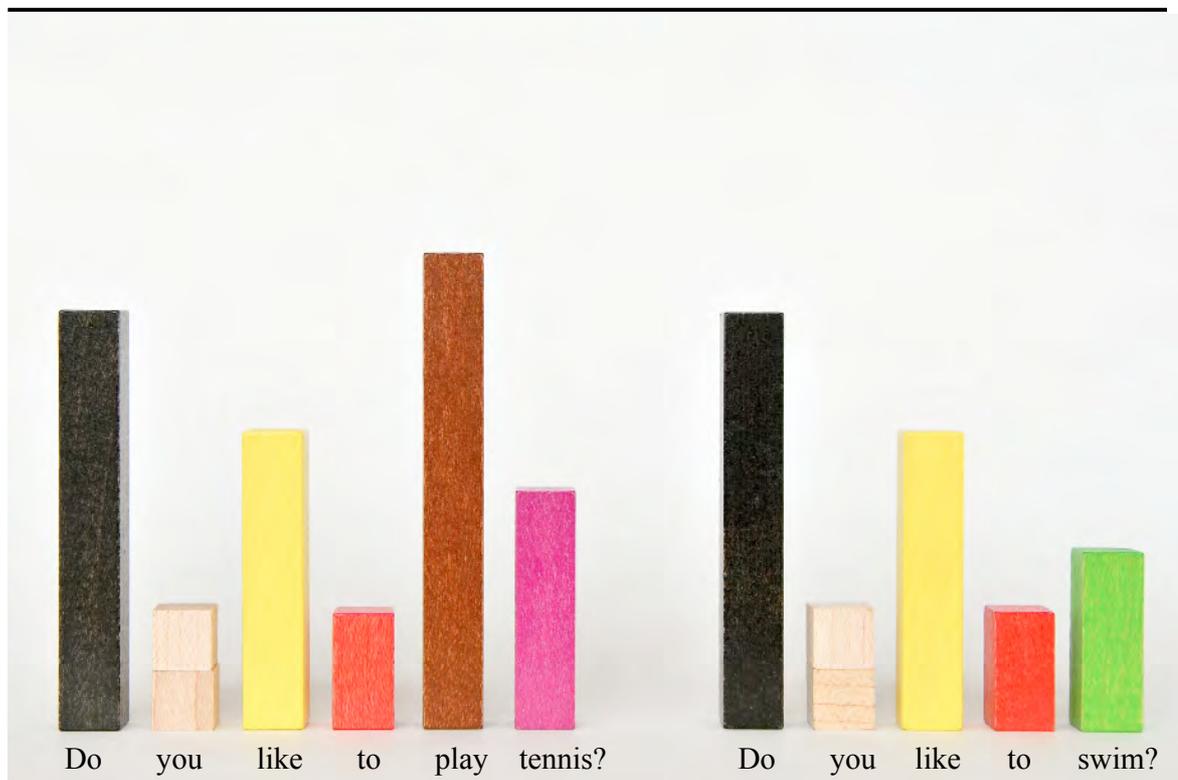
Of course, it would not clarify the patterns if these diverse structures were practiced together. One problem in most textbooks is that the range of tenses and structures introduced to teach contrasts such as *play baseball*, *do* or *practice judo* and *swim* are too diverse.

Further steps

I believe that when we change a picture into language or language into sketches our brains make more connections than if the mediums remain the same. Below, I show two alternatives to sketches. Some sentences learners created using plastic toys and other sentences were made using Cuisenaire rods.

Manipulating objects engages not only different parts of our minds than drawing and saying, writing, reading and listening to language but also illustrates how to translate a well established fact—combining movement with language use aids retention and mastery—into action.

Cuisenaire Rods



Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks your stutends to

Plastic Toys



- Are carrots more expensive than onions?
- Green beans are cheaper than green peppers.
- Garlic is healthier than red peppers.

PS. After hip surgery, one required rehabilitative exercise is lifting each leg until the lower leg is parallel with the floor. The first time most people do this activity they simply swing their legs up and down using the knee like a hinge. This way of doing the exercise has no effect whatsoever. One has to lift each leg gradually as one tightens the muscles in the upper leg, thigh and stomach and then lower each leg gradually while tightening the same muscles.

Swinging our legs rather than lifting and lowering them gradually while engaging our muscles is like repeating words or patterns. Changing sketches, Cuisenaire rods or plastic toys into language is doing the leg raises the right way. We have to engage our muscles to strengthen them and we have to engage our mind to learn.

1,934 Words, rounded Flesch Reading ease 65%, Grade Level 8.9

Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks your stutends to

1.3c. “I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before”*
Enhancing the potential of sketches/images/icons for generating language

The usual and the unusual

In 1.3b. Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks your sdutens to, I suggest having students draw sketches and symbols to represent each word in a series of sentences about exercise and insert them in slots in columns so they can see the word order of patterns such as “I like to ski, play baseball and do judo.” Here again is a table some students created for those sentences.

(Table 1)



*I borrowed the image and wording for the title of this booklet from a poem by an American poet, Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote poems that were easier to memorize than some by others because he used a lot of words that rhyme—like those that end with the same sound, such as tapping and rapping. But the difference between memorizing poems with rhyming words and saying sentences accurately and fluently is huge. I believe that mastering another language requires using the language rather than memorizing sentences or rules.

“I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before. . . .”

Here is the type of table and explanation that commonly appears in textbooks:

(Table 2)
Like versus Like + s

Some girls	like to play	volleyball.
Some boys		
Ali		basketball.
Alice	like + s to play	

Remember: we use *like* with plural and *likes*, the base form plus *-s*, for singular. *I, Ali* and *Alice* are singular. *Girls* and *boys* are plural.

Most teachers have used books with tables and explanations resembling those immediately above and have asked students to substitute words in sentences, listen to grammatical explanations, write explanations and memorize grammar rules. But few teachers have encountered a table of columns with sketches in it for all words in a pattern, like the first table above.

Here is a group of teachers in their first experience translating the sketches and symbols in the Table 1 into sentences. If you were to write a title for this photograph, what would it be?



For me, this photograph is a symbol of an important premise that underlies the usefulness of substitution tables: changing one medium (here, sketches are being changed into printed and spoken words) is more engaging than repeating spoken words, or copying sketches or printed words.

“I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before. . . “

I believe that our brains make more connections when we change a picture into language or language into sketches than if we respond in the same medium. I think copying words, repeating what another says or redrawing sketches that others drew does not engage the mind nearly as much as when we change the medium of what we perceive as we reproduce it.

What some other teachers thought

Some titles other teachers wrote for the photograph were *Engaged*, *A lazy teacher*, *Intrigued*, *Only one tie*, an “*open door classroom*” and “*Why not use an overhead projector or power point?*”

Similarities and Differences

Task: Write some similarities and differences between Table 1 and 2 that you and your students noticed.

Some differences and similarities between Table 1 and 2 that others noted:

- In Table 2, “‘Like versus Like + s’ contains only 4 examples in the first part of the sentence, 2 in the second and 2 in the third. A great many more sentences can be created from the first table. The second table seems to assume that we learn to speak and write by memorizing sentences and rules rather than by practicing using the language, which is what the first table seems to suggest.”
- “The most obvious of course is that the textbook-like table, as in all other textbooks I have seen in 30 years of teaching, has only words and a very few examples. There are no sketches. Dictionaries have sketches or photographs of content words, but never have I seen a sketch or symbol for a function word in a dictionary. The first table provides sketches or pieces from which to make numerous sentences, and no words or explanations.”
- “I have seen hundreds of variations of the second table, and I did not ever question the fact that *like* should be taught as the base form to be used with plural nouns and that *like* plus *-s* should be taught as the verb to use with singular nouns. But in the sketches, I saw that *like*, *likes*, *love*, *loves* were presented as separate words.

I never have taught that *too* is the base form to plus *o*. I have never taught that *to* is the base form and when we add *w* we have *two*, the number. *To*, *too*, and *two* are three separate words. It is the same for *women*, which is not *men* plus *wo* but a separate word. So why are *like* and *likes* not taught as two separate words? Or *walk* and *walk* + *-ed*, *walk* + *-s* rather than taught as the separate words *walk*, *walked*, *walks*?”

- “My students always used to select the correct word— *do* versus *play* in “I like to judo,” when the focus is on the word in the 4th position in the case of this pattern. But even after they fill in the blanks correctly, they still continue to say “I like play judo.” Or “I like do judo.” After they said and wrote sentences from the sketches for a few days, they said the patterns correctly. One reason might be because they produced 6 to 10 sentences per minute, which gave them more use of the patterns than any of the textbook exercises I had used before. Also, during the practice with the drawings, their attention was taken away from *do*, *play* and \emptyset . They focused on the meanings of combinations of words from each slot.”

“I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before. . . “

- “Both Table 1 and 2 show the patterns graphically. Both try to highlight the similarities and differences between the patterns.”
-

A bit of background about practice in the past and the practice requiring thinking in this reading

In the 1940’s both in the US and UK, educators advocated pattern practice and the use of substitution tables. Though only one of the purposes of these activities was to drill or develop habits, many came to view them as nothing more than mindless, mechanical repetition of words. Many teachers began to say, “We want our students to use language in a meaningful way; we want them to communicate.” So they stopped any kind of practice.

I believe this change has been unfortunate. Of course, repeating sentences mindlessly is not going to lead to mastery of word order, structural words or vocabulary. But by having students say patterns that express true information, by having students create and generate sentences and questions cued by sketches and symbols, by having students manipulate the word order and structural words by changing statements to questions and questions to statements, and by using a wide range of content words related to their experience, what they say is not mechanical or mindless. Rather, these variations of the use of pattern practice and substitution tables enable learners to use English not only naturally but also accurately, and to recall it unconsciously when needed for use later.

Asking students in pairs to talk about their weekend using a grammar rule the teacher had explained provides no examples of the many patterns they need to know and use. Those teachers who have recorded and listened to pair work with such general directions realize that their students are not speaking English correctly nor using the grammar rule that was taught. How could they? Asking students to speak in pairs using a grammar rule they had heard explained and were expected to memorize is not teaching but testing.

Those who have studied the mastery of vocabulary say that learners have to experience new words five to ten times in different contexts, while reading, listening, speaking and writing in order to learn them. If learners need this much practice and use of single words, how many more experiences do they need to integrate vocabulary with structural words and sentence patterns?

Those who developed substitution tables and pattern practice indicated that by combining the items in each column in a substitution table or during a pattern practice there were often from 150 to 3,000 possible combinations! Of course, asking students to say patterns cued by sketches or words in substitution tables or pattern practice 3,000 times in one lesson would be absurd. But over the course of a few weeks, unless learners can create and manipulate language in a controlled way, following selected patterns, they cannot master any of them.

One difference between pattern practice and the translation of sketches into language is that students have to think as they practice the patterns. Mindless repetition with substitutions is quite different from the alternatives I have described.

The lack of accuracy in the production of learners around the world and the claim that learners’ errors cannot be changed—become fossilized—I do not accept. Learners can fossilize the correct

“I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before. . . “

forms as well as the incorrect forms. One of the reasons they fossilize the incorrect forms is that they are not taught the correct forms. They are asked to use forms without having had any opportunities to learn them.

Just as when we first play a new tune on an instrument we play one note at a time, so when teachers first ask students to translate the symbols into spoken or written words, they need to point to one symbol at a time. Later, the musicians can play whole bars and pieces, and learners can say whole phrases and thoughts, with their own interpretations and feelings. Reading the many different ways Mari used the sketches shows not only how you can ensure students create hundreds of sentences and questions that relate to their experiences. They also show how they can express them naturally rather than mechanically and word by word.

Asking students to produce sentences or questions after they have heard their teacher explain a rule is testing, not teaching. Asking students to say or write sentences cued by sketches or objects teaches and tests at the same time because if a word like *play* is added before *swim* or *she* is followed by *like* rather than *likes*, the teacher and student(s) can immediately practice the correct form in a way that requires thinking. Combining teaching and testing I believe is more powerful than just testing or than teaching and then testing. Additionally, it reminds students of what they know and can produce rather than what they do not know and cannot produce.

1,748 words, rounded 70 % Flesch Reading Ease Grade Level 7.3

“I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before. . . “

1.3d. I heard a tapping ever louder than before revisited *Matching beliefs about learning and activities*

Moving beyond the humdrum to *Huh? Oh. Aha!*

While saying and writing patterns represented by sketches that represent ways we use language is initially surprising, even tapping sketches to signal that students should write or say new combinations of structural words quickly becomes routine. And routine leads to boredom for both teachers and students.

Another important premise of mine is that learners are more attentive when they do novel, surprising tasks rather than normal ones. Here are some ways a teacher added variety to this activity.

Task: Read the various ways Mari had her students change sketches into language. Write an exclamation mark next to those that you think remind students of what they know and a question mark next to those that show students what they do not know.

Day 1 Mari on Monday in her 9:00 AM class—Tapping one sketch at a time

Mari: “Some students are late because they have been practicing for the school festival. So let’s do a few activities before we start the regular lesson.

Look at the sketches we drew on the board last week.

As I tap each sketch with my pointer, write down a word that matches the sketch.”

(Mari taps the sketch of an eye in Column 1 and waits for the students to write the word the sketch represents. Then she taps one heart in Column 2 and again waits for all the students to write a word that fits the sketch. She continues to tap each additional sketch in the same way. the students take 10 to 30 seconds to write each word.)

Elapsed time: 3 minutes

Day 2 Mari on Monday at 16:00 in the teachers’ room looking at a video clip from her 9:00 class—Some *Aha!* moments

Mari: “I am amazed how slowly my students wrote each word. I can write each word in 3 seconds. Tomorrow, I have to tell them to write faster.

“I heard a tapping every louder than before” revisited

I will also tap a word in the first 3 columns and ask them to write the first 3 words together rather than one at a time. 'I love to . . .' makes more sense than 'I . . . love . . . to'.

Elapsed time: 10 minutes

Day 3 Mari on Wednesday at 9:00 in her first period class--Tapping a few sketches at a time

Mari: "I have finished our regular lesson a few minutes early. So, let's do some practice with your sketches. Open your notebooks and put your pens on your notebooks."

(Points to the top sketch in column 1, one heart in column 2 and the arrow in column 3. Waits 15 seconds.)

"Write words for the 3 sketches I pointed to."

Students: (Some write *Akiko*, some *she* and others *I* in column 1; some write *love*, some *loves*, some *likes* and some *like* in column 2; almost all write *to* in column 3.)

Mari: "Put your pens on your notebook. Look at your words and compare them with what I say: 'Akiko likes to' or 'she likes to.' Change your words to match what I said."

Students: (Some start to erase words but Mari takes their erasers and puts them in their pencil cases. She writes *Akiko likes to* and *She likes to* on the board and points to the words. Students edit what they had written.)

Mari: "Thank you."

(Points to the sketch of a hand in column 4 and the bat and ball in column 5. Waits 10 seconds.)

"Write words for the sketches I just pointed to."

Students: (Most students write, some look at what fellow students are doing and try to copy what they write.)

Mari: (Writes *play* with a 4 over it to indicate column 4 and *baseball* on the board with a 5 over it to indicate which column each word fits in.)

Students: (Write their words.)

Mari: (Writes the words for the sketches she pointed to.)

"I heard a tapping every louder than before" revisited

Students: (Compare Mari’s sentences with theirs and edit their sentences.)

Elapsed time: 7 minutes

Day 4 Mari on Thursday in her 9:00 AM class—Tapping one sketch in each column

Mari: “I want to practice the grammar point your sketches show. Open your notebooks and put your pens on them, as usual.

(With no pauses between, Mari points to the sketch of an eye in column 1, one heart with an X over it in column 2, the arrow in 3, the piece of paper and pencil in 4, the top sketch in column 5. So she taps 5 sketches in 5 seconds. She then taps her desk with the pointer a dozen times.)

“Write.”

Students: (Some write *I like to swim*. Some write *I to*, some *like to*, others *like to swim*.)

Mari: “Put your pens down. ‘I like to swim. I like to swim. I like to swim.’ Correct your sentences.”

Mari: (Repeats the same steps pointing to a sketch in each column but writes the sentences on the board rather than saying them so students can edit by reading what she wrote rather than listening to her sentences. Some students edit their sentences in a few seconds; others take 20 to 30 seconds.)

Elapsed time: 10 minutes

Day 5 Mari on Friday at 9:00 in her first period class—Tapping only half the sketches

Mari: “I want you to write more sentences to practice the grammar point. But today I will not point to one sketch in each column. I will point to just 4 or 5 in total. Notebooks open and pens down, as usual.”

(Points to *MJ* in column 1, the sketch for *basketball* in column 5, the symbol for *but* in 6 and the sketch of *swim* in 5. She then taps the board very lightly a dozen times, not pointing to any sketches.)

“Write!”

“I heard a tapping every louder than before” revisited

Students: (Some look at other students, some scratch their heads, most write *Michael Jordan, basketball, but, swim*. A few write *Michael Jordan likes to play basketball but he doesn't like to swim*.)

Mari: “Look at my lips.” (Mouths ‘*Michael Jordan likes to play basketball but he doesn't like to swim.*’)

“Write.”

Students: (Most write but some put their heads on their desks.)

Mari: (Walks up and down each row and when she sees a word missing, goes to the board and points to a sketch that represents the missing word. She says nothing. She just points to the sketches that show the words students did not write.)

Elapsed time: 6 minutes

Day 6 Mari on her second Monday first period class at 9:00—Spoken words changed to written words

Mari: “I will say a few words and you write complete sentences. *Michael Jackson, dance, and, sing, but judo*. La, la.”

“Write!”

(As students write, she writes these letters on the board:

M J l t d a s b h d n l t d j.)

Students: (Most students look at the initial letters of the 15 words she expected them to write, which she had cued with the 7 words she had said and write words they had left out. Then, some students write, “Michael Jackson liked to dance and sing but he did not like to do judo.” Others write “Michael Jackson like dance and sing but not judo.” A few look out the window. A few others look at the notebooks of students in the row next to them and copy what fellow students have written.)

(When she noticed that some wrote *likes* rather than *liked* she wrote **Michael Jackson died; he is dead.** on the board.)

Elapsed time: 7 minutes

Day 7 Mari on her third Monday first period class at 9:00—Students take over

Mari: (Gives her pointer to a student and tells her the following instructions)

“I heard a tapping every louder than before” revisited

“Point to sketches in each column without pausing and then point to a student and say ‘Say the words I pointed to.’”

(Mari then gives the following instruction to the whole class)

“Other students, write what you hear.”

Student 1: (Points to sketches in column 1 to 5. Then points to a student to say the words represented by the sketches.)

(After the student has said the words) “Write what you heard.”

Mari: (Gestures to first student to give the pointer to another student.)

Student 2: (Taps a sketch in column 1, 3, 5, 6 and a different sketch in column 5.)

Mari and students: (Write variations of “Akiko likes to play baseball but she doesn’t like to swim.”)

Mari: (Gestures to students who wrote correct sentences to write them on the board. Gestures to other students to look at the board and edit what they wrote.)

Elapsed time: 8 minutes

Day 8 Mari on the next Wednesday in her 9:00 AM class—Students’ opinions

Mari: On the board, she writes

*Please write down 1st, why I asked you to say words for each sketch.

*Second, write down why I did not explain the grammar point.

*Then, write down what you liked and did not like about learning grammar by changing sketches into written and spoken words and using just a few sketches or spoken words rather than by my explaining rules. You can write your comments in English or your first language.

*Finally, write down what you learned from other students as you did the activities.

Students: (Fifteen students spin their pens in their hands and write nothing; ten students write one sentence in their first language; 4 students write 2 to 5 sentences in their first language; 5 students write words such as *confusing, excite, fun, think, remember, like draw*. Another 5 write comments such as “I love to draw but before these classes I did not like to speak; now I feel good about drawing and speaking,” and “I cannot draw well but it is not important. The main point is to think of the meaning rather than rules.”)

“I heard a tapping every louder than before” revisited

Mari: (Asks students to read each others' comments silently.)

Students: (Read each others' comments and say "I agree; I disagree; I did not think of that; now I see the point; too confusing; I remember how to say *play baseball, do judo, swim*. Learning from each other is important.")

Elapsed time: 10 minutes

Some assumptions about learning

Task: What assumptions about learning do you think these alternatives are based on? Write two assumptions for each of the alternatives Mari used during the 8 days of her classes.

Here are what others thought.

1. We need to say, write, listen to and read the same sentence patterns with different meanings and relate them to our personal experience over and over. Just saying or writing or listening to or reading a sentence a few times will not result in our being able to use it later. Mari's students said and wrote 5 to 10 variations of the pattern per minute so In 5 minutes they experienced variations of the pattern 25 to 50 times each day for half a dozen days: 150 to 300 uses!

2. Almost all books on language learning teach vocabulary and grammar separately. Knowing the meaning of *baseball* or *karate* or *dance* and *swim* is easy since most of us have done these activities or seen others do them. But the fact that we *play baseball, do* or *practice judo* and *dance* or *swim* is what learners have to practice and master. What is important is how to use these content words—of which there are thousands. Asking students to draw sketches for both lexical items—*baseball, swim, dance*—and structural or function words *to, do, I, she*—reminds learners that we get meaning from the integration of grammar and vocabulary.

4. Reading aloud, repeating after the teacher or an audio recording, and answering oral questions immediately are common classroom activities. They require no brainpower, no engagement of learners' minds.

One of the reasons we point quickly and then give students a lot of time before they speak or write is we need to provide time for students to think about what they are going to say before they speak.

But once they have had a chance to rehearse, they should write quickly and speak at a normal speed and in phrases, rather than a word at a time. In this way, they can focus on the meaning and not think of the grammar point or the significance of each word as a separate item.

"I heard a tapping every louder than before" revisited

5. A frequent comment after students say and write 20 to 50 questions and sentences that the teacher or other students invite students to create is, “I did not know how much English I knew?” Controlling the options we want students to practice reminds them of how much they know.

Another Task

Task: Here are short descriptions of Mari’s alternatives. Write a *u* for *unusual* for those you think are not common. Write a *n* for *new* next to those that were new to you.

Day 1 Mari on Monday in her 9:00 AM class—Tapping one sketch at a time

Day 2 Mari on Monday at 16:00 in the teachers’ room looking at a video clip from her 9:00 class—Some *Aha!* moments

Day 3 Mari on Wednesday at 9:00 in her first period class--Tapping a few sketches at a time

Day 4 Mari on Thursday in her 9:00 AM class—Tapping one sketch in each column

Day 5 Mari on Friday at 9:00 in her first period class—Tapping only half the sketches

Day 6 Mari on her second Monday first period class at 9:00—Spoken words changed to written words

Day 7 Mari on her third Monday first period class at 9:00—Students take over

Day 8 Mari on the next Wednesday in her 9:00 AM class—Students’ opinions

2,324 words, rounded 70 % Flesch Reading Ease Grade Level 7.3

“I heard a tapping every louder than before” revisited

1.3e. It's too damn tight Using language in the classroom in ways we use it outside the classroom

[This chapter is based on an article of the same name which originally appeared TESOL Quarterly Vol. 14, No. 2, June 1980]

More than speech

On a job, repairing cars, preparing meals, or ordering materials, a great many mediums besides speech are present: squeaking wheels or ringing telephones, diagrams of wiring systems or organizational charts, the smells of exhaust and oil, pans and knives, and T-squares, to name a few. However, in most classrooms, only speech and writing are present rather than this wide range of mediums. Even when objects and other mediums are present in a classroom, the way we use them is usually different from the way we use them outside of the classroom, especially in the workplace.

Communications about Objects in Language Classrooms: teachers describing the language they would use to talk about various objects

About Gloves

Alice: I'd say they protect you from blisters. I'd have students tell me what they use them for. I'd say what they were made of and how much they cost. Also, the color and texture. You could teach an idiom such as "They go together like a hand in a glove," too.

About a Screw-Driver

Allen: I'd ask what they can do with it. What is its shape? What jobs can it do? I'd show them how to use it. I'd ask how they could use a screwdriver in different situations. "This is used to remove a screw" and "I am turning it" would be good patterns.

About a Pair of Pliers

Mary: They are made of metal. They can be used to tighten and loosen nuts or pull nails out. They have teeth on them to help grip better. The handles have plastic covers on them.

About a Hammer

Dick: You could teach the song "If I had a hammer." The handle is wood and the head is metal. You could teach *smooth* too and *grain in the wood* and *shiny* and *claw*. You could teach *balanced*, too—the *tool is balanced*.

It's too damn tight

If you are like most language teachers, your comments about gloves and tool are similar to those just presented. These teachers and you, if you are a typical language teacher, would use such objects to illustrate vocabulary items or grammatical patterns and to teach description. You would do what you have usually been trained and paid to do—teach language itself as an object of instruction for its own sake.

But, what types of things would you say outside of a language classroom if you were using gloves, a screwdriver, pliers or a hammer? Forget for a moment about being a language teacher! Pretend to be a reporter or a spy trying to record conversations that others are making as they are actually using gloves and tools. Listen, record and then write down what was said as the objects were used for the functions for which they were designed.

Communications about Objects Outside of Language Classrooms

About Gloves

Bob: Where're my gloves? Who the hell took 'em. I need 'em right away.

About a Screwdriver

Sam: Loosen it for Christ's sake. You can't let it down till it's looser.

Joe: I can't. It's too damn tight.

About a Pair of Pliers

Rick: Twist the wires tighter. No—not so fucking fast. You'll break them!

Joel: Damn! (After the wires break)

Rick: Why the hell don't you listen? I told you to slow down. You did it too fucking fast!

About a Hammer

John: Ow! Damn, damn, damn. (After hitting his finger with the hammer)

Compare your own transcriptions with these. These communications, as well as the ones you collected, are probably not as descriptive as the ones in the ESOL classrooms were.

Few details about the objects themselves are given in these incidents for the simple reason that the objects are present and therefore do not need to be described. In fact, the objects are rarely even named but referred to by words like *it*, *them*, and *one*. When the names of the objects are used it is mainly when they are not there and

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someone needs them: “Where’re my gloves? Quick, gimme my gloves!” You also might have noticed that commands are frequent, blending occurs—“took ‘em”—and expletives are used, both in addressing objects and people. Few of the words have meaning without the objects and actions that accompany them.

So what?

The fact that we use language differently inside and outside of the classroom is not news. What I hope is news is my suggestion that you and your students record what people say as they use objects outside of the classroom and transcribe the recordings. Using recordings to transcribe, read and practice what people say is different from teaching grammar and vocabulary and memorizing contrived dialogs in textbooks.

Most students have seen or used gloves, screwdrivers, hammers and pliers. So we do not need to teach them that they are made of metal or what they are used for. They know these words but not how they are used in natural ways as people use them.

Learning language for its own sake or learning language and skills together

One way to help students get their driver’s license is to teach them the vocabulary related to driving. Pointing to a picture of the inside of a car the teacher says, “ Repeat after me: This is a signal indicator. This is a steering wheel.” Later, the teacher says, “Point to the brake pedal. Point to the accelerator pedal. Point to the speedometer.”

Another way to help students get their driver’s license is to have them listen to driving instructions and use gestures related to the instructions as they listen. Here is a short excerpt of a real driving lesson.

Driving instructions in the front seat of a car

1. **Driver Trainer:** Put your indicator on and turn right.
2. (Indicator is on the steering column)
3. (Car is in the right hand lane)
4. **Driver Trainee:** (puts the indicator on)
5. (Turns the steering wheel to the right)
6. **Driver Trainer:** That was good.
7. **Driver Trainee:** (an intersection referred to by “here”)
8. I go left here?
9. (Starts to move into left lane)
10. **Driver Trainer:** Yeah.
11. **Driver Trainee:** (turns on left hand turn signal)
12. (Turns the steering wheel to the left)
13. **Driver Trainer:** Good.

As you see, the Driver Trainee is able to combine language and experience when a recording of an actual driving lesson is played. If a printed copy of the dialog is shown as the recording is played, learners can see as well as hear the language related to the actions they are pretending to do. While actually being in a car and turning a steering wheel and turning on the signal indicator might be more effective, making gestures that match the language is more powerful than simply learning words like *steering wheel, brake pedal, etc.*, in isolation for their own sake.

Another example of integrating language and experience

Asking students what they want to learn how to do is more likely to produce dialogs that contain language they are keen to master than our selection of topics. In some of my classes, many students have asked me to teach the language they need so they can talk about makeup. Here are the first dozen or so lines from a 100 line dialog between a beautician and a client. Doing a dozen lines one day in class, another dozen another day and then reviewing the first dozen is more effective than having students read and listen to 100 lines. The amount of new information is overwhelming in 100 lines.

A mini makeup in a beauty parlor

1. Janice: What are we going to do tonight?

2. Dolores: Well, we'll do a mini makeup tonight.
We've already done the eyes.
Sit over here, will you?
(Touches the chair.)

3. Janice: (Goes to the chair and sits down.)
What'll I have to do?

4. Dolores: (Hands Janice the cleansing cream.)
Well, here, take off that old makeup.
We'll start from scratch.

5. Janice: (Laughs) OK.
(Starts to apply cleansing cream to her face.)
Mmm. . . I like the feel of this cleansing cream.

6. Dolores: Well, just put it all over your face, eyes, throat—go ahead—now here, take some Kleenex and wipe it off.

7. Janice: (Takes pieces of Kleenex and wipes off the cleansing cream.)

8. Dolores: Mmm. . . good.
Now, here I'll saturate this cotton pad with skin freshener,

It's too damn tight

and then you'll apply it to your face.

Folding paper

My students like to make airplanes out of notebook paper, write messages on them and send them to a friend in class while the teacher is not looking. The variety of paper airplanes is great. Rather than discouraging this activity, we can ask students to demonstrate how they make their paper airplanes and record the language they use along with their demonstration. We can then ask students to transcribe the spoken directions. Since they have experienced the folding of the paper as they listen to the directions and see the demonstration, they are better able to connect meanings of words with actions.

In many classes there is at least one person keen on origami which is a more sophisticated form of making paper airplanes since in origami flowers and people with different roles such as a priest, a sumo, a child are created. So this is another option for connecting language and meaning and at the same time creating objects that students can share with their family.

Recording the directions and having students transcribe them are crucial steps since students can fold the paper to form flowers or airplanes by simply imitating the person demonstrating each fold. To make it more likely that students will listen to the directions, you can have the student demonstrating how to make a paper airplane stand in back of the class.

In the case of the driving lesson, it is likely not possible to bring a car into your classroom so students have to imagine the steering wheel they are turning. But in the case of makeup, students use most of the objects, so they can bring them to class and actually apply the creams, etc., to their faces as they listen to Dolores and Janice. Ditto and even easier in the case of making paper airplanes and flowers.

Checking meanings

Note that just because students are experiencing what they are being asked to do does not guarantee they know the meanings of what the Driver Trainer or Dolores are saying. *Saturate* is a very infrequent word, for example. So as students read the printed versions of the dialogs, encourage them to check the meanings of unfamiliar words in their bilingual dictionaries. Discourage them from writing the equivalent in their first language, though, because once they know the meanings, they can associate the meanings with the actions they are doing. If they write the word equivalents in their first language, they will fail to match the new words with their experiences. They will always look at the word in their first language and skip over the new word. They will go back to learning language for its own sake rather than learning language as it is used, as we learn other skills.

It's too damn tight

A critical difference between teaching language for its own sake and using language as we do an activity related to the language is that vocabulary and grammar have to be integrated. We are learning language as it is used, not as people try to describe and define individual bits of language.

“Cause something to become thoroughly soaked with liquid so that no more can be absorbed” is one definition of *saturate*. The 16 words of the definition contain 10 words with no experiential meaning: *something, to, become, with, so, that, no, more, can be*. Feeling the skin freshener drop from the Kleenex is more likely to enable people to understand *saturate* than this definition. Additionally, *saturate* is within a sentence: “Now, here I’ll saturate this cotton pad with skin freshener”

Different Interests

As you know, no matter what textbook you use, some students will be interested in some topics and some bored out of their minds by the same topics. I know that “Cover the textbook” is a mantra that all teachers are forced to follow.

But once a week for part of a period, if you have students read, listen to, and act out dialogs they have recorded that teach skills they are keen to learn, they can begin to see the value of learning language and other skills together. Those keen to develop their English can then spend time outside of class practicing and learning the language they are interested in. In this way you can still “cover the text” but also show students how they can learn on their own.

These days they do not even have to find lessons on their own and record them. They can type in a skill they are keen to learn and see a video of the skill being learned on *YouTube*. In some cases, transcriptions or subtitles will be available with the video clip so they can listen and read the exchanges as well as see the actions.

More than questions and answers

In most classrooms and textbooks the teacher or textbook author asks questions and students answer them—usually in one word responses. This almost universal pattern of classroom interaction can be supplemented by having students learn skills they want to learn and the language associated with the skill by reading, listening to, transcribing and saying natural language. As a result, students will be reminded that it is only in classrooms that we read to answer questions others ask. Outside of the classroom, we read to learn how to cook, do origami, experience feelings others have had, vicariously encounter people and places we cannot visit, relish lyrics from songs and dialogs from plays and films that transport us to other worlds and times in history.

It’s too damn tight

2,359 words

It's too damn tight

1.3f. AT & T Integrating language and actions, tasting and touching

Actions, Tasting & Touching

AT & T is a company with 240,000 employees that has been connecting people via phones for decades. I am using the name of the company because first, it has been a symbol of innovation—trying new things, one of the themes of these readings—for decades. Second, as you can see, I am using the acronym as a mnemonic device to highlight the importance of integrating language with actions, tasting and touching.

Outside of the classroom we say, “Watch your step” as a person we are with starts to walk down unfamiliar stairs or “Please hold my bag.” as we get off a bus. When we share a meal we say, “Wow, this is a little spicy but delicious” or “I love sweet coffee.” And if a friend has a new jacket we might say, “It not only looks great but the texture of the cloth is so fine.” We integrate the experiences we are having with language.

Actions related to the natural language of directions

In class every day, we say things like “Maria, please erase the board; Aki, please turn off the lights; Okon, would you collect the homework for me please? Those in row 1, open the windows please.” These incidental comments are a rich source of language. In many classes, though, in spite of the fact that the students do what they are asked to do, they are not able to transcribe these comments correctly.

One teacher I was working with recently had his students write down the instruction “Please write these in your notebook,” which he had been saying to the class every day for some time. Here are three renditions:

Please writing on your noot book.
Pris yours in notebook.
Please wirrite in on your note book.
Please write name on sentence.

To ensure that students learn the incidental language you use, have them transcribe a recording of your comments. They are examples of language that matches actions, so they can be quite easily understood but mastered only if transcribed and practiced.

We use many tenses and patterns that we are not aware of, so recording and transcribing our requests for students to do things is useful to us also. “Who collected the homework yesterday? Maria, did you collect the homework yesterday? Don’t forget, the homework is due tomorrow. I’ll collect the homework after you’re done dis-

cussing it.” The variety of natural language we use that is related to actions is extraordinary, so it is crucial to enable students to learn it.

Actions related to contrived language

There are other actions we can connect to contrived language as well as the natural language of classroom directions. “Close your left eye. Raise your left hand. Tap your left foot. Touch your left knee with your right hand.” Question forms introduce other patterns. “Which eye did I ask you to close? Which hand did I ask you to raise? Which foot did I ask you to tap? Which knee did I ask you to touch with your right hand?”

Strange as these directions sound, they are a way to connect the meaning of the language we are using with actions. Many teachers play the game Simon Says. Well these contrived directions are a variation of Simon Says.

As with natural directions, though, it is important to record and have the students transcribe the recording, with them in charge of the play, pause, and rewind controls. Students can even record instructions with their cellphones and use those recordings to make transcripts. I realise that some schools do not allow the use of cellphones in class and might not even have the necessary equipment to record classes. A low tech solution that teachers have been using for years is to simply draw a picture of a play, fast forward, rewind, and stop button on the board. The teacher repeatedly gives the same set of instructions while students take turns controlling the teacher’s speech through the ‘buttons’ on the board.

Why relate actions and language?

When children learn their native languages, they are not told grammar rules or definitions of words. They hear language associated with actions others ask them to do or actions they see others do. “I’m going to feed you now. Let me put your hat on. Here you go, into the stroller. Here’s your snack.”

Our minds store actions, spoken language, images and printed language in different places. The more different places we can store actions, images, spoken and written language with the same meanings, the more likely we can make connections between these different items and retrieve them later when needed.

Tasting

Tastes are stored in still other parts of our mind, so if we can connect them with language, we will have still other ways to develop our language.

If a person says, “Wow, this coffee is very sweet. I don’t like sweet coffee,” the sensory experience and the produced language are connected. Obviously, we cannot bring in all types of food and drink into our classes even once in a while much less every day. But many students have snacks in their backpacks. Some bring lunch. Many buy bottled drinks during the break and have them in their backpacks. These could be used in your lessons occasionally.

“Let’s take a break. Take out some food you want to eat or drink while we take a break.” After your students have begun, you can write on the board or say, “Raise your hand if the food you are eating is sweet.” When the students raise their hands, you can ask individuals what they are eating. “I am eating a chocolate doughnut. I like sweet food.”

“Please write in your notebooks, “Sara is eating a chocolate doughnut. She likes sweet food.” After you correct what the students wrote as you walk around the class you can ask, “Who likes sweet food?” and they can write, “Sara does.” And if they also like sweet food, they can write, “I do.”

Sweet and sour, bitter and salty, bland—the range of words they can associate with the wide range of food and drinks they have in their backpacks is quite broad. You can of course ask them to check the word they want to use in their first language in a bilingual dictionary and then say the word that applies to a taste they like or dislike to the food or drink they have with them.

It might seem strange for me to suggest that they refer to what they like and dislike since most of us eat and drink only what we like. But maybe their parents insist they eat or drink things that are good for them rather than pleasurable to their taste. And what some like others in the class will dislike, so you can have them learn patterns related to both positive and negative tastes.

Touching to feel textures

“Is this rough or smooth?” asks a teacher as she has students move their fingers over a piece of sand paper. “Is this soft?” asks another teacher as he passes a piece of silk around the class.

Most of us remember burning a finger when we touched something that was hotter than we had imagined. And we remember the words “It was so hot” partly because we connect our experience with the language.

Of course, I am not suggesting you teach hot by burning your students’ fingers. But asking students to close their eyes and move their fingers over pieces of smooth and rough wood, rough wool and smooth silk, plastic and glass bottles, quilted cloth and flat cloth, Velcro which some find itches them and a plastic bag which does not itch

them, a newspaper which is coarse in contrast to a magazine which is smooth and teaching them words and phrases at the same time can help them remember the language because it is associated with the experiences.

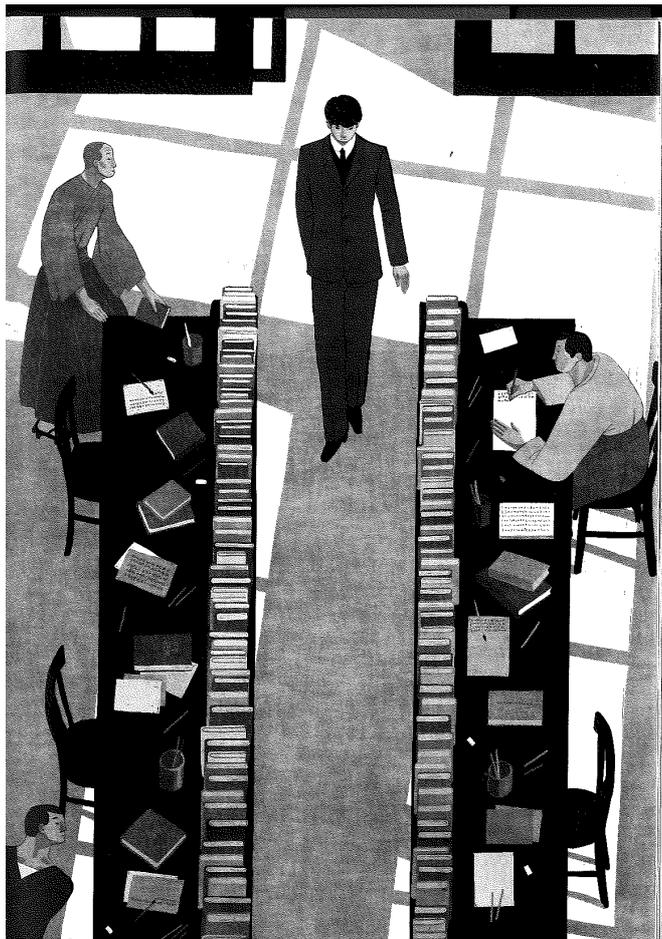
Helen Keller who was born deaf and blind first learned the word for water as her teacher, Anne Sullivan, mouthed the word as Helen felt water on her hands and then felt her teacher's lips as she mouthed the word. This anecdote, I think, is a powerful reminder of the importance of connecting not only our sense of touch with language but also our sense of taste and actions.

Another type of touching

Almost all published materials—textbooks, graded readers, newspapers, and magazines—contain both print and pictures. These pictures illustrate meanings much richer than visual dictionaries. But for some reason, they are rarely if ever used to teach language.

One way to use the images in printed materials we use is to have students point to details in the pictures that illustrate meanings.

Below is a page from a graded reader based on Botchan. In the original, the illustration is in color. But even in black and white, there are many meanings we can exploit by asking students to point to various details and by asking questions about it.



Here are a few examples of ways we can ask students to point to images.

Point to the man with a suite and tie.

Point to the empty chair on the lower right of the picture.

Point to the man in the upper left of the picture.

Point to the man on the upper right hand side sitting at the desk.

And, here are some questions we can ask about the illustration.

How many people are standing?

How many people are sitting?

How many chairs are empty?

How many people are wearing a suit?

How many people are wearing a tie?

Matching language with visual images frees us from defining words and enables us to focus on integrating vocabulary and grammar—to focus on language meanings. When we ask students to point to the person standing or ask how many people are standing, we are bringing attention to the meaning, the integration of vocabulary and grammar.

If a student says, “Four people are standing,” we know the student has not understood the relationship between what we said and the image. So, we can ourselves point to the one person standing and then repeat the question, “How many people are standing?” or say, “No, only one person is standing.”

Picture dictionaries illustrate lexical items such as chair, suit, tie, etc. very clearly. But by asking students to point to various items in illustrations, you focus their attention on both experiential, content words and words with only grammatical meaning, such as *how many*, *are*, *a*, etc., thus integrating vocabulary and grammar and, as a result, teaching language usage.

PS I have two comments to make about actions, tasting, touching to feel, and another type of touching, pointing. First, I want to remind you that many of the questions most teachers ask and textbooks request students to answer represent only one way to enable students to use English. Second, I want to remind you that when our students perform the tasks we ask them to, we should be interested in not only the content or meaning of their response—‘Only one person is standing’—but also the language patterns they use.

1,870 words

1.3g. Lessons from dogs *Mingling scents and sounds with language*

Dogs' powers of smelling and communicating

We have all seen dogs at airports smelling suitcases to detect guns or explosives or agricultural products that might spread diseases if brought into a country. And we have all heard dogs bark, whine, growl, yap, etc., to communicate fear, friendliness, pain, or a request to play, to cite a few messages dogs communicate without language to both humans and other animals.

Humans' senses of smell and hearing are also acute. Non-smokers can detect cigarette smoke many meters away. Just as hearing a dog make sounds can arouse fear or delight, hearing the slight ticking of a clock can keep many people from falling asleep.

Mingling smells and language

Everyone remembers how terrible the smell of sulfur is from rotten eggs and chemistry experiments. Most people also remember the scent from lavender. For some garlic provides a pleasant scent and for others a foul one.

The strong associations we all have to various distinctive smells provide us with a way not only to teach language related to scents but also to help students remember the language.

Here is one teacher mingling how she thinks a flower smells with language. "I cut these lilies this morning in my garden. I think the scent is extremely sweet. Ali, please smell them. Do you think the scent is extremely sweet?"

If we ask each student to bring to class something for everyone to smell every day, students can learn five to ten bits of language every week that will be more memorable than teaching the same language without smelling the objects as they hear, say, and write the language associated with the objects.

I mentioned *sulfur, lavender, garlic* and *lilies*. But the range of items with different aromas is extremely large. I used to think that recognizing the smell of coffee simple. I mean, coffee smells like coffee. But recently, I have been buying fresh coffee beans from a shop that has around thirty varieties of coffee. The owner of the shop takes me outside and asks me to smell various beans. I am astonished at the range of scents. Some remind me of vanilla, some of nutmeg, some of chocolate.

While students below the age when drinking is legal cannot bring wine to class, those above the legal age can. Again, the range of aromas is staggering. Some wines remind us of pears, some apples, others apricots, to name just a few.

Here are a few possible bits of language students can learn associated with their sense of smell.

I like this wine because it smells like apricots.

I do not like this wine because it smells like apricots.

This wine is expensive because people like the pear scent.

This wine is cheap because people don't like the grape scent.

Notice that all the words related to scents are in sentences. Isolating vocabulary items like *pear* or *grape* and teaching them in isolation will not enable students to develop their language efficiently and quickly. Experiential words like *pear* or *grape* or *sulfur* must always be mingled with the other words that provide the glue that enables us to make sense of what we hear, read and write. The words *I*, *this*, *it*, *like* together with the word order are the crucial bits of language students have to learn. They are much more difficult to master than experiential words like *apricot*, *garlic*, etc.

Mingling sounds and language

“The sharp explosive cry of certain animals, especially a dog, fox, or seal” is one definition of *bark*. Many associate *explosive* with bombs. To some *a seal* is like a signature. But if you play a recording of a dog barking, all the students will recognize the sound. Saying, “This dog is barking loudly.” will be understood in a heartbeat. Playing a recording of a dog barking softly while saying, “This dog is barking softly” will also be easily understood. And furthermore, each recording and statement will mingle the sounds and the language that describes the sounds so that they can be stored in various parts of the mind rather than just the part of the mind that stores language.

While recordings are easier and easier to make with smart phones, some schools do not allow students to bring smart phones into class. But we do not need recordings. We can ask students to make sounds. Almost all of them will have heard lions roaring on a TV program. So, we can ask one or two students to make the sound a lion does. When they do, we can say, “Lions’ roars are very loud” or “Lions’ roars are frightening,” to cite two possible sentences you can mingle with the sound.

We hear a wide range of sounds all the time—sirens, screeching trains, honking horns, thunder, rain drops, chimes, ticking clocks, banging doors, to name a few. “Wow, the siren woke me up. The siren was very loud. I hate sirens. Sirens save lives” are a few possible samples of language that we can mingle with the sound of sirens.

In my experience, students sometimes make sounds like sirens, lions roaring, dogs barking or whining, ticking clocks, etc., for fun as they walk from class to class or during breaks. Asking students to make sounds in class that they naturally make outside of class and mingling language that is associated with the sound is a way to

teach language the way we learn our first language naturally. We hear a sound and one of our parents or older sibling says something like, “I love the sound of fog horns.” or “That crow sounds terrible.” We hear these same sounds and the language associated with the sounds over and over and remember them.

The sounds of music and language

Most of us prefer listening to music, either songs or instrumental. We can ask students to draw sketches to show their feelings when they listen to one-minute recordings of various composers both modern and classical. You can then ask them to write sentences about their feelings, You can edit them and have them share their sentences aloud with the class. “I feel very relaxed when I listen to the *andante* movement from Mozart’s sonata.” Of course some students will need to see words such as *andante* and *sonata* on the board. But many take piano lessons and will know the terms.

The advantage of songs over recordings of dialogs or readings of graded readers is that they contain the words plus music. Listening to lyrics with guitar, piano, or orchestra music engages two different parts of our brains, the linguistic and the musical. Most lyrics are now available on the Internet so students can see the printed version of the songs as they listen to the accompanying music.

Many students listen to the same songs over and over without understanding the words because they find the music so engaging. Most find the songs even more engaging when they begin to understand the meanings of the lyrics.

Students can learn sentence patterns, tense, how words like *of*, *than*, *an* are used by listening to songs over and over, pausing the recordings to transcribe the lines, replaying to check their transcription and finally compare what they wrote with the printed lyrics.

The rhythm of the music that accompanies songs enables most people to use intonation, stress and pauses between sense groups in a very natural way.

Incidental learning

Textbooks, curriculum guides and syllabuses contain goals for learning. Many of these goals are separate from the way we use language. And, they rarely set goals which mingle language and our sense of smell or hearing. Yet, when we associate scents and sounds with language we experience, we not only can better understand meanings than from definitions alone, but we can also better remember the language because it is mingled with reality—actual scents and sounds. Incidental learning—language that just happens naturally—can be very powerful if it is mingled with scents and sounds that students bring to class. The sounds and scents they want to

express in language are likely to be more compelling to our students than ones we select to teach in class.

1,370 words

1.3h. “I don’t want to speak” *Tell me more. Tell me why.*

Sylvia Ashton Warner and Charles A. Curran

Sylvia taught Maori children in Horoera (East Cape), Pipiriki (Wanganui River) and Fernhill (Hawkes Bay) in New Zealand. Charles taught counseling and psychology at Loyola University in Chicago in the United States. Their books about language teaching came out in the late sixties and early seventies and helped to drive the Community Language Learning movement.

Both Sylvia and Charles showed ways to teach language by eliciting feelings and experiences that students wanted to share. They both believed that what students said and wrote led to richer language development than having students use textbooks.

When a student said, “I don’t want to speak,” or “I don’t want to write,” Sylvia asked them why. The students usually shared their feelings with her. When they did not know a word she asked them to draw the word. And she then wrote the word in English or sometimes in Maori. Of course, saying and writing why they did not want to use English was a topic that could only be dealt with a few times. But once the students realized that she was interested in their feelings, they started to talk and write about family life, friendships and their dreams or ambitions.

In the textbooks in use at the time, in readings or dialogs dealing with the family or friendships or ambitions, everything was positive. The material was lacking in any conflicts. But in life, we all experience conflicts and negative feelings.

Once students realized that it was not only OK but also essential for them to share the full range of their emotions, they wrote and said more and more. She expanded each student’s use of individual words into narratives. She used these as reading material rather than the textbooks she was supposed to use. As I said, when they could not say or write something, she would ask them to sketch the feelings and experiences or use Maori. She would write out ways that the individual words or sketches they produced and shared would look like in English sentences.

Charles also taught about the primacy of the sharing of feelings and experiences as the source of the language that should be taught. But rather than elicit emotional events from students through drawings and individual words and limited English, he said we should have students say and write in their first language. The role of the teacher was to translate what students produced into English.

Jack and Jane went up the hill

I don’t want to speak

Though millions of students learned to read from readers such as the *Jack and Jane* series, the experiences portrayed in these books are those of one class of children. And they were produced for native speakers of English.

But Sylvia's and Charles's suggestions to talk and write about students' feelings and experiences were not just to produce language that was related to their lives. They believed that even when textbooks showed black characters or Maori and Spanish speaking children, they were still too distant from the students sitting before us. And the books continued to fail to show a wide range of emotions, including negative ones like anger.

Organic now conjures up food produced without chemicals. But for Sylvia and Charles *organic* meant *genuine* and *real*. When Sylvia started teaching in New Zealand she had no access to tape recorders. So she had to listen to each student and write what they said or translate their sketches or Maori words into English in their notebooks or on the board.

When Charles introduced what some have called community language learning, tape recorders were readily available. So teachers using his technique recorded what their students said in their first language and then could listen to long sequences over and over as they translated the students' first language into English.

Language used outside of class

Some students feel more comfortable chatting with friends outside of class in their first language than saying things in class to the teacher or other students. Many students have a recording function on their phones. As a result, there is no reason they cannot record conversations they have outside of class. They can transcribe what they want and cut out comments they consider too private to share.

Translating applications

There were two big limitations of Community Language Learning. First the number of bilingual teachers, especially in less widely used languages, meant that no one was available to translate what students wanted to express. Second, many classes had students from a range of languages.

Both of these limitations no longer exist because there are so many applications that translate languages into English. While the translations contain some mistakes, it is easy for those of us who speak English to edit them before we and our students use them as material to master the English vocabulary and structures. If you have the time to edit the conversations while the student has the translation application open on their smart phone or computer, they can begin to experiment with how to construct sentences that are easier for the translation applications to translate correctly. In this

I don't want to speak

way, they can even use their first language to notice about and learn the grammatical differences between their first language and English.

If students record conversations and translate them outside of class, you can edit them in a few minutes. The final versions, both in print and oral, will provide you with material for many weeks. The sophistication of students' language use in their first language is much greater than in English. So, it is beneficial have to them spend many minutes each day in thoughtful practicing and using of the rich range of patterns and vocabulary items that come up in their natural conversations.

Now what?

Few teachers have the freedom to ignore the textbooks they are told to use. But most teachers can supplement the material they are forced to use for five to ten minutes now and then.

When a student says "Man angry" or draws a sketch of a man with a knife and the teacher writes "The man holding the knife was angry." or a student says in her or his first language "I would love to be a primary school teacher." there is a huge gap between what they say and how they can say what they want to say in English.

So after we elicit meanings our students want to express, we need to select one pattern from each narrative and have students use it and practice it in ways I suggest in the other readings in 1.3. Of course doing activities in 1.1 and 1.2 are useful also.

One big difference

Initially, Sylvia focused on individual words, which expressed emotions and experiences: angry, happy, knife, drink, baby. She never asked students to draw words like *my*, *was*, *the*. She supplied these glue words.

When teachers using Community Language Learning translated what students said in their first language into English, neither the teacher nor the students ever drew sketches. But as you know, translating words from one language to another is not always straightforward. In Spanish, *El amor es para siempre*. is 5 words. In English, it is 3 words: *Love is forever*.

So as I point out over and over in the readings in 1.3, we need to integrate the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. But as I point out here, if we tap the experiences and feelings language students want to express, their engagement with English is likely to be deeper and more emotionally powerful.

I don't want to speak

PS I met a New Zealand School Inspector who had observed Sylvia teach. He was keen on what she was doing, but he was the exception. Most officials were not pleased that she did not follow the official syllabus. No New Zealand publisher initially published anything she wrote. But 2 years before she died Queen Elizabeth the Second made her a Member of the British Empire for her contributions to education and literature. So, those who do not follow the rules can make a difference. Take heart!

1,354 words

I don't want to speak

1.3i. Fortunately, the copy machine is broken. *alternative sources of materials*

To give handouts or not to give handouts, that is the question.

“Damn!, What a disaster!” and “I can’t believe it!” are exclamations more likely to be used before saying “the copy machine is broken” than “fortunately.” But since one of my purposes is to analyze everything from a different perspective, I inserted the unlikely word “Fortunately” as a starter. And basically, there isn’t much else for me to say about this until you think about it and see what others think about it.

Task: Before continuing, please write down a few beliefs teachers might have who would say, “Damn!” if the copy machine were broken and those who would say “Fortunately.”

“Damn”	“Fortunately”

It’s almost like a rule that if you pass out a handout, people will look at it immediately, even if you tell them not to. It’s also true that it is difficult for us to stop our eyes from moving further down the page while reading. However, in order for you to gain the most from this book, it is always best if you do the tasks I set for you before reading how others have responded to them. As soon as you see what others have thought, you limit your own thinking. So, for your own benefit, do not read any further until you have completed the Task above.

Task: Here are some beliefs others wrote. As you read them, write *agree* next to those you agree with.

Damn!

1. **Mari:** “It is important not to waste time. If I have to write a newspaper article on the board and have students copy it, it might take twenty-five percent of the class period. I want students to immediately engage with an article. Giving them a copy is the most efficient way to get them involved from the beginning of the class.”

Fortunately, the copy machine is broken.

2. **Gary:** “When I prepare handouts, my students realize that I spend a lot of time preparing my classes. I believe some of them will spend more time studying if they realize I spend a lot of time preparing. I model good learning practices.”

3. **Jean:** “Handouts are more current than textbooks. My students see that the date of a copy of something I give them is just a day or two before the class. They know that their textbook was printed at least a year ago and in most cases many years ago.”
Jean

4. **Gloria:** “Though textbooks often have copies of menus, articles, e-mails, etc., they are printed on a page along with exercises. But when I give them a handout with a copy of a menu or an article, they think that what they are reading is more authentic than the copies in their textbooks.”

5. **Gay:** “I ask students to bring in copies of material they want to read or study. I then make copies of what they bring me. In this way, I can use materials my students select rather than only materials in the textbook or materials I select. So, making copies of handouts meets the needs of students very well.”

6. **Irene:** “Though sometimes I make copies of students’ writing, usually, my handouts are exercises I write to supplement the textbook, articles in newspapers I think will interest my students or materials my colleagues have used with their students.”

Fortunately.

1. **Laura:** “I don’t use handouts anymore because when I did my students rarely kept copies of my handouts in their notebooks or folders. When I did not finish the activities with a handout on one day, few had the handout with them the next day when I wanted to finish the activities that I had started the previous day. I don’t think students take handouts as seriously as the textbook because I produce them rather than a publisher. I don’t have as much prestige as the authors and publisher of the textbook we use.” Laura

2. **Robert:** “When I give students a handout, they do not have to expend any effort. But when I read aloud a text I want to work with and ask them to write it, they have to listen, think about the meaning, and then write what I have said. Of course this takes more time but I am able to better see what they understand and do not understand when they have to change what I say—sound waves—into written language—black marks on white paper. It is crucial for my students to stretch themselves. If I give them a printed copy, they do not have to stretch themselves at all.”

3. **Takaaki:** “I think that if my students write in their notebooks the content of what I used to give them in handouts, at the end of the term, they will see how many different texts we dealt with in addition to those in the textbook. I also ask my students to record parts of our class. So they realize that spoken material is as important as printed or written material. In a class of IT students who all have laptops,

Fortunately, the copy machine is broken.

I have them enter materials I provide in their laptops. So they are creating, for themselves, a record of many spoken and written texts that I have used.”

4. **Sergio:** “I ask my students to bring in articles or recordings that interest them. But of course different students have different interests. I ask each student to tell the class in 1 minute or less what the material is. Those who are interested in the topics that the various students present gather around them and listen and write what the person reads aloud or has them listen to from a recording. When I make one handout for all students, the chances that all will be interested in the same topic are very small. One size never fits all and one topic rarely is of interest to all students.”

5. **Patrick:** “If the copying machine is always broken and I can never make copies, I could ask students to bring in samples of language they selected. I could write supplemental exercises together with my students. I could think of my students as colleagues as well as my fellow teachers. If my students work with materials they select and develop exercises for, they might learn just as much as from the materials and exercises they jointly produce as from those from the education industry.”

6. **Mariko:** “Handouts are to me like lesson plans—they constrain me. I think that much of teaching is no different from a conversation. We pick up what another person asks, what the other person misses and what we miss and spontaneously interact. We don’t plan conversations and in seminars, we do not plan ahead of time what we are going to say. We start with a topic, refer to various texts, rarely just one text in one handout, and interact.”

In tune and not in tune

Task: Write the names of the teachers whose comments you are in tune with.

“Damn” Teachers	“Fortunately” Teachers

Fortunately, the copy machine is broken.

Task: Write your reactions to these comments by others—comments you are in tune with or not in tune with. You can write reactions to individual comments or to a few comments at once. And you can write about all of them or just a few that stuck you most strongly, either negatively or positively. You can compare and contrast or argue for just one opinion. You can also add more ideas. In any case, it would be best not to read further until you have done the task.

Others' Reactions

1. "I do not feel a conflict. I want to save time as Mari said in her *Damn!* comment. But there is another option to either copying a newspaper on the board or handing out copies. Each student can bring to class newspaper articles that they are interested in. This is more learner-centered. Whether we copy an article on the board or make copies for our students, that means we are the ones doing the selecting, not our students." -**Ali**

2. "Having students bring their own articles deals with the issue raised by Jean in *Damn!* comment 3: the fact that what students bring to class will be more current than what is in their textbooks." -**Paul**

3. "My students receive junk mail every day. When I ask them to bring the junk mail to class they at first grumble. But then they realize that the junk mail they bring contains ads, menus, and a wide range of real visual material as well as text that they want to understand. Those students keen on clothing ads group themselves, those interested in menus group themselves. By using real menus and ads, students realize that teachers' and textbooks' copies are not as related to their lives in their neighborhood as actual flyers they bring in from their so-called junk mail. Rather than just tossing out color brochures, ads, etc., they begin to see that they can learn from what they initially think is garbage.

So I have changed my initial positive reaction to Gloria's copying menus, etc., in *Damn!* 4. Of course, in EFL situations, most menus and ads are in the language of the country. But there are always a few produced by international companies that are in English. And students can always access ads and menus in English on the Internet.

Even if students bring in ads or menus in their first language, I'm also realising that this is also not a problem. Most ads and menus have many pictures. You and some students can either white out the sentences in the students' first language and write in English sentences related to the pictures or you can have the students translate the sentences and write the English version in their notebooks. After you edit their translations, they can use their English corrected versions the same way they would use materials produced in English." -**Aya**

Fortunately, the copy machine is broken.

4. “I started teaching in schools where there were no textbooks and no copying machines. The students filled their notebooks, or exercise books, with sketches, sentences and paragraphs that I either dictated to them or wrote on the board.

But both when I dictated and when I asked them to write what was on the board, I insisted that they never write as I was speaking or when they were looking at the board. They had to wait till I finished speaking to write and they had to write only after they looked at the board, looked away, and paused a few seconds. They could look at the board as many times as they wanted but they could not write at the same time they were looking.

They came to realize that they could own the language that they saw or heard. They were proud that they were producing their own books! So, I agree with Laura and Robert in *Fortunately comments* 1 and 2. Not having a copying machine can be very positive.” -**Fatima**

5. “Initially, I agreed with all those who said “*Damn!*” But after asking my students to write what they thought about my handouts and our textbook, most of them said that the readings in the textbook were out of date and keeping track of all of my handouts was impossible! I was initially shocked since I spent a lot of time making up the handouts as well as copying them. So, I now agree with those who said “*Fortunately!*”

-**Sandra**

My biases

I have not presented a perfectly balanced series of beliefs here. You will have noticed that the comments under *Fortunately* are longer than those under *Damn!* And *Others' reactions* are biased towards *Fortunately*. I intentionally presented this lack of balance to remind you of how difficult it is to shed our notions about what we believe should be done.

Having said this, when I ask teachers and students which options they prefer, I consistently am told that learners find materials they prepare and are asked to do specific tasks with more useful than those in textbooks or in handouts that the teachers themselves prepare. But do not just believe what I tell you! I wrote this book to provide you with ways to explore your teaching. Ask your students which options they prefer and why. If you can discuss the alternatives in the students' first language, you will likely get more sophisticated comments.

If you have to use English, asking your students to rate statements before a discussion will provide a great deal of information. A direction like this can provide a clear indication of student preferences:

“Today you used copies I made of a menu Jose had brought into class last week. Yesterday, you each brought in a menu you wanted to learn about.

Fortunately, the copy machine is broken.

Write *Jose's menu* and *My own menu* in your notebooks. Then, rate both by drawing 1 to 5 + signs next to the choice you prefer. Write one or two reasons for your rating.

Having students rate statements is just one way to learn what your students think about activities and materials. How do you usually decide or find out whether your students enjoy and/or learn from an activity or not? Can you think of any other ways?

2,228 Words, rounded ; Flesch Reading Ease 70% ; Grade Level 7.8

Fortunately, the copy machine is broken.

1.3j. Some pernicious consequences of multiple-choice language test preparation *Teaching errors and explanations for them or using language correctly?*

Preparing students to take multiple-choice tests

All published multiple-choice test preparation books and most English textbooks contain practice items from published multiple-choice tests from previous years. “I give my students practice in selecting the right answer so that they can get a higher score,” is a reason teachers give me when I ask why they are spending most of their class time on test preparation.

Obviously, if students are subjected to standardized tests it is our responsibility to prepare them so they do well. How best to prepare them is the question I will explore in this section.

Teaching errors and explanations

Here is an example of one type of test preparation I have found very common.

Teacher: Please look at item 1 and tell me which choice is correct to put in the blank?

1. Grandpa explained [1] a kite.

- a. how to make
- b. me how to make
- c. me for making
- d. for make

Six students: (raise their hands.)

Teacher: Ali, which do you think is correct? a, b, d or d?

Ali: b.

Teacher: Why?

Ali: We need to say who explanation for.

Teacher: Who is the explanation for?

Fatima: For grandchild.

Teacher: How do we know this?

Two students: Grandpa explaining.

Teacher: That's right. But we do not need to know who an explanation is for.

The teacher continues to ask students which item is correct. Whether a student selected the correct answer or not, the teacher asks each student why they think the item they selected is correct.

If a student selects the correct answer immediately and gives the right reason, the teacher then asks students why the other items are not correct. When students give reasons, it is often difficult for the teacher to relate the point the student is trying to make with the grammar found in their textbooks. If the students are using a test preparation book which contains explanations for why items are right or wrong, the students frequently do not state the explanations that are found in the books, but rather give their own. Either way, each student's statement contains two to four language errors as well as often incorrect explanations for their choices.

Here is another common practice in preparing for standardized multiple-choice exams, or for that matter teacher generated multiple-choice exams.

Teacher: Please look at item 5 and write the correct choice in the blank in your book.

5. This clock [5] two minutes a day, so I'm often late for appointments.

- a. loses
- b. gains
- c. delays
- d. is fast

The correct answer is **a** because, according to the dictionary, *losing* means *failing to keep, no longer have, escape from, be beaten*

If the clock fails to keep time it means it is not working correctly.

If the clock gained time you would not be late for your appointments. You would be early.

Of course *delays* is similar in meaning to *loses* but we usually use delay with people. "I was delayed for my appointment" for example.

Of course *is fast* is like *gains*. If the clock had been fast the person would have arrived early.

Some teachers give the explanations in the students' first language and allow students to explain why items are right or wrong in their own languages. Some teachers write a few words on the board as they explain or as students explain. Few students write anything in their notebooks. Some write a word or two on the page of the text where they have selected what they thought was the correct choice.

Surprises

When teachers look at video clips or listen to recordings of how they prepare students for multiple-choice tests they are often surprised. One reason for their surprise is their failure to notice the language errors the students had made. Another surprise is the lack of clarity of their explanations. And when they see how few students respond to the explanations or even write anything in their notebooks, the teachers begin to wonder how students can remember anything that anyone says.

Relationship between our rationale and reality

A widely used textbook in Japan devotes 14 minutes of a 50- minute class to “reviewing” the grammar needed for multiple-choice tests. In each review, the teacher is supposed to cover 20 items, and each item has 4 choices each. The teachers' notes say that in the review students should interact in groups and the teacher should interact with the students as well.

The sentences in each item vary from 4 to 15 words. Even highly proficient to fluent language users often cannot read the sentences and select the one correct answer out of four in only 14 minutes. To make things even more difficult, none of the sentences are related to each other, and they contain many unfamiliar words—at least 1 per sentence and 1 per choice—often more than 1.

During each class students are exposed to 20 correct choices and 60 incorrect choices. During the course of a ten-week term students are introduced to at least 600 incorrect sentences and 200 correct sentences.

Though no teachers limit their time preparing for exams to the prescribed 14 minutes, even if they did, the practice calls into question support for the rationale. Can anyone memorize 200 sentences that are totally unrelated to each other and forget the 600 variations of the same 200 sentences that are incorrect? Does the clock lose 2 minutes a day or is the person delayed 2 minutes a day? Was the clock fast or slow? There was no real clock. There was no real person. Who is “I’m”? What kind of an appointment was the unknown person late for? Will students remember the word *so*?

Here is the correct sentence with the experiential words underlined and the function or structural or grammar words crossed out. Content words with meaning in the word that are underlined as well as being crossed out contain grammatical plus lexical

meanings. For example, the word loses signifies the habitual present, and minutes, and appointments, along with being content words, are in the plural.

~~This clock loses two minutes a day, so I'm often late for appointments.~~

I mention these facts to highlight that each individual sentence is quite difficult. To read each one in less than a minute and make a correct choice requires students to notice a great deal of information. It also requires teachers to notice a great deal of information. If we fail to make note of the word *so* or the plural or the present habitual, you cannot make the correct choice.

As I always say, do not believe what I say. But, if you are forced to teach the way many commercial preparation books and textbooks require, I think you must consider to what extent your goal can be met.

Using language correctly

While I wish that all exams, both standardized and teacher prepared, would be forbidden, I know this is a pipe dream. But if students are going to continue to have to take exams, here are examples of ways you can prepare them for multiple-choice exams differently.

Many students and their parents, to say nothing of the principals and colleagues, will perhaps consider that you are not fulfilling your responsibility if you try my suggestions at the expense of teaching in the method prescribed by your school. So if you have 10 test review items to cover in 10 minutes, do 2 out of the 10 items the way I suggest. For the remaining 8 items, explain very quickly why the correct choices are right and why the incorrect ones are wrong. If you write out this information and have students study the notes for homework, they will learn the reasons better than if you discuss them in class. As an added bonus, the students will not have the chance to make and listen to language errors during the discussion, which will surely detract from their proficiency. I mean, if while discussing why a particular choice for a question is right or wrong, students make errors that both they and you are unaware of as they speak, how will they ever be able to recognize errors in tests?

Here is my suggestion for a different way to do test preparation.

Teacher: In item 1 cross out b, c and d.

1. Grandpa explained [1] a kite.

- a. the me how to make
- b. me how to make
- c. me for making
- d. for make

Now, in your notebook write this sentence and draw a sketch under the last word: kite.

Grandpa explained to me how to make a kite.

Now copy these sentences under your sentence. Draw a sketch under the last word in each sentence.

My father explained to me how to make a whistle.
My mother explained to me how to make a fried egg.
My sister explained to me how to make French fries.
My friend explained to me how to fry an egg.
I showed my sister how to paper cranes.
Our sewing teacher showed us how to cut silk
Our cooking teacher taught us how to make tacos and pizza.

Teacher: (Walks around room correcting spelling, pointing to sketches of words some students understood and others did not so the student who did not understand can copy the sketches of students who did understand.)

Teacher: Juan, say your first sentence, looking at Saki behind you.

Juan: My father explain me how to make whistle.

Teacher: (Writes on the board):

My father explained to me how to make a whistle.



Teacher: Juan, say the sentence again and everyone else write what Juan says.

Juan: My father explained to me how to make a whistle.

Students: (Some write, “My father explained to me how to make a whistle.” Others write, “Juan’s father explained to him how to make a whistle.” Others write these words with a sketch for whistle after a: “My father explained to me how to make a ...”)

Of course there is no need for such large arrows nor such a long space between *a whistle* and the rest of the sentence. But separating *a whistle* highlights the fact that you need two words at the end of *how to make* or *cook* or *cut* something if it is one object in contrast to no article for object such as *silk* or *French fries* and of course the fact that you need *an* before the word *egg*.

Perhaps my sentence about making a whistle isn't a very useful example for your students. I am sure you can create sentences more in tune with your students' reality since you know what they are learning, what they like to make, and perhaps even about their family relationships. I just wanted to illustrate the importance of using examples that describe the actual life experiences of your students rather than limiting yourself to the examples from the text books or test preparation exam questions.

Research as a check on our rationale

I described the amount of time students have to learn each item in test preparation books and said that I considered it impossible to process the items and learn them in the amount of time provided. I also pointed out the difficulty level of the items. I did this to remind you of the importance of noting what students actually do in class so we can see to what extent activities we use are in tune with our goals or the rationale for doing the activities in the first place.

Though the two points I made are obvious, they are often ignored. Yet these two points are some of the few that are supported unequivocally by research. While many studies produce ambiguous or conflicting results those on frequency of experiencing new items and on difficulty level are clear-cut.

To learn new language items: whether individual words, or phrases, clauses and sentences, learners need to listen to, say, write and read the items from 15 to 30 times. The more related the language bits are to learners' experiences the fewer times they need to use the items.

In my alternative, I suggest, having students write, say, read and listen to 8 variations of a pattern for each item in the test preparation book. If you repeat the activity 2 times for each item, students will just get to the minimum 15 times that they need to experience a language item in order to learn it. To get to the more ideal 30 exposures, the activity would need to be repeated 3 and 1/2 times.

Difficulty level: the second unanimous finding is that learners should understand 98% of the words in the phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, etc. that they are exposed to and using. I initially considered 98% quite extreme. So I had students use language in which they knew 90% of the words. While they eventually managed to understand the materials we used, the amount of time that they took to process the extra 8% of unknown words slowed them down and led to more errors.

PS Though there are all sorts of formulas and applications that you can use to measure the difficulty level of a passage (for example the Lextutor web site at <http://www.lex tutor.ca/vp/eng/> or the Online Graded Text Editor at Extensive Reading Central, <http://www.er-central.com/ogte/>), a very easy analog way to determine whether material is at the appropriate level is to have students cross out the words they are unfamiliar with. Some of the words that they cross out are not necessary to understand the passage and so can actually obscure the meaning if left in. This is an easy way to make language more accessible.

2,320 words

1.4a. “Is it a bird? Is it a plane? It’s Superman!” Realizing how *yes/no* and *either or questions* can enable us to discover the meanings of words

The power of categorizing and grouping

When we see something unfamiliar like a man flying, we subconsciously compare the initially unrecognized action with other familiar ones with similar characteristics. We have categories in our minds for *flying things*, *animals*, *food*, *comic book characters* and *stock expressions*, to name a few.

When we experience something unfamiliar that we later realize does not fit in the first category or file that we think it fits in, we try another one. This accessing of different categories we have in our minds is illustrated by the trademark comment followers of the Superman radio and TV series heard, when in the opening scene people who saw something flying towards them from a distance said: “Is it a bird? Is it a plane? It’s Superman!”

Probably, we are going through various sequences of *Huh? Oh . . . Aha!* all the time for everything we perceive.

But we do not know it because it happens so quickly for things we know. We always first perceive and then we understand/recognize or fail to recognize as a result of what we think fits or does not fit into our categories of breaking up the world.

When we hear or read a known word being used in an unfamiliar way, we also have to search beyond the meanings we are familiar with. In a bar, hearing “Because it’s my birthday, I’m going to shout the drinks for all of you,” most people first subconsciously associate the word *shout* with *voice level*. And the voice level in bars often requires us to shout

Voice level is the most frequent meaning: “Because it’s so noisy in here, I’m going to shout so you can hear me.” But *to shout the drinks because of a birthday* does not fit this meaning, and so requires us to try another option.

We try to guess unknown meanings by subconsciously asking ourselves a series of *yes/no* and *either or questions* about the meaning required in the slot the unknown word is in. Is the action of *shouting drinks* a positive act or negative one? Is the action associated with a happy event or a sad event?

Is the act related to the host’s voice or money? Before we know it, we have subconsciously deleted *shout* and we are searching for meanings related to money that fit in the empty slot: “Because it’s my birthday, I’m going to _____ the drinks for all of you.” *Buy*, *treat* and *pay for* make sense so we slot the meaning of these words into the position *shout* occupies—Aha!

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it Superman?

Ways to increase our power of predicting

While checking unknown words in bilingual dictionaries is more efficient than guessing meanings, there are times when people do not have dictionaries with them or cannot use them, like when taking tests or having interviews.

Additionally, when using either a bilingual or monolingual dictionary, we have to select which word equivalent or definition matches the needed meaning in a text or conversation. And sometimes, a translated definition is not as accurate or precise as it seems to be.

Learning ways to group and re-group words—*animal, vegetable, mineral, a bird, a plane* or *Superman*, to cite a few categories—enables us to select the word equivalent or definition in our mind or in our dictionary that fits the unknown meaning in what we see or hear much more quickly. And like many of the suggestions in this book, it increases the range of ways learners can learn on their own.

Task 1 As you read *A short trip in 1800*, cross out or put a post it on any words you do not understand.

A short trip in 1800

The four men quickly pushed a currach from the beach into the water. They jumped into the currach, and the fisherman and the youngest man started to row away from the beach to an island one kilometer away.

When they arrived at the island, a black guillemot flew over them very quickly. It made very loud sounds from its throat, and then it swooped down close to them.

Flesch Reading Ease 80%

Grade Level 5.8

Task 2 Note whether the words you crossed out or put a post it on refer to *people, things, feelings, a live thing with feathers* or *with fur* by writing these words above of the words you crossed out.

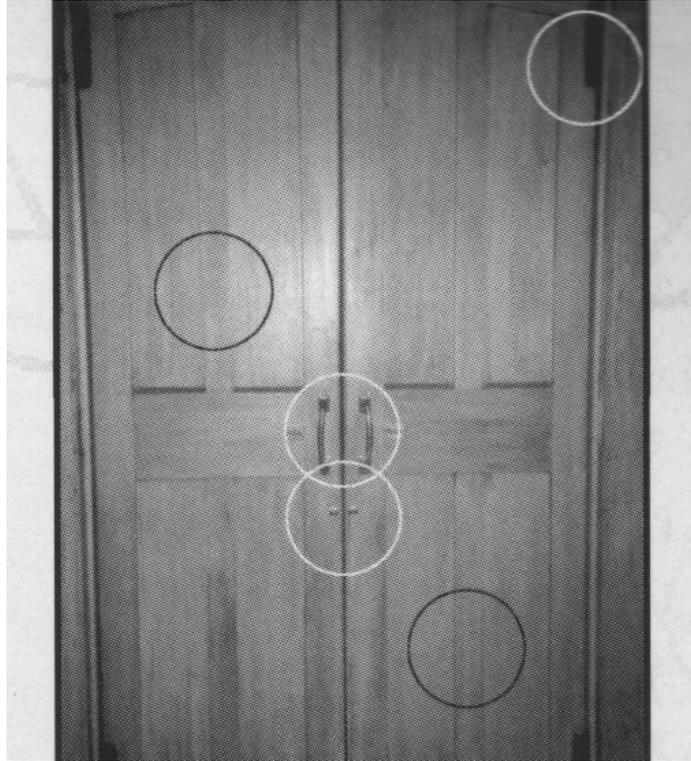
Predicting unknown meanings and ways to open unfamiliar doors

Discovering the meanings of unknown words is similar to finding out how to open an unfamiliar door. First, we push it. If it does not open, then we pull it. If neither pushing nor pulling opens the door, we slide it to the right or left, or look for a button to push in the case of electronically controlled doors.

Before we try, we might notice whether there are any hinges facing us or hidden, whether there is a doorknob or an indentation made for our fingers to help us slide the

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door. But basically, we make a series of binary choices: *push* or *pull*, *slide right* or *left*. Nine times out of ten, we can open an unknown door with fewer than four tries. If we try to guess the meaning of a word unknown to us, we can usually do it with less than four tries as well, assuming that we understand 90% to 95% of the words in the passage the unknown word is in.



Door handles, hinges, panels, and other features on doors that we either take note of, or ignore when determining whether to pull, push, or slide doors to open them.

These are the words most people crossed out or put posts its on, and what they noted about these unfamiliar words.

A short trip in 1500

a thing

The four men pushed the ~~eurræh~~ from the beach into the water. They jumped into the ~~eurræh~~ and started to paddle away from the beach. Immediately after

a live thing with feathers

they got into the ~~eurræh~~, a black ~~guillemot~~ flew over them and swooped down close to them.

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Most thought *boat* and *bird* as they *crossed* out the words *currach* and *guillemot* before they thought *thing* and *live thing with feathers*. But to be able to think *boat* and *bird*, our mind subconsciously and extremely quickly goes through a process that is something like asking a series of *yes/no* and *either/or* questions.

Does the meaning required in the slot refer to a thing or a person? Does the word after *pushed the . . . jumped into . . . got into . . .* refer to a kind of transportation? Is the meaning before *flew over them and swooped down* something natural or manufactured, alive or dead? Does the flying thing have feathers or fur or skin or an engine?

Yutaka, a teacher with 25 years of experience made the following comments about the task you just did:

“I was able to understand that *a currach* was a boat and *a guillemot* was a bird because the word order, function words *a* before *currach* and *black guillemot* indicated they were nouns, word endings and other experiential words—*pushed, jumped, beach*—provided information. Focusing on the 66 out of the 68 words in the sentences that I was familiar with made it easy to predict the 2 unfamiliar ones, especially since *currach* occurred 3 times, each connected with different information. Though I use this process myself, I have never introduced it to my students! Why Not? Why have I and the authors of textbooks I use asked students to underline the words they do not know? Why do I write words I do not think my students will know on the board in isolation so they have no clues to help them predict the meaning? Even if I wrote *a currach* rather than just *currach* they would know it was a noun.”

Roving eyes versus tunnel vision

When we are predicting, whether how to open a door or what a word means, we need to have roving eyes and minds. Focusing on the door panels or the unknown words rather than the hinges or the known words (likely all of them, except for *currach* and *guillemot*) and grammatical signals (word order, action words plus function or structural words that are linked to lexical items like these underlined words—*pushed from, jumped into, paddle away from, got into, flew over, swooped down*) blinds us.

The common instruction “underline words you do not understand” interferes with our mind’s subconscious attempts to understand what meanings are required in the slots occupied by the unfamiliar words. It distracts us from noticing what is around those unknown words, and it focuses our attention on what we don’t know rather than on what we do know.

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I have asked hundreds of people to cross out or cover with post it notes the words they don't understand in *A Short Trip*. Most—well over 70%—do not follow these simple instructions, but instead, underline the words they don't understand. Why? Habit? A focus in their education on what they do not know? A lack of understanding of the directions? Cultural preferences? Wishing to be able to understand and read the word clearly after the activity is over?

When we are in a train going through a tunnel we can see nothing to the right or left, only a small circle of the track in front of us. Seeing only a circle of the track in front of us is called *tunnel vision*. When we focus on one word we do not know and ignore all the other words in a passage we are limited in what we see the same way we are limited in what we see when we are riding a train through a tunnel. But while in a train we have to endure our limited view till the train exits from the tunnel, in reading a text we can escape from tunnel vision by looking at what we understand and moving our eyes backwards and forwards. We can use roving eyes!

While 99% of people who do this activity have never seen or heard the words *currach* and *guillemot*, if I ask them to draw a picture of what they think the words might be, they *all* draw a boat and a bird in a heartbeat. We guess the meaning of unknown words extremely quickly if there are only say 2 to 5 out of 100 we do not understand. But if there are more than about 5 unknown words out of a hundred, bewilderment is more likely than discovery. And for understanding to take place, first we have to ignore the words we don't know and focus on those we know to engage our minds.

Our ability to place things or ideas in appropriate groups so we can predict meanings of what is unknown to us is natural. But even though it is a natural process, students do not necessarily naturally use these same skills when reading or listening to a second language. People have to be reminded of how they predict meanings and practice doing it, especially because some classroom activities stifle the subconscious thinking that enable us to guess what a word means. Teachers must also recognise that there are many different ways that students can group words. Accepting only one right answer is a sure way to discourage students from predicting in the classroom.

Encouraging use of this natural ability, by having students consciously put things in groups, will enable them to understand unknown words when they do not have access to dictionaries. The skill will also be useful when they have to decide which definition, out of the many in their dictionary, fits the context the unknown word is in.

Task 3 Write how you think you were able to predict the meanings required in the blanks that you created when you crossed out *currach* and *guillemot*. How did you eliminate options such as *canoe*, *kayak*, *raft*, *surfboard* or *yacht* to fit the slots *currach* is in? And how did you eliminate *kites*, *dragon flies*, *airplanes* or *helicopters* to fit in the slot that *guillemot* is in?

Though learners might not be familiar with the words like *kites* and *dragonflies* in English, they will know these objects in their first language. When we are attempting

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to reduce the ambiguity of what we do not understand, we are not limited to meanings only in English.

Just a few categories or groupings

The thousands of words in all languages can be grouped into relatively few categories. In the *Longman Dictionary of American English*, the editors grouped words in the Picture Dictionary Section using these categories: *Animals, Body, Kitchen Verbs, Food, Musical instruments, Sounds, Verbs of movement (hands) Verbs of Movement (body, Sports, Office, Sports, Office, Car* (Page A1 in Longman) But the editors realize that there are many ways to group words in addition to these categories. So they suggest that students should come up with their own groups or categories. They suggest *family, sports, describing people, and the street*. Their main point is to encourage students to group words in a wide range of ways. (Page A26 in Longman.)

Grouping not only enables people to discover unknown meanings and select the definitions that match words in a particular context, the act of grouping can also increase retention. In one experimental study:

three groups of people were asked to inspect a set of 52 cards, each of which had a word written on it. One group was told that they would later be asked to recall as many of the words as they could; the second group was asked to look at the cards and [group] them into as many piles (or ‘categories’) as they liked; and the third group was asked both to categorize and recall. After each group had examined the cards for the same period of time, however, they were all given exactly the same task—to recall as many of the cards as they could. In the test, the second and third groups did equally well; the instruction simply to categorize the cards took care of remembering, and the additional instruction to remember the cards made no difference at all. On the other hand, the group told simply to remember performed worse than either of the other groups. The key to better recall is not in telling people to remember, but in telling them to [group and] to try to relate in some way what they were doing to what they knew already.” (Frank Smith. *Comprehension and Learning*. 1975. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.)

Comments about Task 3



Here are some comments others wrote in response to Task 3.

- “The number *four* before *men* eliminated *canoe*—(2 to 3), *kayak*, (1 to 2), *surfboard*, (1) and *yacht* more than 4 as well as not likely to have existed in 1800. *Jumped in* eliminated *raft* since a raft is flat; we would have to jump on a raft.”

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- “The year, 1800, eliminated *airplanes* and *helicopters*. *Kites* cannot *swoop down*. *Size* eliminated *dragonflies* for me. Somehow I do not think of such small insects being that visible. Most of my students crossed out *swooped down* and based their guesses on *flew over them*. But some wrote *flew* for *swooped* because they understood *down close to them*.”

A great mystery

The most frequent question about meaning is “What does X — a currach — mean?” rather than “Is X — a currach — alive?” or “Is X — a currach — something that flies or swims?”

If a teacher wrote a large ‘ X ’ on the blackboard in an algebra class and demanded that the students answer the question “What is the value of X ?” not only could the question not be answered, most would consider the teacher's actions to be absurd. In an algebra class, we always work with some kind of formula, such as $3X = 2I$. We never try to determine the value of X in isolation with no parameters. Why? Well, because in one million years, no one can know or make a logically reasoned or even an emotionally inspired guess at the value of X in isolation.

We can know the value of X only when it is in a formula or has some other kinds of parameters; i.e., when it is in context. Which makes me wonder why teachers are in the practice of writing so called key words on the board and asking what they mean in isolation? Why doesn't this common action of writing a word up on the board in isolation seem unusual when it is done in an English language classroom?

When I draw an X on the board and ask its value, students think I am crazy! But if I write *Currach* and *guillemot* on the board and ask, “What does *currach* mean? Who knows what *guillemot* means?” students don't seem to think it is strange at all. But how are these words in isolation different from the unknown value X ? And why do almost all language textbooks suggest this as one of the primary options for teaching vocabulary—asking the value of X in isolation?

I have written the word *currach* on the board and asked hundreds of teachers and students what it means. At the most, 5 out of 100 know the word—those from Scotland or Northern Ireland. If I write ‘*a currach*’, around 10 out of 100 at least guess that it is a thing, since the use of *a* signals a noun. But there are thousands of nouns and adding *a* does not narrow the options enough to predict the meaning of the word, only the part of speech. But 100 out of 100 people who see the word *currach* used in the passage you and your students just read know that it is a boat of some kind. Everyone! Ditto for the word *guillemot*, which only avid bird watchers or people from Scotland or Northern Ireland know. But everyone understands that *guillemot* is a type of bird when they read it in the sentence from the passage.

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Of course, we cannot predict all unknown words we see or hear just because they are within a sentence. But we cannot predict the meaning of any words when they are presented in isolation. And so we are back to my perplexity for the almost universal use of this practice of writing so-called *key words* on the board and asking students what they mean. Silence is by far the most frequent response! If you have been using the key word technique, try the opposite, inviting students to predict the meanings of words in the text in which they occur rather than in isolation.

Incidentally, many readers look up *currach* and *guillemot* in their dictionaries during classes, when I introduce *A short trip in 1800*, even though they know the first word is a boat that is big enough for at least 4 people and the other word is the name of a bird. When I ask them why, they say they are curious about the nature of the boat and the bird.

In the event, in the case of *currach*, which is a word students are unlikely ever to encounter, the definition raises many new questions. Here is one definition:

A currach is a boat like a coracle formerly used on Scottish and Irish lakes and rivers made out of wicker or reeds or canes with skins stretched over them. *Grade Level 11.3 Flesch Reading Ease 63%*

Back to the dictionary to check *coracle*, *wicker*, *reeds* and *canes*. Many know *canes* but as sticks we use when we have an injury and need help to walk.

In spite of the fact that definitions often introduce more unknown words, like these learners, I enjoy looking up words I have used, ones I guess the meaning of, and many that I do not understand.

Dictionaries are mines of information, both lexical and grammatical information. I am not discouraging their use! Rather I am discouraging asking anyone what words mean in isolation.

Figuring out meanings is as exciting as solving a mystery in a crime story. But in both cases we cannot solve the problem if all we know is the simple fact that a person was robbed or shot or are give a word in isolation. When we ask our students the meaning of a word without any context, not only does it frustrate learners, it also pushes students into the habit of focusing on the words they don't know at the expense of thinking about the words in a sentence or paragraph that they do know. Asking for the meaning of words in isolation actually leads to students developing *tunnel vision*. (The same practice leads to *tunnel hearing* when we focus on single words in listening activities.)

Mysteries are one of the most popular forms of fiction. Authors of detective stories provide us with clues which engage us in a series of *yes/no* and *either/or questions* as well as *question word questions*. The clues tap our natural curiosity and remind us that

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we have to rove around each page, and each chapter to understand the clues. If we stop at one clue that we do not understand we cannot discover anything. We need to give students chances to develop roving eyes (and roving ears) when reading in a second language. If they become skilled at paying attention to the words they know in a sentence, they will start to feel the excitement and surprise of solving the mysteries of word meanings.

PS In the sixties I watched a TV program in the US called “What’s my line? Four celebrities sat at a table and faced people who were invited to the show with unusual occupations. The task for the panelists was to guess the type of work each guest did. They could ask only yes/no questions and were limited to 20.

Sometimes, people were invited who were in the news and the panelists were asked to guess who the person was. Since the people in the news were well known, the panelists put on eye masks so that they could not see the person. Go to this website to see how the panelists guessed the name and role of a guest in the early sixties:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_ByZ-fluOU&app=desktop

3,771 words 65% Flesch Reading Ease 8th Grade

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1.4b. “Is a *germ* positive or negative?” *Overcoming the limitations of understanding isolated words*

Positive or Negative?

In the last chapter, I showed ways we can group words to discover their meanings. This is a skill language learners need to develop for situations when they do not have a dictionary handy, such as when they see words on storefronts, buses and t-shirts or when dictionaries are forbidden, such as during examinations.

But our students also need to be able to decide which groups words belong to *even* when we they can use their dictionaries since most words have more than one definition or word equivalent listed after each entry. Even a frequent word such as *apple* can be something to eat, a person we love—*She is the apple of my eye*—,the name of a big city—*New York is the big apple*, a laptop or a company—*I love Apple products, especially my Apple laptop*—depending on where it occurs.

If words are completely unfamiliar to us, we cannot start by asking whether they refer to *a bird, a plane or Superman*, whether they are *animals, vegetables or minerals*. Rather, we have to try to determine simply whether they refer to something *positive or negative, good or bad*.

To understand the potential usefulness of asking whether something is positive or negative as a first step to selecting the right word equivalent in a dictionary, or, as a first step to finding what category a word is in, do the tasks below, with your students if possible.

Task 1 *Write a + sign next to the words below you think have a positive meaning and a – sign next to those you think have a negative meaning.*

1. *germ*

2. *acids*

Of course, without the words being used in a context, you were at a disadvantage doing this task. But, by asking you to make this binary choice about the words in isolation, I hoped to remind you of the value of presenting words in sentences and paragraphs, in contexts, in order to reduce the ambiguity of their meanings, rather than just in lists. I also hope it will give you pause as to the value of how textbooks commonly list so called *key words* in isolation before giving students a chance to see them in a reading passage or hear them in a listening text.

Most people consider *germ* negative, thinking of colds and the flu. *Acids*? In chemistry class, people learn that acids are dangerous, and so think of them as negative. Many remember the names of some, like *hydrochloric* and *sulfuric acid*. They are liquids that can burn your skin.

*“Is a *germ* positive or negative?”*

Task 2 Draw a + sign and – sign on the same 2 words, *germ* and *acids*, in the passage below. Limit yourself to a minute so that you will more likely make use of your subconscious predicting of meanings.

A message on a cereal box

Shredded wheat is made from 100% wholegrain wheat. Whole grains are better for us because they contain the 3 parts of the wheat grain: the endosperm, bran and wheat germ. The wheat bran and wheat germ have a lot of dietary fiber, important fatty acids and antioxidants. These are all good for our health. When cereals are processed or refined, the vitamins and minerals are removed.

Task 3 Re-read *A message on a cereal box* and as you do, draw a question mark above words you are not familiar with or do not understand.

Some teachers, who I have asked to do this activity, have been surprised to find out that this is a real advertisement and have wondered why ad writers would use such a large number of unfamiliar words in a message on the back of a cereal box intended to try to sell cereal.

Task 4 Below are some dictionary definitions of the two words from *A message on a cereal box*: that I asked you to rate as + or -. Circle the letters of definitions that match the meanings of the words as they are used in *A message on a cereal box*.

germ

- a. the smallest part of an organism
- b. something that can cause disease
- c. something very small that can make you sick
- d. the germ of a cereal is the reproductive part that germinates to grow into a plant
- e. an initial place from where things develop: *the germ of a very clever idea*

acids

- a. chemical substances that neutralize alkalis, dissolve some metals
- b. compounds, usually water-soluble that release hydrogen ions when in *solutions*
- c. sour tasting liquids
- d. the panthothenic acid in wheat germ helps the body process and use energy from food, and metabolizes cholesterol
- e. *figurative*: sarcastic, harsh, vitriolic,

“Is a germ positive or negative?”

Task 5 Re-read the definitions of *germ* and *acids* in **Task 4** and cross out all those words that interfered with your understanding of the definitions—all those words that were like static on a phone:*noise*.

Grouping and using previous experience

Reread the five tasks you completed above and rate them with plus signs according to the two following criteria, where + + + + means strongly agree and + means hardly agree at all.

G (Grouping): The Task provides opportunities for learners to use their natural ability to make predictions based on ways they group meanings.

UPE (Using Personal Experience): The Task provides opportunities for learners to make use of their previous experience to predict meanings.

If you want to compare your ratings with others, this is how most teachers have rated these five tasks.

Task 1 Write a + sign next to the words below . . .

1. *germ*
2. *acids*

G +, UPE +

Task 2 Draw a + sign and – sign on the same 2 words in the passage below . . .

G + + + +, UPE + + + +

Task 3 Re-read *A message on a cereal box* . . . draw a question mark above words you are not familiar with . . .

G + +, UPE + +

Task 4 Below are some dictionary definitions . . . Circle the letters of definitions that fit the words . . .

G + + + +, UPE + + + +

Task 5 Re-read the definitions of *acids*, and *germ* . . . and cross out all those words that interfered with your understanding of the definitions . . .

G + + + +, UPE + + + +

“Is a germ positive or negative?”

Words in isolation and in context

As I mention in other chapters, anyone who heard an algebra teacher ask for the value of X in isolation would consider the question unanswerable, and foolish. Yet, asking for the definition of words at the beginning of a lesson is common in English classes and textbooks. We know X is 7 in the formula $3X = 21$ by ignoring X and looking at 3, the *equal sign* and 21, but X by itself we cannot know the meaning of. The same is true of most words in isolation, particularly if we have never seen or heard the word before.

Even seeing *a germ* rather than *germ* increases the chances of narrowing our choices because the *a* signals a noun: the name of a person, place or thing. Determining if the word is positive or negative gives us a second characteristic of the word.

Seeing it on a cereal box gives us a possible third clue—related to food. So rather than getting no clues about *germ* in isolation, in the ad, we have 3 characteristics: *a positive meaning*, *a noun*, and *related to food*. Using 3 features of a word better enables us to guess the meaning of the word needed in the text we are reading or listening to. And taking notice of this information helps us make a more informed choice of which definition fits the meaning if we do use a dictionary.

Crossing out words we do not understand enables us to focus on the ones we do understand. And as I just said, knowing that *germ* is a noun related to food in a positive way means we can eliminate some definitions, for example, *c* and *e*, quickly. And while reading the definitions, we might make a connection between *b* and *c* even without being sure of the meaning of *disease*, leading to an *Aha!* moment, connecting *disease* with *sick*, and so allowing us to delete this meaning as well.

Even if we notice that *acid*, in *d*, and *acids*, in the ad, are somewhat different words and do not know the meaning of some of the words in *d*, we can match this definition of *acid* with *acids* in the ad.

We can sense that both are positive in meaning, from the word *helps* in the definition and from the fact that we know food ads will be saying positive things about the food the ad is encouraging us to buy.

The word *food* appears only in this definition, and the ad is for food. And we know that both are nouns, from the first word *the* in *d* and from the words *a lot of* preceding the list that includes the word *acids* in the ad.

Other meanings of + and –

The symbols you used to indicate whether you thought *germ* and *acids* were good things or bad things represent a whole range of meanings. A plus sign is used for *expensive* and a minus sign for *cheap* in some ads; on thermometers the signs refer to *hot* and *cold*; on a scale for *heavy* or *light*, *fat* or *thin*; in a birthday card for *old* or *young*; on a medical chart for *active* or *passive*, *high blood pressure* or *pulse* or *low*; on stock market reports, *rising* or *falling share prices*, to name a few other meanings

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of + and -. So, when we look at unknown meanings, we can use the signs to help select meanings of a very wide range of words.

The symbols can also be used for students to illustrate graduations of meanings of words in the same category by using multiple +s and -s, as well. As we read, “She was burned by the scalding water.” and check our dictionary and see that *scalding* refers to a liquid at the boiling point, we know that the word needs more +s than warm or hot. If we know the words *warm* or *hot*, together with our students we can show relationships between *scalding*, and a range of other words concerning temperature by drawing a line using the symbols like this:

++++ ++ ++ + - - - - - - - - - -

scalding *boiling* *hot* *warm* *lukewarm* *cool* *cold* *freezing*

The disadvantage of this visual representation is that though it enables us to see relationships between words we know and words we are learning, all are out of context. So as soon as possible, students should draw the number of *plus* or *minus* signs above the words in the texts in which they occur.

Knowing that *scalding* refers to a higher temperature than *warm* fails to integrate grammar—how words are used—with what they refer to in our experience. Seeing words alone easily leads to such incorrect comments as “It’s a scalding day,” “It scalding today,” and “It’s a boiling drink.” By having students connect the word to how they is is used in context, and by placing and emphasis on learning phrases or groups of words that fit together in chunks, we can decrease the chances of students misusing words.

Beyond Grouping and Using Experience

As teachers and students rated the same five tasks I asked you to do and rate, they thought of other rating criteria for activities used to recognize, learn, and use vocabulary. Here are some of the other criteria that they suggested.

- 1) The task requires using dictionaries for purposes other than finding the meaning of words.
- 2) The task requires creating sentences with certain words.
- 3) The task requires creating word lists.
- 4) The task requires discovering meanings from the context.

I hope you will think of additional criteria and invite your students to suggest their own criteria, and with both of them, evaluate the activities they are doing and compare these with their feelings about the activities and their perceived usefulness of the activities.

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I have found that, though initially students like focusing on words in isolation so they can memorize lists and definitions, when they experience learning words in context, they realize that they use the words correctly more frequently and they can develop their grammatical skills at the same time.

I have based the tasks in this chapter on the three rules below. Think of at least one option to complete the second sentence of each rule, in order to generate some more activities that are different from the usual.

1. *Never have students write or type single words they hear as they hear them.*
Instead, . . .
2. *Never focus on lexical and grammatical meanings separately.* Instead, . . .
3. *Never ask students to make word lists or flash cards with a word on one side and a definition or word equivalent in their language on the other side.*
Instead, . . .

Here are a few of my alternatives.

1. Instead, have students write or touch-type chunks of words after the words have been said, not as they are being said.
2. Instead, integrate the learning of lexical and grammatical meanings.
3. Instead, have students use the two previous alternatives.

Of course, if all we want if for our students to learn to recognize words out of context on tests and not use them, word lists and flash cards can help our students memorize words by rote. But I believe there is no reason our students cannot increase the words they recognize in texts while also learning how to use those words accurately in the same amount of time.

Grade Level 9 Flesch Reading Ease 64% 2,300 words, rounded

“Is a germ positive or negative?”

1.4c. *Dismounted, Horses, Saddles, Reins*—Comparing school knowledge and world knowledge

School knowledge and world knowledge

In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens satirizes Mr. Gradgrind who thinks that only facts are important. One of his students, a female, lives above a stable where her father trains horses. Every morning she feeds the horses and in the afternoon she grooms them. She has reproductions of horses on the wallpaper in her bedroom. When Mr. Gradgrind asks her in class to define a horse she cannot. But of course she knows what a horse is and has more experience dealing with them than any other student in the class.

Mr. Gradgrind then asks a male student to define a horse since she could not. Here is what the male student, Bitzer, said: “Quadruped. Gramnivorious. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisors. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but required to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.”

In 1992, Douglas Barnes wrote *From Communication to Curriculum*. He called Bitzer’s definition school knowledge and contrasted it with the experience of the female student who knew about horses from experience—world knowledge.

Tunnel Vision

Focusing on memorizing words and their definitions out of context, like Bitzer did in *Hard Times*, not only devalues each students’ experiences but also can lead to what many call *tunnel vision*. (Isolating words in listening activities we might call tunnel hearing.) For example, if learners have memorized that the word *orange* refers to a color and that a *bowl* is something to eat soup from, and then read a passage about football in which they see the name of a parade called the *Orange Bowl*, they might not connect the two words either with *football* or with *fruit* or with something we use to eat from.

The Orange Bowl parade is held prior to the American college football Orange Bowl game, which takes place in a stadium in an area of California famous for luscious oranges. Those who watch football games of course have seen the parade on television and so can understand that The Orange Bowl is not about bowls that hold soup or other food and that the word orange is more than just a color.

Jigsaw puzzles

If you look at only one piece of a jigsaw puzzle at a time, it will take you forever to fit the pieces together. You have to look at quite a few pieces at the same time so you can see relationships. Even just looking at the four corner pieces is not enough. Starting

with the corner pieces is fine, but you have to spread out the other pieces to find those with straight edges and colors similar to the four corner pieces.

Tunnel vision limits our ability to solve all sorts of every day puzzles, such as how to use an ATM, get train tickets, find a product we need in a supermarket or drug store, to name a few.



Word frequency and personal experience

In the passage below, the words *dismounted*, *saddles* and *reins* are beyond the first 5,000 words in frequency—*horse* is at 659. But those who have seen cowboy movies or horse races or ridden horses themselves know that people get off a seat on a horse and tie a thin strip of leather from a piece of metal in the horses' mouth to a piece of wood or a tree after they finish riding. (All the references to frequency are from the JACET Word Frequency list.)

A short trip in 1800, first paragraph

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house. After they took the saddles off of their horses and tied their reins to a tree, the fisherman's son gave water and food to the horses.

Dismounted, Horses, Saddles, Reins

When most students read the passage they stop at the words they are not familiar with and say, “I have no idea of what this means.” After being asked to draw a sketch to show the meaning of *dismounted*, almost all draw a mountain. *Mountain* is within the first 1,000 words in frequency—744. But this meaning makes no sense here unless one focuses only on the word itself rather than the other words in the passage.

When I ask students whether *dismounted* is an action or a thing, when they re-read the entire sentence, most say it is an action, which of course eliminates *mountain*. *Saddle* is at 5,040. But most students draw sandals in spite of the fact that *sandals* is not within the 8,000 most frequent words. But again, *sandals* makes no sense. But many students wear sandals so from their experience it is a more familiar word. When I ask whether *saddles* and *sandals* are things or actions, of course all say *things*. The question, “Are saddles things we wear?” leads learners to stop saying sandals.

Initially, our role is to illustrate ways we group meanings. But ultimately, our role is to enable students to generate the categories they need to predict the meanings of unknown words and phrases.

Words in Isolation

Almost all textbooks and teachers begin reading lessons by focusing on words in isolation. This practice not only makes it impossible for students to predict meanings but also teaches students to focus on what they do not know and ignore what they do know.

Teaching students to focus on individual words they do not understand encourages tunnel vision—the practice of looking on single words as we look only at the light at the end of a tunnel when we are riding on a train through a tunnel. Tunnel vision is an extremely unfortunate, perhaps unintended, consequence of focusing on words in isolation.

When students cross out *saddles*, *reins* and *dismounted* and draw a sketch of the meaning that is required in the empty slots, they all draw the objects and the action!

While word frequency information can be helpful in selecting and writing texts, showing students ways to match their experiences with a passage can overcome their initial lack of understanding of infrequent words.

Here are some words and their frequencies to remind you that words in print and words we have experienced in various settings can be very, very different. *Basketball* is at 7,681, *homosexual* at 5,693, *salmon* at 4,619, *cowboy* at 7,004, *horse* at 659, *crow* at 6,564, *pigeon* at 5,508, *mountain* at 744 and *mount* at 3,328 and *arrive* at 481. Since *disagree* is at 2,297 and *disappear* is at 1,019, noticing that *dis* is in front of *mount* should not be that difficult.

All students have seen crows and pigeons from the age of 3 or so. They have experienced the birds and so know the meanings, but maybe they do not know the words for them in English. Until they are shown ways to discover how to match their experiences with the words in texts, they cannot rely on themselves to discover their meanings.

In spite of the fact that *sandals* is beyond the 8,000 most frequent words, students initially said this word rather than *saddle*, which is at 5,040. More have used sandals, but not saddles.

Teaching is reminding people of what they already know, not presenting words in isolation and making no attempts to match meanings learners have experienced with initially unfamiliar words.

Recognition versus use

The chances that anyone will have to use the words *saddle* or *reins* or *dismount*, either in conversation or in writing are very, very, very small. A common activity after teachers define unfamiliar words is to have students use them in sentences. Both defining words and having students use them in sentences are a waste of time.

Nine times out of ten, students make 3 to 5 mistakes in the sentences they produce using the new words. And in many cases the sentences do nothing to show that the student actually understands the word.

The frame “I like” can be used with thousands of words: “I like saddles, I like dismount [*sic*], I like reins.” But none of these sentences shows that the person has any idea what the meaning is.

As I have said many times, the most efficient way for students to get the meaning of unknown words is to look them up in a bilingual dictionary. The least efficient is to try to understand an oral definition from the teacher.

But when students are taking tests, they are usually not allowed to use dictionaries. So it is important for students to learn ways to discover meanings without a dictionary. And even when they use dictionaries they have to make choices. In the case of *saddle*, there are at least 3 meanings for the word as a noun and 3 as a verb, one of which has a negative meaning—“He was saddled with a great deal of debt.” Yet, in the phrase “She’s in the saddle” the meaning is positive, because it suggests she has a lot of responsibility.

So, what to do and what not to do?

It is easier to point out a problem than to suggest some solutions. When it comes to discovering the meaning of words, I have suggested a few activities already

implicitly, but here I list some explicit ones for you to get started with. However, I hope you will come up with more of your own as you have more experiences.

- Ask students whether an unknown word is a person, place or a thing, a feeling, or an activity, narrowing the meanings of the unknown word.
- Have students draw sketches of meanings that fit the slots where the unknown words are.
- When there are pictures or sketches on the pages students are reading, tell them to point to words for feelings, things, actions, etc., that the images illustrate.
- Remind students to think of an experience they have had related to the passage. (Many students have seen people riding horses in movies and some have ridden horses or gone to horse races.)
- If students cannot predict the meaning after trying these activities, suggest that they check the meaning in their bilingual dictionary. But after they find out the meaning, encourage them to draw a sketch or write down an experience they have had related to the unknown word or indicate that it is an action or place rather than have them write the word in their first language. Using the unknown word correctly is crucial in addition to knowing the meaning, and when we write a word equivalent in our first language we focus on the meaning rather than on how the word is used in the foreign language.
- Do not ask students to define the unknown word. Native speakers who are hired by publishers to write definitions produce many that are very difficult to understand.
- Forget the common practice of asking students to use the unknown word in a sentence. As I said above, these sentences usually contain errors, and there are many frames or patterns students can use a word in which does not show that they understand the meaning. Instead, provide structures learners can use the words in and which helps show if the student has understood the meaning or not. The frame “Xs are Y is one of these: “Saddles are expensive; reins are expensive; horses are expensive; saddles are cheap; reins are cheap; horses are cheap; saddles are beautiful; reins are beautiful; horses are beautiful; saddles are ugly; reins are ugly; horses are ugly.”

1,914 words

1.4d. Hold your horses! *Teaching or testing words?*

Ranking definitions of unfamiliar words

In *A short trip in 1800*, you see that the word *horses* is used 3 times in the first paragraph.

A short trip in 1800

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house. After they took the saddles off of their horses and tied their reins to a tree, the fisherman's son gave water and food to the horses. The fisherman asked, "Do you want water and food now before you go to the island?" The oldest man said, "No, we must get there before dark. We can eat and drink as we travel." When the son heard what the oldest man had said, he thought that the situation was dangerous.

Nine readers out of ten at a beginning level of English can draw a horse or make sounds that they have heard horses make. But in spite of this fact, some teachers think it is important for students to learn how to define words and so ask them to define words. If they have trouble a few of these teachers tell the students to read the definition in an English dictionary.

To explore the extent to which asking students to define and read definitions of words is useful, I invite you to do Tasks 1 and 2.

Task 1 Write a definition of *horse*, and ask your students to do so, as well.

Task 2 Compare your and some of your students' definitions with the seven below. Circle any of your students' definitions and the seven below that you think would enable a person who did not know what a horse was to recognize one. I show which of the seven definitions others circled and describe some reasons they gave for their positive evaluations of some definitions and negative evaluations of others following Definition 7.

- Definition 1, by Abdul, an EFL Student: *Horse* is an animal, which has masculens (sic) to run quite fast. Also, *horse* has a long relationship with human such as in war and for sport. (Flesch Reading Ease 80% Grade Level 5.5)
- Definition 2, by Yoko, an EFL Student: It is a kind of animal. It is mammal. It tail is used as many kinds of instrumental's strings, such as violin. It has long legs and runs fast. It likes vegetable. Many people enjoy its race. Usually, it is calm, but sometimes it may be dangerous. It is cute, so a lot people love it. (Flesch Reading Ease 83% Grade Level 3.5)

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- Definition 3, by Juan, an ESOL Student: The *horse* is a kind of animals, which can run fast putting humen (sic) on the back. Its weight is around 500 kg and it has big body with strong legs. People play to bet horse racings. (Flesch Reading Ease 86% Grade Level 4)
- Definition 4, by Maria, an ESOL teacher: A *horse* is an animal with four legs, a tail and long hair on its neck. It is often used to do field work. (Flesch Reading Ease 99% Grade Level 2.3)
- Definition 5, by Shoko, an EFL teacher: A *horse* is an animal often found on a farm or a race track which runs fast. People like to ride this animal. You can see this animal in cowboy movies and pictures of cowboys. (Flesch Reading Ease 81% Grade Level 4.8)
- Definition 6, by Berna, an EFL teacher: A *horse* is a large animal—its body is 4 to 5 feet tall and its head is 5 to 6 feet from the ground. It has four legs and a person can ride it. (Flesch Reading Ease 95% Grade Level 4.3)
- Definition 7, from *Longman Dictionary of American English*, 2004: **horse** 1 (printed in red to indicate it is within the 2,000 most frequently used words) [C] **1** a large strong animal that people ride on and use for pulling heavy things; *a girl riding a white horse* | a horse race >see picture at FARM **2 hold your horses!** *Said when you want someone to wait or to stop doing something.* **horse** 2 v. horse around *phr. v. informal* to play in a rough and silly way (Flesch Reading Ease 66% Grade Level 10)

Others' Rankings of the 7 definitions

Most circled Definition 4, Maria's, and Longman's Definition, 7:

- Definition 4. A *horse* is an animal with four legs, a tail and long hair on its neck. It is often used to do field work.
- Definition 7. **1** a large strong animal that people ride on and use for pulling heavy things; *a girl riding a white horse*.

Why? Partly because of the fact that Maria's was short and Longman's was accompanied with an example: *a girl riding a white horse*. Many circled the other English language students' definitions numbers 2 and 3 in addition to Maria's.

- Definition 2. It is a kind of animal. It is mammal. Its tail is used as many kinds of instrument's strings, such as violin. It has long legs and runs fast. It likes vegetable. Many people enjoy its race. Usually, it is calm, but sometimes it may be dangerous. It is cute, so a lot of people love it.
- Definition 3. The *horse* is a kind of animals, which can run fast putting humen

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(sic) on the back. Its weight is around 500 kg and it has big body with strong legs. People play to bet horse racings.

Why? They said they showed a much wider range of characteristics of horses—weight, horse racing—than the dictionary definitions and showed understanding of what a horse was in spite of the their grammatical and other mistakes.

A teachers who completed this task circled Shoko's and Berna's definitions, numbers 5 and 6:

- Definition 5. A *horse* is an animal often found on a farm or a race track which runs fast. People like to ride this animal. You can see this animal in cowboy movies and pictures of cowboys.
- Definition 6. A *horse* is a large animal—its body is 4 to 5 feet tall and its head is 5 to 6 feet from the ground. It has four legs and a person can ride it.

Why? They said that in 5, Shoko's mentioning a *farm*, a *race track*, *people like to ride*, and *cowboys* meant that students had four associations to help them connect to the animal—a much larger range than in the dictionary. Because Berna in 6 illustrated large, 4 to 5 feet tall and head is 5 to 6 feet from the ground, a few circled hers, also.

Task 3: Check the difficulty of your definition and your students' using the Readability Statistics included in older versions of Microsoft Word. (You can check the Readability Statistics by opening the Options window in the Microsoft Grammar/Spell Check and Clicking the Readability Statistics option.) If you have a new version of Microsoft word, you can check the readability of materials on this website: <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php> or by searching for 'readability statistics' on your favourite search engine.

Even though checking the grade level and reading ease on such short samples of language is not very accurate, to what degree do your evaluations of the definitions I have provided and of those you and your students wrote match their Flesch Reading Ease—100% would be the easiest to understand—and their Grade Level measurements—a 1 means it is suitable for students in the first grade in an American school? Do definitions you circled have a low or high Grade Level and Flesch Reading Ease percentage?

Useful as the readability statistics are, you can teach your students a more analog and perhaps simpler way to determine whether materials are at their level or not; just ask the students to put a check mark above words they do not understand in a text. If they put more than 5 check marks on words in the first 100 words of a text, it is above their level of comprehension and so not useful to read or listen to for the purpose of improving their English abilities.

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Task 4 Cross out any abbreviations, words or anything else in the definitions, including your own, that on reflection you think make the definitions difficult to understand or do not aid understanding. Many teachers have commented that concrete nouns, words like *horse*, can be easily drawn or their meanings can be guessed by placing them in a group of similar things, such as *animals*. These are some alternatives that we can try to begin with, if we decide that defining concrete nouns in English is not very useful or efficient.

Task 5 Write some comments about the value and lack of value of Definition 6, by Berna, and Definition 7, in Longman.

- Definition 6. A *horse* is a large animal—its body is 4 to 5 feet tall and its head is 5 to 6 feet from the ground. It has four legs and a person can ride it.
- Definition 7. **horse** 1 (printed in red to indicate it is within the 2,000 most frequently used words) [C] 1 a large strong animal that people ride on and use for pulling heavy things; a girl **riding** a white horse | a horse race >see picture at FARM 2 **hold your horses!** Said when you want someone to wait or to stop doing something

Here is what some other teachers wrote about these definitions:

- “Berna gives some sense of *large* but the Longman definition does not. *Large* could be the size of an elephant or a whale. In comparing a *cat* and a *goat*, a *goat* would be large. My students said that indicating that a horse is about 4 feet tall was helpful. *Strong* too they found vague, though mentioning *that people ride on (them) and use (them) for pulling heavy things* helped. But they said they faced the same problem with *heavy*: how heavy is heavy? Can a horse pull 100 pounds? 300 pounds? 100 kilos?”
- “Most of my students said that the only reason they understood either definition was that they already knew what a horse was.”
- “The additional information, *a horse race, hold your horses!* did not help in understanding what *a horse* is. Nor did the word *white* help. ‘How does the word *white* help understand horse?’ was what my students asked.”

Your call

I believe that providing definitions and asking students to define words are less useful than other ways of understanding meanings or checking the comprehension of words. But I am not making this statement to convince you. I just want to make my ideas about teaching vocabulary explicit. I think both teachers defining words and asking students to define them and spending a great deal of time reading definitions are overrated as positive classroom activities. Students need to have many strategies for

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discovering meanings other than finding definitions in English dictionaries or word equivalents in bilingual dictionaries, which all but the very youngest already will know how to do.

Also, those who memorize a single definition of a *horse* are taken aback when they hear a person say, “I have a sore throat—I am so hoarse.” In print they might or might not see that *hoarse* is spelled differently, but when they hear it, the pronunciation is the same as *horse*. Those who notice the absence of an “a” before “hoarse” and the presence of “so” before “hoarse” will realize that the meaning is a condition rather than a thing/animal. The fact that function words signal different lexical meanings is all the more reason to avoid depending so heavily on only definitions.

Hearing “I hate students who horse around,” will baffle students just as much if they have only one meaning of *horse* in their minds. Ditto for “Hold your horses!” Having one definition or image of any word can prevent learners from trying to come up with alternative meanings, when the word appears in a different context with a different meaning. Instead, they will probably feel stuck and unable to figure out what it means.

When I was first receiving feedback on this book, a common reaction to early versions of this chapter was “Boring!!!” When I asked teachers why, most said because definitions are so uninteresting, abstract, full of fragments and clauses, tedious and rarely related to their experiences. Perhaps such judgments about dealing with definitions supports my claim that spending much class time with them is not worthwhile. Instead, having students engage in similar tasks to the ones I asked you to do with definitions in this chapter will show you how accurate their English is as well as their perceptions of meanings. They can also rate definitions on how useful each is, or they can rate how useful memorizing definitions is compared to other language learning activities. And they can measure how much time various activities take, such as using bilingual dictionaries, drawing sketches, predicting, and reading and hearing the same word in a range of texts over and over, to name a few alternatives.

And here are some other questions you can investigate around vocabulary:

- Do your students subsequently recognize more new unfamiliar words when they are defined or learned in other ways before, during, or after reading or listening to a text?
- Does writing and then manipulating the sample sentences from dictionaries or textbooks in which words are used correctly lead to more accuracy of use?
- Which ways of learning meanings do your students and you find most stimulating, most challenging, most engaging, most memorable, and/or most enjoyable?

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I would spend the least amount of time possible with definitions and use the time instead to have students read and listen to passages, preferably that they have selected. When students work with passages a few times in different ways, they will have much more exposure to natural language in use than dealing with definitions—an extremely rare and unusual activity in the daily lives of most people. Asking people to define words is not teaching: it is testing.

But of course, do not take my word for any of this: Check in your classes and with your students. Said another way, I invite you, I urge you, to try both to prove and to disprove any and all of my rules, such as *Never explain vocabulary or ask students to define words*—rather, have your students use bilingual dictionaries to get lexical meanings and monolingual dictionaries for examples of correct usage.

PS If you look up definitions for *had* in some dictionaries you will find from 1,000 to 1,500 words including examples of how *had* is used to express various meanings. If you look up *it* you will find only 400 words of definitions. If you say “I had a glass of wine, I had a hamburger, my mother had me when she was 21, I had class starting at 9 am” to cite a few examples, you know that *had* can mean *drank, ate, delivered, attended.*” You can think of scores of other meanings of *had* without understanding the definition. Ditto for *it* which is used to refer to literally hundreds of different things. So while we can learn some fascinating things about words we did not know by using dictionaries and they contain a great deal of information which allows us to learn on our own, practice with vocabulary items which are integrated with grammar and experience is likely to lead to more correct use and retention.

2,603 Words, rounded Flesch Reading Ease 63% Grade Level 9

“Hold your horses!”

1.4e. Beyond definitions *Comparing beliefs about the value of definitions*

Writing reasons for common practices

I do not think that trying to convince people to rethink their practices or assumptions by talking at them or writing arguments is as powerful as inviting people to write down the reasons for their practices, write objections to those practices, and compare what they have written with what other teachers write. I believe it is useful to think about what we believe and how those beliefs might effect what we do in our classes. In this chapter, I would like to take some time to explore your beliefs about definitions.

Please write some positive and negative reasons for these three practices. Then compare your reasons with those others have written.

a. Asking students to define words,

b. You as a teacher defining words,

c. Having students silently or orally read dictionary definitions of words.

Here are some pluses and minuses that other teachers have written.

a. +s and -s of asking students to define words.

- “I believe that asking students to define words is less useful than other ways for them to show understanding of meanings. Students make many grammatical mistakes in their definitions. We rarely ask people to define words in conversations.”
- “Native speakers of English hired by publishers to write definitions write some that are very difficult to understand. If they cannot provide clear definitions even though they are paid to do so and have access to definitions in other dictionaries to compare with those they write, how can we expect non-native students of English to orally give accurate and clear definitions of words?”
- “Since many dictionary definitions are at the 8th to 10th grade level and have Flesch Reading Ease measurements in the 60% range, I wonder about the value of definitions in contrast to word equivalents in the students’ language.”
- “If students write the new words and definitions in their notebooks in the order presented, if they want to check meanings when they see words they have defined in subsequent lessons, there is no efficient way to find the definitions. Even if they write them in alphabetical order, they can do this only

based on the first letter. If they have 30 words starting with *s*, they have to go the *s* page in their notebook and scan through 30 words.”

- “Definitions in dictionaries, or word equivalents in bilingual dictionaries, whether in print alone or also spoken on a CD or on an electronic dictionary, can be read/listened to over and over. But when a teacher has students define words orally or defines the words herself, no matter how rich the definitions are and how much the teacher relates the definitions to the students’ experiences, they have only one chance to catch what is said. If the students write the definitions, of course they can re-read them but unless the definitions are checked, they might contain errors so the students will be re-reading inaccurate English”.
- “If it takes 90 seconds to say or write a definition, including time to think of the definition, students can define at most 1 word per minute. Students could find meanings in a printed bilingual dictionary in from 15 to 30 seconds—3 to 6 times faster. They could access meanings in electronic dictionaries even faster.”

Here are 6 student written definitions of a word. Can you guess what word they are defining?

Definition 1: Abdul: atmosphere that moment place, time

Definition 2: Yoko: what happen during the event

Definition 3: Juan: is the case both people hold

Definition 4: Maria: state involving more than two things and relate to each other

Definition 5: Shoko: position where putted in

Definition 6: Berna: a place, a problem, a time and what happened

If you can write the word they are defining you are the exception. I have asked scores of teachers to write the word the six students wrote definitions of and none were able to write the word: *situation*.

b. +s and -s of you as a teacher defining words,

- “I had my students transcribe a recording of a couple of definitions I had said in class. They could not write more than half of the words in my spoken definitions. I realized that defining words aloud was really a waste of time. And as I was filling the space with my spoken language, it prevented them from either speaking or reading or writing. Each minute I used to define words

was a minute robbed from them to speak, read, or write.”

- “I find it easier to define words by paraphrasing those in a dictionary. Here is a copy of a definition of *situation*:
 - n. [C] a combination of all things that are happening and all the conditions that exist at a particular time and place; *the present economic/political situation in the country* | *In this situation, it is unrealistic to expect a quick solution.*

Flesch Reading Ease 40%

Grade Level 12

Here is my paraphrase: ‘A situation is what happens on any day based on various conditions. So if a storm is coming this is a condition that influences the situation we are in. We need to close the windows if a situation is getting worse.’

- “I add examples to my definitions because without examples I think my definitions are too abstract. I try to give at least two examples because as in the examples below some students may not be familiar with Pakistan but will be familiar with Moscow. Other students might be familiar with Pakistan but not Moscow:
 - The situation for millions of people in Pakistan is terrible. They have lost their homes and all the food they have stored in their homes and all the food they were growing. The rain is still falling so the situation is getting worse ever day.
 - The forest fires around Moscow have created one of the worst situations in the history of the city. The air is full of smoke so breathing is difficult. There is a shortage of water since the army has had to take water from the Moscow area to fight the fires. In this situation, it is unrealistic to expect a quick solution.”

c. +s and -s of having students silently or orally read dictionary definitions of words

- “When I saw that many of the definitions in dictionaries were at a reading level and Flesch readability level far above their competence in English, I realized that even if my students were able to mouth the words in the dictionary definitions, they were unlikely to know the meaning of what they were saying.”
- “Focusing on definitions separates vocabulary from where and how a word fits in a sentence and what words it can be used with. Separating definitions from grammar, from word order and function words, prevents learners from using words correctly. Not one of my students was able to create a grammatically correct sentence using the word *situation*, even though they sort of knew the meaning of *situation*.”

- “Everyone always mentions the importance of context. But I now realize that when I ask a student to define a word that I have written on the board or just said, though it appears in a context that we are about to experience there is no context when I set the task. They can obviously find a meaning in a dictionary or define a word only if they are looking for the meaning of *situation* in a particular sentence that they are reading or listening to. To ask them to define *situation* out of the blue or select the most appropriate definition without a context I am beginning to realize is potentially completely baffling. It is like holding up a small piece of wool taken from a sweater and asking students to say what kind of garment the piece of wool came from.”

Asking for words out of context is also like showing a person 2 centimetres of the white margin of a bill and asking what country the bank note was from or what the denomination was. The United States is one of the few countries in the world that prints all denominations the same color and the same size. Other countries print bills in different sizes so blind people can distinguish them. And they print them in different colors so if people cannot read the numbers or recognize the images, they can know how much a piece of paper money is worth by the color. But even with a magnifying glass, we cannot tell which bill we are looking at if we can see only a small piece. We need the entire bank note and better still other bank notes of different denominations to compare with. Asking students what a word means in isolation is setting an almost impossible task and one that we never face outside of a classroom.”

Different kinds of words

One label that is given to the word *situation* is abstract noun. A label for *horse* is concrete noun. Instead of relying on the labels that we use as language teachers or that are found in the dictionary, you can ask your students to write or draw labels for these two types of nouns on their own. In chapter 1.4d., I suggest you have your students draw a horse rather than define it. But drawing the meaning of *situation*, a more abstract term, is not as easy. So I think we have to ask students to show understanding of different types of words in different ways. They might come up with groupings other than abstract and concrete. Students might say that certain type of words can be visualized, or certain words can be experienced, or students might say that words such as *it* or *had* have no experiential meaning, to name just three types of words. The actually labels students use for a type of word is less important than developing the ability to relate words to each other and to provide a framework for dealing with unknown words. If we focus on one discreet definition in class, our students, at most, will learn that one new word. But if we help students develop a more effective way to understand words in context and to deepen that understanding by making connections between words and word types, students can learn many more words, and better yet, learn words that they discover themselves as opposed to the words picked out in advance by teachers.

1,748 Words, rounded Flesch Reading Ease 63% Grade Level 9

1.4f. The best place to hide a secret *Questioning to tap the information in dictionaries*

Dictionary secrets

I have asked countless fellow teachers and students questions about the prefaces to dictionaries they use. Rarely can they answer because they have not read them. So I now know that if I want to send a secret message to someone I can insert it in the preface to a dictionary. As you work your way through this chapter, I would like you to rate the 8 activities I introduce. Many of these activities illustrate ways students can make use of information in the prefaces of their dictionaries.

Rating the value of dictionary activities

Below I have described 8 activities. I have listed the activities in a sequence so that I can refer to them easily. They were not presented in the same class in the sequence below. Rather, each one was used separately in different classes on many different days. After you have read the description of an activity, I would like you to evaluate it on the basis of the following criteria:

- **V+G** for activities which integrate vocabulary and grammar
- **SS** for those which enable students to learn on their own
- **ME** for activities which result in multiple exposure because to remember telephone numbers as well as words we need to experience them many times
- **RE** for those activities that relate the words to the experiences of students
- **N** for novel activities
- **95%** for activities which use language of which students know 95% or more of the words. This is the threshold at which students will be able to guess the meaning of a word from context
- **R or U** for activities where students understand which words only need to be recognized and not used

Keeping this criteria in mind I would like you to give each activity one of the following overall ratings:

- two plus signs + + next to activities you think very useful for language learning
- one plus sign + next to activities you think are somewhat helpful.
- one minus sign - next to activities you think are not very useful for language learning
- two minus signs - - for activities you think are useless for language learning

Following each description of an activity, I have included comments from other teachers and learners. These comments include others' ratings of the activities. Some of the activities are related to the following passage from a cereal box:

The best place to hide a secret

A message on a cereal box

Shredded wheat is made from 100% wholegrain wheat. Whole grains are better for us because they contain the 3 parts of the wheat grain: the endosperm, bran and wheat germ. The wheat bran and wheat germ have a lot of dietary fiber, important fatty acids and antioxidants. These are all good for our health. When cereals are processed or refined, the vitamins and minerals are removed.

66 Words Flesch Reading Ease 73 Grade Level 6.3

Activity 1. Look up the meanings of these words in your bilingual dictionary: *acid, fiber, germ, and mineral*. Try to remember the meanings. Do not write the meanings in your first language.

Activity 1. Comments Most teachers rated looking up words in bilingual dictionaries – –. Yet research has consistently shown that the quickest way to learn meanings of words is to find their meanings in our first language. If you believe that students should learn on their own—**SS**—and make use of their previous experience—**RE**—then a positive rating is necessary for this activity.

Some rated using bilingual dictionaries negatively because the teacher only asked the students to remember the meanings. The teacher did not provide the students with opportunities to see or hear the words and their meanings in their first language more than one time. So teachers who believe in the importance of **ME**—multiple exposure—rated this activity negatively.

No teachers rated this activity highly because of its novelty—**N**. In fact, most said that their students did this all the time, even when the teachers advised against it. So, most teachers said that *not* using bilingual dictionaries would be novel.

Since there was no direction to distinguish between words that students only had to recognize rather than use, teachers who believed in the importance of **R or U** rated this activity negatively.

Activity 2. Look up the meanings of the words *acid, fiber, germ, and mineral* in their bilingual dictionaries. Write the English words on the front of note cards and the equivalent in your language on the back of the cards. To encourage looking at the words every day to help remember them, there will

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be a quiz the following week on the 4 words plus other words you look up this week.

Activity 3. Look up the meanings of these words in your bilingual dictionary: *acid*, *fiber*, *germ*, and *mineral*. Write the English words on the front of note cards and the equivalent in your language on the back of the cards. Be sure to write the part of speech next to the English words. To encourage you to look at the words every day to help remember them, we'll have a quiz next week on these 4 words plus others you look up this week. I will ask you to write the parts of speech of the words as well as check their meanings.

Activity 2. & 3 Comments. Although these activities allow students to write the words in English and their own language and students were told to look at them many times, some teachers still objected to the use of bilingual dictionaries. Though they agreed that students could learn on their own using their bilingual dictionaries—**SS**—and that comparing their first language with English tapped students' experience—**RE**—these teachers were still somewhat skeptical and found it hard to write plus signs next to these activities.

Other teachers, however, highlighted the request to note the part of speech in Activity 2 and the writing of the words in sentences in Activity 3 and gave these activities a positive rating. These teachers agreed with my belief that integrating grammatical and lexical meanings is important—**V+G**—is important for leaning new words.

Many also rated the teachers' assignment to look at the words every day to prepare for the quiz as very positive. They believe that students need to experience new words many times for them to enter their memory—**ME**.

One teacher wrote that students she has observed know that *vocabulary* refers to learning word meanings after a few days of class. But they misuse the word in statements such as "I want to increase my vocabularies" and "My vocabularies is too small."

Activity 4. Look up the meanings of these words in your bilingual dictionary: *acid*, *fiber*, *germ*, and *mineral*. Write the sentence each word is used in from *A message on a cereal box* on the front of your note cards and the equivalent of the word in your own language on the back of the cards. Leave out one letter in each of the 4 words when you write them in the sentences from the text. So *acid* could be *acd*, *aci*, *cid*, for example.

Activity 4 Comments. Asking students to write the words *acid*, *fiber*, *germ* and *mineral* leaving out 1 letter was rated – – by many teachers. But some rated this direction ++ because they found it not only challenging and engaging, but novel—**N**. Most teachers saw the writing of the sentences with the words as positive since the meanings of words and the use of words was combined—**V+G**.

Activity 5. Read the paragraph *A message on a cereal box* and underline the words you know. Then, look up the words you have not underlined in your bilingual dictionary. Write a synonym in English or draw a sketch above the words from the passage that you looked up in your dictionary. Do not copy the equivalent in your first language.

Activity 5 Comments. Most rated having students determine which words they do not know ++, but one teacher responded by writing, “How can we really know what our students know and do not know?” Teacher’s that rated this activity positively thought it was a way to tap student experience—**RE**. Many thought it was an unusual activity and gave it a ++ rating because of this. This is in tune with my own belief that novel activities—**N**—can be engaging.

The idea of drawing sketches as opposed to a first language equivalent was rated -- by some and ++ by others. The negative raters wrote that it took too much time to sketch and that it was childish. The positive raters thought that students would have a visual image to complement the verbal equivalents and sketching enabled students to relate the words to their experience—**RE**. They pointed out that in textbooks, dictionaries and newspapers, images are frequent and often the visual images illustrate meanings of both known and unknown words.

Asking students to write synonyms, another part of this activity, was usually rated - - because most thought it was too difficult unless students could consult a dictionary. Also, even if synonyms have the same meanings, they are often used differently. And most teachers could not think of synonyms for *acid*, *germ*, *fiber* or *minerals*, so they were sure their students could not, either. Writing synonyms does not combine meanings and grammar, so it does not meet the criterion of **V+G**, either.

Activity 6. Look up words you don’t know in *A message on a cereal box* in your dictionary. When you find a definition that fits the meaning in *A message on a cereal box*, look for a sample sentence in the dictionary in which the word is used. Write the sentence in your notebook. Do not copy the sentence. Rather, look at it, cover it and then write what you remember. Compare your version with the original and edit any differences. Now change the sample sentences you wrote into *yes/no questions*, and write them. Then change the sample sentences into *Wh questions*--ones starting with What, Where, When, Who, or How. Write a couple of these as well.

Activity 6 Comments. Asking students to select the definition or sample sentence that fits the meaning and write it in their notebook was rated ++ by most people. The most common reason was because writing provides a chance to experience the new word again—**ME**. The activity was also rated positively because it seemed likely to enable the students to do so on their own—**SS**. And though the definitions focused on vocabulary, the sample sentences combined grammar and vocabulary—**V+G**.

Changing the sample sentences to *yes/no* or *question word questions* was usually rated in the negative range. Why? Most of these teachers believed that understanding the meanings of unknown words is the most important task. Only a few thought that

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understanding meanings must be combined with using the new words correctly—**V+G**—in this way. On the other hand, some teachers said that changing sentences into *yes/no* and *question word questions* provides controlled practice so that students can use the new words correctly—**V+G**. They added that changing statements to questions using the same new vocabulary items also gives students experience with the same words many times—**ME**. So, these teachers rated this activity positively.

Because learners have to have multiple exposures to the same words to be able to remember them later—**ME**, I personally believe that having students change sample sentences into question forms is ++. Having multiple exposures in slightly different patterns requires that students think more than if they just repeat the same sentence over and over again. So, for those who believe that multiple exposures is important, the changing of sentences into questions should be seen as very positive.

Activity 7. We have around 5 minutes left before the bell. I want those in row 1, 3 and 5 to read *keys to terms* in the introduction of our class dictionaries. I want those in rows 2, 4 and 6 to read the first few paragraphs of *grammar codes* in the introduction of our class dictionaries. Tomorrow, I will ask a few students from each row to tell the class what they found useful or not useful from the paragraphs you read today in these last few minutes of class.

Activity 7 Comments. Some rated the comment “We have around 5 minutes left before the bell” very negatively. They thought it undermined the potential value of asking students to read parts of their dictionaries that they had never noticed. The activity itself was rated ++ by most teachers because they thought it was unusual—**N**. And it reminded students that dictionaries provide information about many features of language other than the meanings of words—**V+G**.

Many also said something like, “The more students can learn on their own the better. We are in class only a few hours a week. While not all the students are keen to learn English, those that are can if I show them ways to learn on their own”—**SS**.

A few teachers gave the activity a ++ rating based on the “5 minutes left before the bell” statement. They said that their students were so used to thinking they could learn vocabulary only from their teacher that if they started the class by asking students to look at something new in their dictionaries, they would expect students to resist. By making the activity seem incidental, these teachers thought it would decrease resistance to the activity.

A few teachers commented like this: “My role is to define words and explain vocabulary. My students appreciate the way I help them. I add anecdotes when I define words and I give them examples from my life as I explain new words. The definitions in dictionaries are impersonal. Mine are not.” These few rated the request for students to learn how much more dictionaries can teach other than word meanings negatively.

Activity 8. Some of you found that *germ* was defined as *A very small thing . . .*, and others as *the smallest element in an organism . . .*. How small is small? One centimeter? One millimeter? An eighth of an inch? The thickness of a hair from our head? One of you said that you found a definition of *germ* that said you need a microscope to see a germ. If you have not used a microscope, look it up in your dictionary and you can see a picture of one. But there is no indication of the size of the microscope, so if you have not seen one, you still don't know the size of either a microscope or the germ that we can use a microscope to see.

As you look up words and see sketches next to the definitions, based on your experience, write in the size of the object illustrated in the sketch or photograph. For example, if you look up *fox* and *lighthouse*, the size of the images are identical in most dictionaries. But from your experience, you might know that a lighthouse is usually between 20 and 50 feet high while a fox is rarely more than 2 feet tall.

If you are not sure of the size of something you see a picture of, you can check the size by asking another student, your parent or checking pictures in your other textbooks. The Internet might be helpful, also. When you find out, if you write in the number of inches or feet or centimeters that indicates the size under the sketch or photograph in your dictionary, you might form a more accurate picture of the meaning of the word in your mind. Of course if you use a digital dictionary you will have to copy sketches and add sizes in your notebooks unless you can print the sketches from your electronic dictionary.

Activity 8 Comments. Many found the suggestion to write the size of items visualized in dictionaries too novel—**N**—to deal with. “We know the size of items we look up.” was a frequent statement. However, a few said that though we might know the size since we are familiar with the word, if the word is unknown, the size is likely to be unknown. So the idea of noting the size of objects or creatures in photographs and sketches in dictionaries was rated + + because size is an important part of any definition. A few teachers wondered why dictionary editors did not note the size in the visuals in their dictionaries. Those teachers who highly value students making use of their experience—**RE**—rated the noting of size positively, also.

Recognition or use?

I mentioned the criterion ‘**R or U?**’—to what extent the words that are unknown need to be recognized in print or speech and to what extent do they need to be used in speaking or writing—only once, when discussing **Activity 1**. But, in truth, **R or U?** is important for all the activities. Many dictionaries indicate the most frequent words used in English with a different color.

Unfortunately, a fair number of our students have the mistaken notion that if they memorize very infrequent words that few people use in either conversations or writing they will improve their English. This lead to students saying things like “My

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throat is arid.” rather than “My throat is dry.” This not only makes a person sound strange, it also illustrates how students are unable to distinguish between words we are more likely to write than say. So the frequency of words we need to recognize in speech or print and those we need to use when we speak or write is a very under recognized problem in the production of textbooks and tests. In all to many countries, those responsible for English tests and texts attach undue importance to the infrequent and obscure words.

Also, . . .

Though I believe that dictionaries contain a great deal of information about the way English works as well as meanings of words—lexical plus grammatical meanings—it is important for students to realize that mastering grammatical terms and rules and using language are two separate activities. If you have your students record their speech in class and transcribe what they say, you can check both the accuracy of information and accuracy of language.

Whether your students use English to discuss movies they like, what they eat or how English works, recording and transcribing the language they use and editing it will show both you and your students what areas of language they have to work on. If students think that mastering the meaning of grammatical terms they find in their dictionaries is the goal, you need to discuss the fact that they can use language correctly without knowing terms.

Matching Beliefs or Premises and Practices

One of the purposes of rating activities in this chapter, and in fact of almost all of the tasks in this book, is to provide you with ways to see to what extent your beliefs; your descriptions of your teaching, and your actual teaching are in tune. One of the ways we can bring our beliefs and teaching into tune with each other is by trying things that we might at first believe to be of little value in class. After I suggested that a friend try eating eggplant one day, he said he did not like eggs. In the same way, we often reject trying alternatives because we believe they will not work and/or because we do not really understand what they are, how to carry them out, or what they can accomplish.

Whether you rate the activities in this chapter positively or negatively, and even whether you try the activities or not, I hope you will see the value in comparing your beliefs about teaching with your teaching practices. By following the steps I asked you to engage in while rating the 8 activities, I hope you will develop new ways to engage in conversations about teaching and what you do in your classes.

I also invite you to try activities you rate negatively and to ask yourself how activities you rate positively might be less useful than you had believed. If you do not try alternatives based on different beliefs, you will not be able to learn anything new about teaching and learning. Try activities you think are a waste of time! Try those you think are very useful and not very useful and compare what students produce by listening to recordings of what they say and looking at what they write. If you and your students find the first attempts trying alternative activities negative, it does not

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mean the alternative activities are not useful. When you try a recipe for the first time, the result might not be what you expected. So you adjust the amount of baking soda, or the amount of time you beat the eggs or the baking temperature. After a few tries, the recipe produces what you had hoped for. In the same way, you need to try alternatives at least 3 times before you and your students decide that the alternative is not worthwhile.

3,632 Words, rounded Flesch Reading Ease 64 Grade Level 9

The best place to hide a secret

1.4g. Superman revisited *More on categorizing and grouping*

Lexical and grammatical groupings

Important as categories related to lexical items are, grammatical groupings can be helpful as well. Grammar labels, such as *noun*, *verb*, *transitive*, *intransitive*, *count*, *uncountable* are also useful for selecting the meaning that actually fits the word you are looking up.

Of course to understand grammar labels, word positions in a sentence have to be learned and connect to the grammar label. Knowing that *book* is in the verb position in “Please book me 3 tickets for Saturday night” enables us to select *buy* rather than *printed pages bound together* when looking up the meaning. Understanding the difference between *transitive* and *intransitive* verbs is another way for people to determine that “shouting drinks” and “shouting so we are heard” refer to *treating/buying* versus *raising our voices*.

One of my main purposes for writing this chapter is to urge you to show your students ways they can make more use of the great amount of information that grammar labels provide. Matching these labels with many examples of language in use will enable everyone to more quickly select the meaning that correctly fits the way the word is being used in the passage being read or listened to. It will also enable learners to depend on themselves and not only their teachers to learn.

Here are some questions, which I call ‘choice questions’, based on the questions “Is it a bird? Is it a plane?” These questions help show how students can make use of both grammatical and lexical meanings.

- “Is a bird a thing?”
- “Is a bird an action?”
- “Is a plane a thing or an action?”
- “Is a bird a verb?”
- “Is a plane a noun?”

Task: *Re-read A short trip in 1800, copied below and as you do:*

- Write a *g* on top of grammatical features such as *the*, *into the* and *over them*, that enabled you to understand a *currach* and a *guillemot*.
- Write an *l* on top of experiential words such as *pushed*, *beach* and *flew* that enabled you to understand a *currach* and a *guillemot*.

A short trip in 1800, short version

The four men quickly pushed a currach from the beach into the water. They jumped into the currach and started to row away from the beach to an island one kilometer away.

When they arrived at the island, a black guillemot flew over them very quickly. It made very loud sounds from its throat, and then it swooped down close to them.

Here are places where others wrote an *l* on top of experiential words and *g* on words that communicate grammatical meanings:

g l l+g l+g l+g g l g g l

The four men quickly pushed the currach from the beach

g g l g l+g g g l g

into the water. They jumped into the currach and

l+g g l+g g g l

started to row away from the beach.

What questions versus choice questions

The most frequent question asked in classes about unknown words is “What does X mean?” But if we are alone and without a dictionary, asking this question is as useless as asking, “How does this door open?” when we are facing an unfamiliar door alone. Faced with such puzzles, at least when we are alone, we begin by trying various options and making choices, mostly outside of our consciousness: pushing the door, pulling it, sliding it, etc.

With unknown words, we sometimes subconsciously search for answers to choice questions, but there is no reason not to deliberately ask them.

Asking choice questions, such as “Is a currach a noun or adjective?” and then, “Is it a verb—an action—or a noun, a thing?” Asking about the function of the word together with noting the word order is another way that helps us to discover meanings on our own in addition to asking about the experiential meaning of words—Is a currach alive? Is a guillemot alive? Can a currach fly? Can a guillemot fly?

Other words for choice questions

When I ask teachers and students for another word for *choice questions*, the most popular is *Computer Like*. Those who suggest this criterion say that focusing on binary choices mirrors the way computers work. They say that labelling files on our laptops to store various documents and photographs is similar to establishing categories in our minds.

While I agree completely with the surface appearance of similarity between these two features of computers and the way our minds work, I think that our minds can establish wider and more flexible and quickly-adjusting ranges of categories and make more diverse binary choices than any computer. The binary choices and groupings that I am advocating, moreover, are intended to reflect the distinct understandings, beliefs, feelings and creative abilities of each individual.

Though I used words like *noun* and *verb* in my examples of grammatical terms, there is no reason you cannot ask your students to create their own names for nouns, verbs, etc. *Action words* for *verbs*, *feeling words* for adjectives, glue words for *prepositions* are a few of the labels students have suggested. These are more concrete than *noun* and *verb* and *adjective*.

The homogenization that the textbook and testing industries try to impose on us and our students, oftentimes by forcing us to think about language in the same way, is similar to the limits that Power point and other software programs try to impose on our freedom to act spontaneously and creatively when making presentations. Though software can be used to create and can free us from mundane activities, like checking the spelling of words in print dictionaries, it does not have the qualities to see and create new worlds that our minds have, and it does not have any emotions, so central to all of learning. By encouraging our students to develop their own grammatical terms, we are allowing them to use their imagination as well as their experience, we are fostering learning as opposed to memorization.

Teaching lexis and grammar separately

In all of these chapters on vocabulary and using a dictionary, I have been advocating the integration of grammar and vocabulary or lexis. Most textbooks present pictures to illustrate word meanings with the words printed below the pictures. But in the case of nouns they never print the articles.

Those who produce charts for our classrooms also separate vocabulary from grammar. We have charts in our classrooms with pictures of fruits, animals, vegetables, birds, flowers, etc. Not one has any articles before the nouns.

You can see that next to the picture of a bunch of bananas the caption is *banana* and under two cherries, the caption is *cherry*. Of course our students do not learn the articles to use with nouns because we only spend a small fraction of available time teaching a reinforcing their use. Most of the time we present words in isolation in our classes and producers of wall charts present words in isolation. We separate lexis and grammar.



As you might know, the articles, prepositions, and helping verbs of English can all be printed on one a4 sheet of paper. These are the words that are truly difficult, not the words like *currach* or *shout* or *apple*. Some of my students said these *function words*, to use the technical term, are like mortar; without knowing how to use these mortar words, even if they knew *currach* or *shout* or *apple*—what they called brick words—they could not master English.

1,272 words

1.4h. “Use *horse* in a sentence.” *A common but detrimental activity*

Why detrimental?

One central theme of this book is to be analytical rather than judgmental about teaching and learning. So you might be shocked that I have said that asking students to use words in sentences is detrimental. As I frequently say, do not believe what I say. Rather, try the suggestions I make and compare the results with the practices you usually use. As you do the tasks in the next section you can evaluate my claim.

Results of asking students and colleagues to use *horse* in a sentence.

Arata asks two of his colleagues to write sentences using *horse*. He also asks his students to write sentences using *horse* in the vocabulary section of their notebooks.

Task 1 Below are sentences his students and colleagues wrote. Write a **C** for **Correct** next to those you think are grammatically correct. Write **NC** for **Not Correct** next to those you think do not use language correctly.

1. **Student Fatima:** I like horse.
 2. **Student Aya:** Horse I bet.
 3. **Student Okon:** I enjoy ride horse.
 4. **Student Hans:** I want to have a horse as a pet.
 5. **Student Juan:** I gave water to flowers by using horse.
 6. **Student Marta:** Horse is pretty. I hope touch to a horse body
 7. **Student Anis:** Because I had to ride dengierase horse has killed person, I praied for god. But the god Said me to be killed b the horse. I sad down.
-
1. **Colleague Charles:** Tom is quite the workhorse doing the work of 5 others.
 2. **Colleague Virginia:** There ain't no horse that couldn't be rode and there ain't no cowboy whose never been throwed.

Task 2 Re-read the 7 **Student** and 2 **Colleague** sentences you just rated as **Correct** or **Not Correct**. Draw a plus sign (+) next to those that indicate

“Use horse in a sentence.”

that the person using the word *horse* understands the word and a minus sign(‘-’) if you are not sure the sentence illustrates understanding.

Task 3 Compare your ratings of both accuracy—**Not Correct** and **Correct**—and to what extent you feel sentences expressed understanding of the meaning of ‘horse’— ‘+’ or ‘-’ — with those others made below. You do not have to agree with the ratings. In fact, not agreeing illustrates one possible drawback in asking the students to do the task: vague criteria.

1. **Student Fatima:** I like horse. **Not Correct -**
 2. **Student Aya:** Horse I bet. **Not Correct +**
 3. **Student Okon:** I enjoy ride horse. **Not Correct +**
 4. **Student Hans:** I want to have a horse as a pet. **Not Correct -**
 5. **Student Juan:** I gave water to flowers by using horse. **Not Correct -**
 6. **Student Marta:** Horse is pretty. I hope touch to a horse body **Not Correct +**
 7. **Student Anis:** Because I had to ride horse has killed person, I praied for god. But the god Said me to be killed b the horse. I sad down. **Not Correct +**
-
1. **Colleague Charles:** Tom is quite the workhorse doing the work of 5 others. **Correct -**
 2. **Colleague Virginia:** There ain’t no horse that couldn’t be rode and there ain’t no cowboy whose never been throwed. **Not Correct +**

Task 4 Re-read the **7 Student** and **2 Colleague** sentences you just rated as **Correct** or **Not Correct** and showed understanding of the meaning + and did not show understanding of the meaning -. **Write some reflections on what the ratings showed.**

Here are some comments Arata wrote about Charles’s and Virginia’s sentences: “The ways they used the word *horse* were too complex and so were not helpful for learners but rather would distract from the most common meaning of *horse*. I think we need to provide more common examples but Charles and Virginia said that they produced unusual examples because they thought they would be more engaging.”

“Use horse in a sentence.”

Some alternative activities

Drawing and making sounds and checking meanings

Rather than asking his students to use *horse* in a sentence, Charles first asks his students in pairs to draw a *horse* and then make the sounds a *horse* makes.

Then he asks students to look up *horse* in their bilingual dictionaries to check whether the sketches they drew and the sounds they made fit the meaning.

In the meantime, on the board, he writes this direction:

After you draw sketches, make sounds and check the meaning, write sentences using horse following these patterns:

A horse is _____ high and weighs about _____ kilos.

A horse makes this sound:

Many people _____ on horses in horse _____.

Horses have _____ tails and long _____.

Horses eat _____ and _____.

Using a dictionary

Virginia asks her students individually to look up *horse* in their monolingual dictionaries and write the sample sentence that they find after the definition.

As the students do the task, Virginia writes this sample sentence and some questions based on it on the blackboard.

Sample sentence: Horses are kept as domestic animals for riding, pulling vehicles, and carrying loads.

Do horses pull vehicles and carry loads?

Is a horse a domestic animal?

Is a horse used for riding?

What do horses pull?

What do horses carry?

“Use horse in a sentence.”

Are horses kept as pets?

Why oh why?

Task 5: write what beliefs Arata, Charles and Virginia have about checking students' understanding of vocabulary and teaching vocabulary.

Here are some beliefs others wrote.

- I, Oscar, have been teaching adults for 4 years. After I define words, I ask my students to use them in sentences, as Arata did. But I never recorded or wrote down what my students said. Looking at Arata's students' responses, I realize that my students have probably been saying and writing incorrect sentences for years!
- I had believed that if my students used words in sentences in class they would be able to use the new words outside of class. But I now understand I was testing my students, not teaching them. And I was not giving them any real help in being able to use the words either in class or outside of class.
- I teach in Japan and along with all the other teachers at my school, we English teachers have banned bilingual dictionaries in our classes because we believe that when students translate they become too dependent on their first language. But I see that Charles had his students use a bilingual dictionary to check meanings, not to find meanings.
- We had banned bilingual dictionaries in our school as well because we thought our students should communicate only in English and if they use bilingual dictionaries they might communicate in their first languages. But I see that Charles provided patterns so his students could communicate in English even if they checked meanings in their bilingual dictionaries.
- I, Berna, and my colleagues, have been big on getting our students to communicate in English but I now realize that just asking students to use words in sentences is not communication. I plan to ask my colleagues to do some of the tasks I just did. My colleagues and I want our students to communicate, as I said. But if they say incorrect sentences day after day, they are not communicating!
- The control that Virginia provided so her students could write correct sentences, I think, is more likely to produce communication than simply asking students to say or write sentences. How is asking students to say a sentence with a word teaching? It is testing!
- Arata seems to think that if his students use a word in a sentence he can determine whether the students recognize the meaning of the word and also can use it.

"Use horse in a sentence."

- Mary, who teaches students 10 years old, said that Arata seems to believe that testing is a big part of classroom interaction. Mary said that she believes that more time should be spent on new words by asking students first to notice how words are used in model sentences, songs, newspaper articles, conversations, stories, etc. that they read and listen to. Mary thought that having students use words in sentences did not teach students anything but rather tested them before they had chances to learn meanings and practice them in correct sentences.
- Fatima had similar reactions as Mary. She said that when students use new words in sentences they make many errors. As a result, it is difficult to understand what the students are saying much less see whether they understand the meanings or how to use the words. She believes that we cannot evaluate students' understanding if they use mangled English.
- John noted that none of the students produced sentences related to their personal experience. This suggested to him that the teachers do not believe that personal experience is an important way to tap learning.

1,444 words

“Use horse in a sentence.”

1.4i. “position where putted in”
Exploring the defining of abstract words

A few tasks

Many frequently used concrete nouns like *horse* can be easily drawn or their meanings can be guessed by grouping if we decide that defining them in English is not very useful. In spite of this fact, many students are asked to define such words.

Task 1 As a first step to compare defining concrete nouns like *horse* with abstract nouns like *situation*, write a definition of *situation* as it is used in the last line of *A short trip in 1800* below.

A short trip in 1800

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman’s house. After they took the saddles off of their horses and tied their reins to a tree, the fisherman’s son gave water and food to the horses.

The fisherman asked, “Do you want water and food now before you go to the island?” The oldest man said, “No, we must get there before dark. We can eat and drink as we travel.” When the son heard what the oldest man had said, he thought that the situation was dangerous.

Task 2 Evaluate the 8 definitions of *situation* below by drawing 1 plus sign ‘+’ next to those that show the person who wrote the definition understands the word and 2 plus signs ‘+ +’ if the definition illustrates the meaning clearly for you. Draw a minus sign ‘-’ next to definitions that fail to show the person understands the word and 2 minus signs ‘- -’ next to those that do not help you understand the word.

Definition 1, Abdul: atmosphere that moment place, time

Definition 2, Yoko: what happen during the event

Definition 3, Juan: is the case both people hold

Definition 4, Maria: state involving more than two things and relate to each other

Definition 5: Shoko: position where putted in

Definition 6, Berna: a place, a problem, a time and what happened

Definition 7, from *Longman Dictionary of American English, 2004:*

n. [C] a combination of all things that are happening and all the conditions that exist at a particular time and place; *the present economic/political situation in the country* | ***In this situation, it is unrealistic to expect a quick solution.***

Flesch Reading Ease 40% Grade Level 12

Definition 8, from *Encarta World English Dictionary*

- n. 1. the general conditions that prevail in a place or society
2. the circumstances that somebody is in at a particular moment.
3. the location of a property
4. a difficult or problematic set of circumstances
5. U.K. a job or position of employment (*formal*)
6. a significant combination of circumstances in a drama, movie, or work literature

Flesch Reading Ease 36% Grade Level 11

Here are some evaluations made by other teachers:

Definition 1, Abdul: atmosphere that moment place, time – – –

Definition 2, Yoko: what happen during the event – – –

Definition 3, Juan: is the case both people hold – – –

Definition 4, Maria: state involving more than two things and relate to each other – – –

Definition 5, Shoko: position where putted in – – –

Definition 6, Berna: a place, a problem, a time and what happened – – –

Definition 7, From *Longman Dictionary of American English, 2004:*

Position where putted in

n. [C] a combination of all things that are happening and all the conditions that exist at a particular time and place; *the present economic/political situation in the country* | *In this situation, it is unrealistic to expect a quick solution.* + – –

Definition 8, From *Encarta World English Dictionary*

- n. 1. the general conditions that prevail in a place or society
2. the circumstances that somebody is in at a particular moment.
3. the location of a property
4. a difficult or problematic set of circumstances
5. U.K. a job or position of employment (*formal*) + – –
6. a significant combination of circumstances in a drama, movie, or work of literature

Task 3 Write your views on the value of asking students to define abstract words such as *situation*. To what extent does this request teach words or test knowledge of words? Here are views others expressed. Though you can just read them, readers have found that they read the comments more carefully if they are asked to in some way comment on what they read. One option is to write an *A* next to those you agree with and a *D* next to those you disagree with. Another option is to draw a question mark *?* next to those that raised questions about definitions that you had not thought of.

- The teacher asking students to define *situation* seems to forget the importance of understanding the meanings of words in context. To ask for definitions out of the blue or select the most appropriate definition without any context can be completely baffling.
- Asking students to define words can be useful because the task reminds students that they have to learn word meanings explicitly. If they write the words with the definitions in their notebooks, they can see how they are increasing their vocabulary week to week.
- Students always make many grammatical errors in their definitions so we are setting them up to fail. Not only do the definitions not make sense to me, they show basic flaws in the students' English ability. If we want to diagnose and treat students' language deficiencies, then asking them to define words could be useful. But it is not useful if we want to see whether they understand or whether they can define. Their definitions don't show understanding usually students cannot define the words.
- When we read or listen, we have to recognize the meanings of words quickly. We do not have time to think of definitions of words. If we have to stop and think of definitions of each word we see or hear, we cannot understand what we are reading or listening to. We need to know the meanings which can be an image in our mind, an

experience we have had, the equivalent in our first language, a synonym or antonym in English, to name a few other ways we can understand other than through definitions.

- Without establishing criteria for the definitions we ask students to produce neither they nor we know when they are successful.
- When a teacher has students define words orally or defines the words herself, no matter how rich the definitions are and how much the teacher relates the definitions to the students' experiences, there only that one chance to catch what is said. If the students write the definitions, they can re-read them but they might contain errors so the students will be re-reading inaccurate English. I can't imagine any way for students to use the definitions of '*situation*' a teacher presents isn't a waste of time and probably detrimental to students language development.
- It's really a matter of time. If I have students define an abstract word like 'situation', it usually takes them even more time than to define a more concrete word like 'horse'. Even with practice, students are still going to need a minute or more to come up with a definition of an abstract word and write it down. In the same amount of time they could have already found the definition in a bilingual dictionary and started to generate sentences with patterns I provide
- Spoken definitions, whether by the teacher or students, are a waste of time since there are so many words to process and understand. My students and I looked at these two definitions again, with our ratings:

Definition 5, Shoko: position where putted in – – –

Definition 6, Berna: a place, a problem, a time and what happened – – –

We did not find them any clearer than the first time. We found equivalents in our first languages more helpful.

Task 4 To what extent is defining abstract and concrete words different? Whether you have done the tasks in 1.4d "Hold your horses!" or not, if you write a definition of a *horse* now, you can compare the process with defining *situation* in the Task 1 in this reading. Here is what another teacher had to say about the defining of abstract and concrete words:

- I find defining *horse* and *situation* equally difficult. What I find easiest is finding words that I am not completely familiar with in the newspaper or in articles on the Internet. For example, as I was engaged in the Tasks in this chapter, I read about the floods in Pakistan and the forest fires in Russia. Reading examples of what is

Position where putted in

happening in the world related to the so called abstract words makes them concrete. Here are some sentences I found:

“The situation for millions of people in Pakistan is terrible. They have lost their homes and all the food they have stored in their homes and all the food they were growing. The rain is still falling so the situation is getting worse ever day.”

“The forest fires around Moscow have created one of the worst situations in the history of the city. The air is full of smoke so breathing is difficult. There is a shortage of water since the army has had to take water from the Moscow area to fight the fires. In this situation, it is unrealistic to expect a quick solution.”

Once I or my students find new words used in the usual way, I ask them to manipulate the sentences. So, for example, I might ask students to write 3 *yes/no* questions about each sentence in the news clips just cited.

Is the situation for millions of people in Pakistan terrible?
Have many Pakistanis lost their homes?
Is the situation getting better?
Is the situation getting worse?

Are the fires around Moscow creating a very bad situation?
Is the situation around Moscow going to improve soon?

When my students change statements to questions, they are integrating the meaning of the word with correct grammatical patterns. They are using English accurately. They are relating the new words to experiences they hear about and see on television or the Internet.

Conclusion

In this chapter on dictionaries and vocabulary, I have pointed out over and over the importance of context. Many teachers often repeat what has become something of a cliché; “Words have meaning only in context.” So many of you who have read my suggestions might think that in fact you are already doing the types of activities I am suggesting. But since almost all textbooks isolate so called key words and most tests require learners to match words with meanings in multiple-choice items—each item totally unrelated to the other—I have seen that dealing with words in context is the exception rather than the rule.

A few years ago many of my students liked The Backstreet Boys. One of their more popular songs was “Baby, I can’t live without you.” When I asked students to say how old the baby in the song was, almost all the students said “one or two years old.”

Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, an adaptation of a play by Bernard Shaw—*Pygmalion*—sings these words: “Words, words, words, I’m so sick of words.” Students around the world write a word in English they do not know on the front of a note card and the equivalent in their own language on the back. They try to memorize the words and their meanings. But none of the words on the cards are related to each other. On one card they read the word *Eskimo*. On another *extensive*, on another *fastidious*, or other quite infrequent words. All these words and none of them related to each other or to any context like a story, an announcement, a news story, etc.

Some find the use of flash cards cumbersome and just look up unknown words in their bilingual dictionaries. But all too often they read the first meaning of the unknown word rather than looking at the position of the unknown word in the sentence and then clicking on other possible meanings.

In the following two sentences, if students click on the first meanings they find of *bear*, *find*, *hard* they will not be able to understand the meaning of the sentences:

“Bears find it hard to bear the heat. When it is very hot they find caves with hard stone floors which are cool.”

Word order, the meanings of sentences, whether words refer to animals—the first ‘bear’—or actions—the second ‘bear’—and ‘hard’ as a feeling or the condition of something we sit on show how counterproductive memorizing individual words out of context can be.

Finally, we have to remember that language is not words plus grammar rules but in the case of speaking “a stream of speech” and in the case of reading “a stream of meanings.” People spoke before they wrote and read. Our division of what we hear into words with spaces between them came long after we started speaking.

For at least the past one hundred years of language teaching, people have been making lists of what they believe to be the most frequent words that we read and hear. There is a great difference between these frequency lists. In spoken English, function words—what some students have named mortar or A 4 words—are the most frequent words used. In written English there is a balance of around 50/50 between those words that express our experiences and those that signify only grammatical meanings.

An even more crucial point is that both in hearing and reading, speaking and writing, the number of words we have to recognize rather than use is very large. We have to recognize many, many more words than we use. But textbooks and tests do not distinguish between these two types of words. So many teachers treat all words the

same whether we have to just recognize them in print or listening or whether we have to use them in writing or speaking.

Finally, I must speak of the value of multiple experiences with the same words, phrases and sentences. Through the decades there have been hundreds of studies comparing ways of teaching words or patterns. There have been even more studies of how we acquire our first and second languages. Most of these studies end with the strong suggestion that further studies are needed. But there is one area of agreement in studies of learning: we need to read, listen to, write, and say any new word or phrase from fifteen to thirty times on different days in order for us to learn it. Of course you really do not need studies to make this point. You know when you learn a new telephone number or the name of a person or a place of employment that you need to hear or see the information more than one time in order to learn it.

In spite of the near unanimous agreement on the need for multiple exposure to the same words and patterns textbooks often only provide only one or two experiences with the same bits of language. So if you decide to try some of the alternatives in 1.4, be sure to provide your students with opportunities to experience the items you introduce at least a dozen times; the more exposures the better!

I wrote 1.4a to 1.4 I to deal with these issues. Do not believe all of my suggestions but do try them and each time you try an alternative you will learn something new about the complexity of teaching vocabulary and the need to integrate the teaching of vocabulary with grammar rather than teaching both of these parts of language separately.

2,607 Words

1.5a. Teacher or student questions? *Exploring differences between questions students and teachers ask*

Frequency of teacher questions

The first study I read about classroom interaction was by Arno Bellack and his team at Teachers College, Columbia University. They grouped all classroom communications into 4 categories:

STRUCTURING: making announcements, giving directions, and giving explanations

SOLICITING: asking questions and setting tasks

RESPONDING: answering questions and doing tasks

REACTING: commenting on structuring, soliciting or responding that others did

One central finding was that 80% of the soliciting was done by the teachers. Many other studies during the last 100 years have consistently shown that teachers are responsible for the bulk of the questions in all subjects, grade levels and class sizes in all countries around the world.

Very few teachers I share these results with are surprised or bothered by the high frequency of teacher soliciting. Are you? To what extent?

Here are a few comments from other teachers.

- “I am encouraged by reports that we ask most of the questions. That is our job. How else can we know whether our students are following us?”
- “It is hard to see how students in language classes can improve their language if all they do is answer questions. The methods books I read are filled with suggestions of how we can get our students to use language more than we do. I am not shocked by the numbers you report.
- “The only thing I am surprised by is the fact that the studies seem not to mention questions in textbooks. Here too, the bulk of the questions are for students to respond to. Students are rarely asked to create questions about readings or to ask each other the questions they create.”
- “Why should anyone be surprised? All tests we give and the tests produced by the educational test industry focus on questions. And most of these questions are not ones that enable students to explore but require students to remember.”

A teacher asking questions

Sara: I gave you five minutes to silently read the first two paragraphs. Now, I want to ask you some questions. Close your books so you cannot see the sentences. My first questions are about the first sentence from *A short trip in 1800*:

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house.

Sara: OK. How many men dismounted?

Ali: Three

Sara: Very good. Where did the men arrive at?

Maria: Fisherman house

Sara: Right. They arrived at the fisherman's house. Who dismounted from their horses?

Okon: Men

Sara: The three men dismounted from their horses. Yes. That's correct.

Task: Write a few reactions to Sara's questions before you continue reading.

Here are some comments other teachers wrote.

- Sara ignored the students' language: "Fisherman house" is not correct English nor is "Men" a fully correct answer. She seemed only to expect the students to be able to say things that were similar to the correct answers.
- Sara said 15 words in her questions, and the students said 4 words in their answers. But in Sara's initial directions, she said 39 words. And in her comments about the answers and restatements, she said 17 words. So in total Sara said 73 words and the students said 4! I am astonished.

Concerning the last comment, directions—which Bellack and his team called Structuring Moves—often consist of language that not only contain useful patterns but also illustrate relationships between sentences. Sara's instructions illustrate sequencing, for example: "I gave you five minutes to silently read the first two paragraphs. Now, I want to ask you some questions about them. Close your books so you cannot see the sentences. My first questions are about the first sentence."

Teacher or student questions?

But when teachers ask students to transcribe directions, few can. (I suggest ways to ensure students learn the language in Structuring Moves in *Twose key words other understand*.)

Many teachers state the goal of a lesson when they begin a lesson. “Today we are going to learn the difference in pronunciation of the past tense in words like *combed, walked and waited*.” When I ask students to write the goals the teacher mentioned, hardly any can. So as usual, try the opposite. Ask students to write what they thought the goal of various activities was afterward, and then compare what they write with what you had in mind.

Sara’s reactions to her transcript

When Sara read her transcript she realized the importance of encouraging her students to ask as well as answer questions. She saw how few words her students actually said. The transcript confirmed for her what 100 years of research has documented: teachers dominate soliciting (asking questions) in the classroom, as well as speaking in general.

Two options for decreasing the frequency of questions from teachers

If you apply an heuristic approach to learning—a rather uncommon word that simply means trying something different—most teachers initially suggest this alternative: have the students write questions about a reading passage. It comes to mind because it is simply the opposite of common practice

Why would this be useful? There are at least five reasons. First, you can circulate around the room and edit what students write. Then, when you tell them to state their questions, they are more likely to say the questions correctly. Second, all students will have a chance to try the activity. In most classes, half a dozen students are always raising their hands or shouting out answers to what the teacher asks. Third, students will have a record of their questions and your edits. Perhaps they can learn from them and, over time, they can compare the frequency of errors and types of questions they ask. Fourth, their questions will contain more words. Fifth, their questions are likely to be more varied because they are written by many different people rather than just one person, the teacher.

A caution! Because students as well as teachers are used to teachers asking about 80% of the questions, I would suggest you gradually increase the amount of questions you require students to ask and decrease the number you yourself ask.

Over time, you can increase the amount of time students are responsible for asking questions until the numbers are reversed from teachers asking 80% of the questions to students asking 80%. If you compare the number of questions you and your students ask it could be very instructive.

Teacher or student questions?

Also, your students will write questions with fewer errors if you ask a dozen questions before you ask them to ask questions themselves. Have them write the questions you write in their notebooks and also be sure to have them write the answers to them as well. Circulate and correct what they write. Have them then ask each other the questions while looking at a fellow student, not at the written questions. Have them turn the questions over before they begin talking. Then have both those who ask the questions and those who respond write the questions and answers again, not by copying but from memory, and then compare the two versions and make corrections.

An additional advantage of having students write your questions and answers before you have them say them is that, in almost all classes, the same few students raise their hands when teachers ask questions. Having all students write first and then speak when you call on them ensures that all students have a chance to answer the questions, not just the usual few. Still another advantage of having students write your questions and their responses is that, nine times out of ten, they will say more than they would have said without writing and more than they have written, and the words they say will be slightly different from those they wrote.

1,313 words

1.5b. Reasons and suggestions for students to engage in unusual practices for producing questions *Multiple purposes for writing questions*

Why write so many questions about single sentences?

Asking students to write down questions the teacher says aloud is a bit unusual. Asking them to create and write many questions about only one sentence in a reading passage is **very** unusual.

Task: write a few reasons for having students create many questions about one sentence. Then, write some advantages and disadvantages of having them do this. And then, continue reading.

Here are reasons and advantages and disadvantages others wrote.

- My students have trouble with using *the, is, do, from, as soon as, they* and all the other words that have more of, or only, a grammatical meaning than a content meaning. Having them manipulate these words gives them practice in using them correctly.
- I can find out to what extent my students understand more precisely if they write the questions than if they only answer them! And I can see from their mistakes the areas of language I have to practice with them.
- When they make and write questions they use much more English than the few words they usually say in response to my oral questions or the printed questions in their textbooks. Also, over a term, they have hundreds of questions and answers in their notebooks, which they can study and practice on their own, if they wish.
- When students write questions, whether I establish the criteria or restrict the source or not, they need to integrate word order, function words, word endings--grammar and experiential words—vocabulary. This often does not happen when students only answer questions because answers to questions can be very short.

Supplying initial words for questions

Sara told some of the students the initial words to use in some of their questions.

Below, I have marked with an asterisk the questions Sara's students produced about the sentence "The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house." from the initial words she provided: *Who, Are, Why*.

1. What did the three man as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house?
2. How many people did visit the fisherman's house?
3. Who was on the trip?*
4. Were the men who arrived at the fisherman's house is 2 members?
5. Are the three men family?
6. Why the three men visited the fisherman's house?
7. Who did dismount from horses?
8. Who are the three men?*
9. Why did they dismount?*
10. Why men go fisherman house?*

When teachers compare the length of time between the direction to write questions with and without initial words provided, many find that without initial words, students do not begin to write for 30 to 60 seconds after those who are given the first words. Those supplied with initial words also write about three times more questions in the time provided.

Initially, the teachers thought that they would hinder the students' creativity if they supplied initial words. But when they chatted with the students, many of them said that they never knew what the teacher wanted them to write and so hesitated a long time before beginning. The range of questions they asked was also wider when given initial words. The teachers and students realized that we can be quite creative within constraints. Composers who write sonatas have developed a huge range of different pieces within the framework. Ditto for poets who follow the format of different types of sonnets, or of haiku.

In my experience students cannot ask a wide range of questions by simply being told to ask questions. Precise and particular small steps, initially following a model and then just creating from initial words, if done over and over in a variety of ways, leads to creativity as well mastery.

Supplying initial words is contrived. I would submit that all classroom teaching is a contrivance. But one key purpose of a useful contrivance is to bring about a desired result. Here, one desired result is for students to master a wider range of patterns and verb forms and use of function words than if the initial words were not given. Another desired result is for students to write more questions

I am not only making these points to try to convince you to change your assumptions. Rather, I am modelling a theme of all of the readings: trying to understand the advantages and disadvantages of what we do and compare our practices and the results with opposite ones.

We have to ask how what we presently think is useful is not useful. And we have to explore how what others suggest that we consider useless can perhaps be useful, and vice versa.

As students share their responses to being asked to write questions, they will almost certainly see that there is great variety in their questions. Sometimes there will be great differences and sometimes the differences will be slight. Seeing these variations is another way to learn language and to learn how to create.

As I have suggested, introduce alternative activities during just 10% of a class period, or even 5%. As you and your students become accustomed to the changes, count the number of sentences and questions they write and the frequency of their errors. See if either of these increase or decrease. Also, ask your students for their feelings about the previous and new activities. It will prove better to start comparing after a few classes, say three or four, because it will take time for students to understand and follow the new procedures.

950 words

1.5.c “What did you do over the weekend?” *Questioning broadly and narrowly*

The usual and the unusual

Nine times out of ten, we ask questions which require people to consider a very, very wide range of responses. During the, say, 32 waking hours of a weekend, for example, most of us do at least one different thing per hour. So we have to think of one of the 32 things we did to answer the question “What did you do over the weekend?”

Additionally, we have to try to figure out why we are being asked this question. Is the teacher checking up on whether we did our homework? Is the teacher checking up on whether we spent time playing games on our computer, which the teacher considers a waste of time? Is the teacher wondering whether we helped our parents with household chores?

When students do not respond, some teachers assume their students did not do anything. Others think that they are shy. A few think the students need practice with the question, which contains only one word that has any experiential meaning: *weekend*. The other six words in the sentence express only grammatical meaning. If you look each of these up in a bilingual dictionary it will be very difficult to translate the sentence into a student’s first language.

One way to see whether we can get more students to respond to our interest in what they did over the weekend is to change this usual broad general question into a series of specific questions. Another is to have them write the questions down in their notebooks before writing their answers. Here are just a few examples of specific questions and prompts that might be easier for your students to answer:

- “Write down three people you saw on Saturday and Sunday that you did not see during the week.”
- “Write down three foods you ate on Saturday that were different from foods you ate during the week at school.”
- “Write down the names of TV programs you watched on Saturday with your family.”
- “Write down one thing you did that you enjoyed and one thing you did that you did not enjoy.”

Writing versus speaking

You will have noticed that in addition to asking more specific questions, I suggested that the students write the questions and their responses. I have found that when students first write down the questions we say aloud as well as their responses, the number of questions they respond to and the amount they produce for a given response are greater. When we say the question only one time, many students do not

What did you do over the weekend

catch what we say. You can also check to see their written versions of your questions and their answers and correct them before they respond aloud.

When I have listened to recordings of students' oral responses, I have usually noted from two to four errors per sentence. Each time a language learner says or writes an incorrect sentence, the error becomes more deeply ingrained in the mind of the learner. So, correcting errors immediately in writing before students say the incorrect sentence increases the chances that the students will use and remember correct English.

Why?

I said that some students might not respond because they do not know why we are asking the question. So every few days, ask the students to write in their first language why they think you are asking them what they did over the weekend. You can ask students to share their reasons, and you can of course tell them your reasons.

Here are a few reasons students wrote:

- You want to see if we studied English.
- You are testing our understanding of your question.
- You would like us to use English naturally.

Here are a few reasons teachers have told me:

- I want students to communicate in English.
- I want them to see that we use English to share information, not just to learn grammar and vocabulary.
- I am curious about what my students do on the weekend.

Sharing

When I talk with students, they are very curious about my personal life. They often ask the same general questions teachers ask. "What do you like about Japan?" for example. Well, do they want to know what foods I like, what trees and flowers I like, what I think of the train system, the convenience stores, etc. I mean there are hundreds of things to like about Japan. And there are some things to dislike, as well.

So, before you ask students what they did on the weekend, you could write on the board six things you did on the weekend, a few you liked a few you did not like. This would both give students a few models and also help them begin to understand why you ask them what they did during the weekend.

Just some of the hundreds

What did you do over the weekend

Here are just some of the hundreds of sentences that students are saying about what they did over the weekend or what their favorite food is which impedes their language learning.

What did you do over the weekend?

1. I meet friend shop. (I met a friend and we shopped.)
2. We play soccer friends. (We played soccer with friends.)
3. Visit shop center so excite. (We visited the shopping center. It was so exciting.)
4. Sleep more. (I slept a lot. I slept more than during the week.)

What's Akiko's favorite food?

1. She's favorite food is choco! (Her favourite food is chocolate)
2. She's favourite place is my room! (Her favourite place is her room)
3. She like sweet thing. (Her favourite food is sweet things.)
4. Every morning she eat much sugar. (Every morning she eats food with a lot of sugar.)

954 words

What did you do over the weekend

1.5d. Asking questions we know the answer to and do not know the answer to *Wondering “Is that dog meat?”*

Personal Photographs as a source of questions we do not know the answers to

When I, as a teacher, ask, “How many men dismounted?” about the sentence “Three men dismounted from their horses.” I know the answer to the question. Some students might wonder why I am asking a question I know the answer to, since in conversations outside of class we do not ask questions we know the answer to. One purpose of questions is to learn something we do not know or understand.

A way for you and your students to ask questions you and they do not know the answers to is to have each person show a photograph on their cell phone to a fellow student and have the fellow student or you, the teacher, ask questions about the photograph. Here is a photograph I had students ask me and each other about.



Here are some questions they asked me, with their errors corrected.

- Is that dog meat?
- Is that a butcher shop or a restaurant?
- Is the boy crying?
- Is the woman smiling?
- Where did you take the photograph?
- Why did you take the photograph?
- What animal is hanging on the hook?
- Did the meat smell a lot? Why does the woman have her head covered and the boys do not?

Asking questions we know the answer to and do not know the answer to

- When did you take the photograph?
- Did dogs come to this butcher shop and eat some meat?
- What country is this in?
- When were you in this country?

If we have our students ask questions about pictures we show them, or if we have students ask questions about photographs their fellow students show them, the number of questions that students ask will increase greatly, because they will ask questions they are interested to know the answers to. We will tap into their natural curiosity.

Having students ask questions they do not know the answers to about photographs of their fellow students not only more closely mirrors how we use language, but students are able to use language in a personal way to express genuine meaning rather than to practice language alone.

A reminder: when students ask questions in pairs, have them record the interaction and then listen to the recording and transcribe/write what they hear. Then, correct what they have said and written and have them write the final draft without the corrections to provide a new text for them to read silently, think and say/listen to and write again.

Personal information

Though personal photographs can be used to elicit questions we do not know the answer to, so can personal questions about the lives of others.

Here are some questions that we can ask our students, our students can ask us, or students can ask each other that they probably do not know the answers to:

- “Have you visited any country outside your own country?”
- “What is your favorite song?”
- “What movies do you like?”
- “What don’t you like to talk about?”

Some students might not want to answer some personal questions. So we need to teach a few comments they can make when there is some personal information they would like to keep personal. “I can’t remember,” “I do not listen to songs/watch movies,” and even a simple, “no comment.” are just a few items we can teach. No one should be forced to respond to personal questions that they do not want to answer.

Though there are many reasons that we ask questions we know the answer to, one is that these questions are safe and do not require students to share personal information they do not want to share.

Asking questions we know the answer to and do not know the answer to

Public Information

In classes with students from different countries, asking impersonal questions about food, dating practices, costs of clothes, housing, movies, and internet access is natural. In classes with students from the same country, here are a few questions that students might be curious about that do not require sharing personal information.

- “How can I find the name of the director of the movie *Rashomon*?”
- “When was inter racial marriage made legal in the United States?”
- “What was the name of the Japanese Admiral who organized the attack on Pearl Harbor?”
- “How many people live in New Zealand?”
- “What wood is best for making baseball bats?”

If students have access to the Internet they can type the questions on a search engine and find the answer. I say type hoping that they are learning how to touch type so they do not have to look at the keyboard as they type in their questions. If students do not have access to the Internet, they will have to search for the information in dictionaries or reference books.

But whether students in mixed classes ask about food, or whether students are all from the same country and ask about things like I just mentioned, students should write the questions they have about public information or general knowledge down in their notebooks so you can correct them. Then they can write the answers to those questions that they know or have looked up. Of course you need to correct these answers also. Then, when the students do finally speak, sharing their question and answers, make sure they are not looking at their written questions or answers but at you or another student. Giving students the time to prepare to answer questions through writing and you checking their writing will result in students making fewer errors, and in most cases, students will also give even more detailed answers than what they have written down.

875 words

1.5e. Fact, Inference, Life--Grouping Questions

3 Types of questions

Task: Group the 10 questions Sara's students created into at least 3 types, not necessarily mutually exclusive. I have reprinted them below.

1. What did the three man as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house?
2. How many people did visit the fisherman's house?
3. Who was on the trip?
4. Were the men who arrived at the fisherman's house is 2 members?
5. Are the three men family?
6. Why the three men visited the fisherman's house?
7. Who did dismount from horses?
8. Who are the three men?
9. Why did they dismount?
10. Why men go fisherman house?

Here are groupings other teachers made:

Fact questions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7

Thinking questions: 5, 8, 9, 10

Incorrect language: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10

Correct language: 3, 5, 8, 9

Unanswerable from the text: 5, 6, 8, 9, 10

Answerable from the text: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7

Long questions—more than five words in the question: 1, 2, 4, 6

Short questions--five words or less in the question: 3, 5, 7, 8, 9,10

Questions the person asking the questions knows the answer to: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7

Gurrey's grouping in 1955

During my early years of teaching, the only label I had read about that referred to questions was *comprehension questions*. But as you have just seen, such a general term obscures many characteristics of questions. As I started to read books about teaching reading, I came upon the 9 types of questions below in a book on language teaching published in 1955 by Percival Gurrey. Here are examples I wrote of each type based on the first sentence of *A short trip in 1800*:

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house.

	Fact	Inference	Experience
Yes/No	Did three men arrive at the fisherman's house?	Were the three men in a hurry?	Have you ever dismounted from a horse?
Either/Or	Did two men or three men arrive at the house of the fisherman?	Did the men get off their horses as soon as they arrived or later?	Is it easier for you to dismount from a horse or a bicycle?
Question Word	How many men dismounted from their horses	How many horses arrived with the men?	How many times have you ridden a horse?

Here is a category that I added to take into account types of questions that some students wrote that did not fit these 9 groupings, though I have supplied these particular examples.

	Curiosity
Yes/No	Was this the first time the three men had visited the fisherman's house?
Either/Or	Was this the first time the three men had visited the fisherman's house or had they visited his house before?
Question Words	Why did the three men visit the fisherman's house?

I have counted the frequency of these 9 types of questions asked by teachers and textbooks in many classes for fifty years. (The three *Curiosity* questions are recent.) My tallies are the same as many studies of questioning. From 70% to 90% of the questions in classrooms are question word questions about facts. Charles Dickens noticed the frequency of fact questions and satirized them in *Hard Times* more than a century ago.

A dialog from Hard Times by Charles Dickens

Mr. Gradgrind: *Girl number twenty, Sissy Jupe, your definition of a horse?*

Sissy Jupe: . . . *silence. (A student whose father raised horses and who fed horses and groomed them every day and who had pictures of horses on the wallpaper in her bedroom.)*

Mr. Gradgrind: *Girl number twenty unable to define one of the commonest of animals. Bitzer, your definition of a horse!*

Bitzer: *Quadruped. Gramnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisors. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but required to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.*

Mr. Gradgrind: *Now, girl number twenty, you know what a horse is. Now we are ready to continue to fill the vessels each of you have so that your brains will be full to the brim with facts! Facts alone are wanted in life.*

Why ask a wider range of questions?

Since teachers have been asking fact questions from 70% to 90% of the time for decades you might wonder why I am urging you to expand the range of questions you ask. Well, for one thing, outside of classrooms we ask a wider range of questions. When we watch mysteries on TV we do not just ask each other what the name of this or that person is or how many people were in the room when the murder was committed. We ask each other who the murderer is. We ask each other which character we like best and which scene is most frightening, to cite a few examples.

When we have coffee with friends we do not just ask what time they left to meet us, whether the train was on time, or what they have in their backpack but how they feel personally and about current events, what they did recently that was exciting. In dialogs on TV programs there are also a wide variety of questions.

Another reason to ask a broader range of questions is that each type of questions we ask activities a different part of our brains. Personal information is stored in a different place from public information.

Finally, our brain is not just a storage area for facts but an organ that is designed to think and process what we read, hear, taste, touch, and feel in a wide range of ways. But if we do not make use of the wide range of actions our brains can perform our brains might well atrophy just as if we do not use our muscles they weaken and become less and less effective in enabling us to move without effort.

1021 words

1.5f. The frequency of different questions in different places Courtrooms TV programs, etc.

Questions in courtrooms

A frequent type of question in courtrooms is *yes/no questions*. “Did you meet the victim by accident?” In classrooms these occur less than 5% of the time. When I ask teachers why they avoid *yes/no questions*, they say that students can respond with one word.

But in courtrooms, judges are constantly telling witnesses to respond only *yes* or *no* because witnesses like to give reasons for their answers. Also, as you saw in Sara’s class in 1.5a, responses to question-word fact questions can also be one word!

Questions in TV programs

Yes/no questions were the norm in a TV program called *What’s My Line?* The four people of on each show’s panel needed to determine the type of work that guests did by asking a series of *yes/no questions*. “Do you work with people? Do you work alone? Do you work with animals? Do you work in your home?”

The opening scene of a superman series on TV contained these questions “Is it a bird? Is it a plane?” and this answer—“It’s Superman!”

Back to A short trip in 1800

As you read on you will see how Questions in TV programs and in courtrooms can be useful in classrooms. I will be discussing the first two sentences from *A short trip in 1800*:

A short trip in 1800

The four men pushed the currach from the beach into the water.
They jumped into the currach and started to paddle away from
the beach.

Frank Smith, who writes about how we learn to read and criticizes standardized tests and the factory/military/banking model of education, says that learning is the reduction of ambiguity. He urges us to encourage students to ask questions like “Is a *currach* a thing or an action?” rather than “What is a *currach*?”

This latter question depends on someone else for an answer, but much of the reading people do is on their own. So, they cannot ask another person.

Of course they can use bilingual and monolingual—bilingual being much more efficient—which now are commonly available via cell phones. But when neither other people or dictionaries are available, knowing how to narrow the possible meanings of words can be useful.

Also, if the student invests some thinking into the discovery of the meaning of a word, s/he is much more likely to remember the meaning than if s/he just looks up the meaning in a dictionary, especially an electronic dictionary.

We do things based on variations of *yes/no* and *either/or questions* every day. We could hardly get through the day without making choices to understand what is initially puzzling. When we see a door to a room we have never entered before and we are alone, we try pushing it. If pushing does not work, we try pulling it. And if neither pushing nor pulling opens the door, we try sliding it to the right or left.

Different purposes of questions

The comments below are related to these paragraphs:

A short trip in 1800

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house. After they took the saddles off of their horses and tied their reins to a tree, the fisherman's son gave water and food to the horses.

The fisherman asked, "Do you want water and food now before you go to the island?" The oldest man said, "No, we must get there before dark. We can eat and drink as we travel." When the son heard what the oldest man had said, he thought that the situation was dangerous.

The fisherman then ran to the beach with the three men. The four men quickly pushed a currach from the beach into the water. They jumped into the currach, and the fisherman and the youngest man started to row away from the beach to an island one kilometer away.

When they arrived at the island, a black guillemot flew over them very quickly. It made very loud sounds from its throat, and then it swooped down close to them.

Flesch Reading Ease 80% Grade Level 1.8

The frequency of different questions in different places

One of the categories of questions we can ask is composed of questions asking for information that the person asking the question already knows—“How many men pushed the currach?” I consider the activity of **teachers** asking these types of questions to be one of the most unproductive practices in ESOL classrooms. But I think that these questions can be very useful when the **students** create them. Why?

When we ask students to make questions, we provide them with practice in manipulating the patterns of the language: “How many men pushed the currach?” “Did 3 men or 4 men push the currach?” “Who pushed the currach?” “Where did they push the currach?” So, the purpose of students asking questions they know the answer to is totally different from a teacher’s purpose. And, if we ask students to create the questions from a reading or listening passage, we have provided them with a chance to produce language they are capable of, which if chosen well, could increase their comprehension as well as their ability to use English correctly.

When teachers ask these types of questions, they just want to know whether students know the facts. But whether two or three or four men pushed the currach is not as important as the patterns found in the sentences “How many men pushed the currach?” and “Who pushed the currach?” In the answer, “Three men pushed the currach,” ‘three’ is not very important. What is important is the pattern. This is a distinguishing difference of language teaching and learning from the teaching and learning of many other subjects.

Of course when students answer each other’s questions they should check the accuracy of the information. But practice in manipulating the pattern is the main goal.

Setting tasks

One of the reasons Bellack and his team used the word “soliciting” rather than “questioning” was because of the need to recognize that students and teachers do more than ask and answer questions in class. They set and perform tasks as well.

In my experience, most tasks focus on knowledge. Here are some examples: “Draw a *currach*. Count the number of *the*’s in the first paragraph.”

But we can also set tasks and ask our students to do activities that require thinking rather than only knowledge or understanding. For example:

- Circle all the verbs that refer to time. And draw a triangle on other words that refer to time. (In this task students would circle *dismounted*, *arrived*, etc. and draw a triangle on words such as *as soon as*, etc.)
- Draw a rectangle around all the living things mentioned in the story. (fisherman, *horses*, *guillemot*, etc.)

- Write a 1 above the largest living thing in the story and a 2 above the smallest.

We can also set tasks that draw on students' personal experience:

- Draw a picture of a horse you have ridden (a boat that you have taken a trip in, some flowers or trees on an island you have visited) or seen a picture of.
- Write down some of the food that you take with you when you go on a trip.

Exploratory talk and final draft talk

Douglas Barnes in a book called *From communication to curriculum* recorded and transcribed questions students ask each other during group work. He analyzed not just English classes but other subjects like science.

One of his findings was that most questions students asked each other were ones that required a cut and dried answer like "How many men pushed the currach?" He called these questions *Final draft questions*. For practicing language and decreasing the number of language errors students make these can be useful.

But when the teacher or students ask only these types of questions the amount of thinking students have to do is very limited. He suggested that questions we cannot find answers to in a text are also important. "Why did the men want to go to the island? Why did they stop at the fisherman's house? What was their purpose for going to the island? Did the men know each other or were they meeting for the first time?"

None of these questions can be answered by searching the reading. Rather they can be answered only by searching our experiences stored in our brains. Different students will give different reasons which helps the students see that we question not only to check facts and practice language but to explore reasons people do and do not do things, to wonder about the relationships between people. These are just a few of the reasons why people engage in what Barnes refers to as *exploratory talk*.

You will have noticed that Barnes uses the labels *exploratory talk* and *final draft talk*, not *exploratory questions* and *final draft questions*. One reason he did not use the word *questions* was he wanted to highlight the importance of the responses to the questions. In some systems which are used to categorize questions, it is only the questions which are grouped. But the only valid ways to group questions depends upon the answers given. We might think that a question we are posing is asking for facts, but if a student gives a response that deals with why the characters are doing what they are doing in a scene or story, they are, regardless of our expectations, engaged in exploratory talk.

1,599 words

1.5g. Other groupings of questions *Bloom's taxonomy and Gurrey's grouping*

Bloom's Taxonomy

There are many ways to group questions. That is one reason I asked you in 1.5e. to group them and suggested you have your students group them, as well. One of the most widely quoted systems is one developed in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom and some colleagues at the University of Chicago. They called their categorization *a taxonomy of educational objectives*. One of their goals was to show, in a systematic way, the differences between questions that required memorizing and other thought processes. Here are the major categories Bloom published:

Evaluation
Synthesis
Analysis
Application
Comprehension
Knowledge

You can find examples of these categories on the Internet, but keep in mind that this system was not developed for second language learners.

Initially, the list had *Knowledge* at the bottom and *Evaluation* on the top, suggesting that before we can evaluate the truth of a statement we have to answer fact questions about the statement. But in fact, we can evaluate the truth of a statement at the same time we confirm the fact.

If we say “yes” in response to “Is it true that 3 men dismounted from their horses?” we are evaluating as well as indicating that we understand the knowledge in the sentence. But many believe that we have to first ask, “How many men dismounted from their horses?” and then evaluate the truth of the response.

The list that Bloom and his team developed from bottom to top is now shown on various sites on the internet in concentric circles or in a triangle which highlights the fact that we do not have to focus first on facts—knowledge—and then comprehension, moving up the list.

Gurrey's grouping of questions in 1955

In 1.5e., I point out that I came upon the 9 types of questions below in a book on language teaching published in 1955 by Percival Gurrey. Gurrey was a teacher of English as a second or foreign language so his taxonomy is easier to apply than Blooms.

Here are examples I wrote of each type based on this first sentence of *A short trip in 1800* :

The three men dismounted from their horses as soon as they arrived at the fisherman's house.

	Fact	Inference	Experience
Yes/No	Did three men arrive at the fisherman's house?	Were the three men in a hurry?	Have you ever dismounted from a horse?
Either/Or	Did two men or three men arrive at the house of the fisherman?	Did the men get off their horses as soon as they arrived or later?	Is it easier for you to dismount from a horse or a bicycle?
Question Word	How many men dismounted from their horses	How many horses arrived with the men?	How many times have you ridden a horse?

Beyond Bloom and Gurrey

Though I found both Bloom's and Gurrey's categorizations very useful, I decided to develop another way to group student activities because I observed that many tasks we ask students to do not easily fit into their systems.

Though Gurrey used the word *grouping*, which I have used rather than *taxonomy*, I was not put off by *taxonomy*. I loved botany in college and saw similarities between the taxonomies that scientists used to group plants and Bloom's taxonomy for grouping questions. Taxonomies often show hidden similarities. For example, strawberries and roses are members of the same family though initially looking at them the similarities are not obvious.

Using both Gurrey's and Bloom's grouping of questions, I developed 5 categories for describing tasks in ESOL classes. The first question I asked is whether the students are taking in or producing. In receptive activities such as silent reading, listening, tasting, or feeling textures, a person is trying to make sense out of content, another person, or something communicated. I coded such receptive activities *attend*.

To distinguish between different productive activities I asked whether what people say or write consist of comments about language or the use of language. "This is a noun" and "These words sound the same" are comments about language. I called these activities *characterize*.

Answering questions that the person asking knows the answer to and recalling facts is another way to use language. This use of language I called *present*.

If the communications do not fit any of these categories, I ask whether the learners are repeating or explaining or inferring. If they are repeating, I call the task *represent same medium*. If they are showing thinking by explaining or inferring, I call the task *relate*.

When we draw a sketch of a word, write a sentence we hear, read a sentence aloud, or write a transcription of a sound like an explosion, we are representing but in a different medium. Copying is obviously different from writing what we hear. So I distinguished an activity such as copying from transcribing by calling it *represent change medium*. “That was an explosion.”, for example.

Some find it hard to believe that we can use language and other mediums such as gestures and sketches in only 5 ways. However, because we can use them to communicate *procedure* (such as giving directions and classroom regulations), *language* (by directing students to change ‘I like to play baseball’ to a question starting with ‘Do’), *content* (such as science or international relations) and *personal experience* (by asking students “Who is your favorite baseball player? Do you watch him play a lot?”), it means that we can combine 5 ways to communicate with 4 areas of content, so we have 20 options.¹

Of course it is not always easy to distinguish language from personal experience. When we ask “Tell me, do you like to play baseball?” in order to find out whether a person does, the question is asking about personal experience. In the same way, “Do you like to watch him play a lot?” can be asked to practice language or to elicit personal experience. The ideal is to combine personal experience and language.

If we can be more aware of the range of questions that can be asked and the purpose they serve, we are more likely to make sure that our students are using and practicing all of the question types they will need to be able to not only ask and answer questions about facts remembered, but their feelings about art, their ideas about how the world works, and their hopes for the future. And if our students can help us analyse questions types and help us to keep track of how we are talking in class, there is an even greater chance that they will find the space they need to ask and answer the questions they are truly interested in.

1,194 words, rounded Flesch Reading Ease 73% Grade Level 6.4

¹I describe my coding system in more detail in the second book in this series, *Exploring and analyzing the results of small changes* as well as in the article *Beyond Rashomon—Conceptualizing and Describing the Teaching Act*, and in my book *Breaking Rules*.

1.6. Considering the emotional component of language learning: *The 5th skill*

“I was a very strange child.” *Typical questions that are part of published reading materials.*

In almost all textbooks, graded readers, and so-called standardized tests such as TOEIC or TOEFL, readers are asked so-called comprehension questions.

Here are a few typical questions about two excerpts from an exceptionally engaging graded reader based on Natsume Soseki’s novel *Botchan*. The title of the first chapter is *Botchan leaves Tokyo for Shikoku*, and “I was a very strange child” is the first line in this chapter. (Alastair Lamond adapted the graded reader I am referring to. It was published by Young Adult Eli Readers.)

Some typical questions:

- Who left Tokyo for Shikoku?
- Was Botchan a strange child?
- Was Botchan a normal child?
- Who wrote *Botchan*?
- Did Botchan leave Tokyo for Shikoku?

I wrote these questions but they are representative of almost all questions in published materials. They enable readers to clarify their understanding of the material. They provide practice of structures and vocabulary in an integrated way. And they provide teachers with guidance in determining whether the level of the material is suitable for each student. So, it is easy to see why these standardized questions are so common.

Other kinds of responses to reading materials *self-involvement, associations and judgments about behavior*

In 1968, a professor at New York University, Louise M. Rosenblatt, wrote a book suggesting ways to make fiction more engaging for students. Rosenblatt drew some of her suggestions from I. A. Richards, who in the nineteen twenties wrote about literary responses for literature majors and scholars, very different from Rosenblatt’s own experience preparing high school English teachers.

Drawing on the insights from Richards as well as her own experiences in reading literature, she suggested that self involvement and personal associations were two important topics to discuss in addition to ensuring that readers got the facts about a story or novel or poem right. “Have you met anyone like Botchan?” is a question that

would see whether a reader was making any personal associations with the story. “How do you feel when you leave on a trip?” is a question that would invite self-involvement.

In Japan, rice fields are flooded with water after the rice plants are planted in the soil. They have to be kept under water for some time. If they are not-kept_under water, the plants die. So, in a scene in the story where Botchan blocks the water flowing into the rice fields, he caused the rice plants to die. When a reader says “I don’t think Botchan should have blocked the water from going into the rice field,” the person is making a judgment about the character’s behavior.

Rosenblatt, and others as well, suggested that these types of prompts for responses involved readers emotionally. They urged teachers to expand the types of questions they asked and to teach students to ask questions on their own so that they would experience the value of emotional responses to literature.

Song lyrics, dialogs from plays and poems--*Sharing feelings*

Many students already know how to interpret and connect with stories and poems at an emotional level, because for one thing, they watch singers and actors. When singers and actors produce lines from a song, a play, or a poem, they do so with a wide range of emotions. Students experience these emotions as they listen and watch on their smart phones or other devices.

One reason we enjoy listening to recordings of singers and actors is we can share both the content of the lines and their feelings.

Sometimes I ask students to draw a series of faces to show the emotions they feel as they listen to each line in a song. Some of these same students who draw faces that show the emotions they feel are unable to answer questions about facts in the song lyrics. I find that letting students connect to the ‘feeling’ of the story helps them realize that in many important ways they do understand what they are hearing.

Another way to explore this duality of emotion and fact is to write some sentences on the board that express a feeling that fits the actor’s interpretation of a story and some sentences that don’t. Then as students listen to a reading of a story, or the acting of a scene of a play, they choose the sentence they think fits and write it down in their notebooks. Different students might choose different sentences, as each has individual emotional reactions. Sometimes we have to point out that a range of choices is OK because students in many cases have been indoctrinated to the idea that only one single reaction can be correct.

And it is not just songs or scenes from plays where we can give our students chances to become emotionally involved with a text. Many graded readers have CDs so we can listen to actors or people good at reading with emotions, as we follow the lines in the book or even just listen.

I was listening to the CD of the Botchan graded reader myself recently and here are some of the lines that stayed with me:

- Once I jumped from the second floor of my school. I do not know why I did it. I hurt my leg. I was in bed for a week. My father was angry with me.
- Someone gave me a small knife. I showed some friends.
- “Your knife is not dangerous,” said one boy.
- Not dangerous? I cut my hand! I remember the pain.

Here are some emotions that I felt as I listened to the recording of these lines: The actor read the lines very deliberately. He did not say the lines with any strong emotion. He sounded like a person who accepted Botchan as a person without making his actions look strange, even though Botchan himself said he was strange.

One crucial difference between sharing emotions and answering factual questions about materials we read or listen to is that each person can have a different and valid emotional response to observation about the same line. One might think an actor reading a text is being condescending and another student might think the reader is simply being deliberate.

There is only one answer to the question, “Where did Botchan go from Tokyo?” On the other hand, as students hear or read emotional responses from their peers they can expand their understanding of the story in new ways. “Oh, I thought Botchan did a stupid thing, but Atsushi said he had once cut his finger once just as Botchan did because he was curious to see what would happen.”

As students share their self-involvement, associations and judgments about the readings with each other, they often say they have a wider appreciation for all the things the author might be trying to say. They see that as important as the facts are, the way characters act can be interpreted in many different ways.

Overcoming the tradition of right answers

When one student says Botchan did a stupid thing and another thought he showed curiosity, some students expect the teacher to say which interpretation is correct. The idea that there is one right answer is not easily overcome.

When all students agree that a character in a story laughed after they read “He chuckled,” it is crucial to ask what the laughter indicated. Was the character embarrassed?

Did the character laugh because he thought something was funny? Perhaps the character did not know what to say, so laughed instead.

To delve into emotional responses we have to constantly ask, “What else might the feeling expressed mean? Tell me more about the emotion that was expressed.” If we do not do this, students are likely to deal with emotions they experience as they read, the same way they deal with facts as they read—as right or wrong. But of course emotional responses to the way characters and all of us behave are nuanced. Why we and others do what we do and how we feel about what we do are topics to explore—not questions to be answered as right or wrong.

Understanding more than making sense of language—
She understood Botchan’s actions

Understood in a subtitle, as in many sentences, can mean different things. In this case, it might mean that when asked what floor Botchan jumped from, she could say the second floor. Or it can mean she had sympathy for Botchan.

If you tend to focus on the ‘making sense of the facts’ meaning of understanding, consider spending a few minutes in class dealing with the emotional meaning of understanding.

When we think of language learning as only mastering reading, listening, speaking and writing, we forget how we react when we read literature, listen to songs or watch plays. We identify with characters, we are reminded of experiences we have had that are similar to those we are reading about, we recall friends who are similar in some way to the characters. In short, we become emotionally involved.

Learners who are reminded that the language they are learning, just like their own language, is meant to convey feelings as well as information are likely to be more interested and invested in developing their language. This is why I see emotional engagement with language as the 5th skill.

1,571 words

1.7a. “A blue fez wool.” *Considering whether to point out and/or correct errors or not to; and if deciding to do so, how to and how not to*

Trying to discover how teachers deal with student responses

I gave eleven teachers a bag containing the items in this photograph, and a lesson plan.



I also gave them a sheet of paper with these directions:

1. The main goal is to teach adjective word order—color, material, object.
2. The names of the materials and the colors are simply means to illustrate the word order. While saying a yellow tie is red is not acceptable, knowing the difference between cotton and silk and other materials is not as important as the word order: color, material.
3. If you have time, you can practice the differences between wearing and holding and/or take and give as in the following examples:

“I am holding the red woolen socks.”

“I am wearing a yellow cotton tie.”

“Take the brown leather gloves.”

“Give me the blue felt fez.”

4. Here are a few of the patterns you can have your students practice. But because it is unusual to tell a person who we are actually looking at what we are wearing, have your students either close their eyes or sit back-to-back when they practice the sentences using *holding* or *wearing*.

Please give me the blue wool fez.

The blue fez wool

Please take the red leather eyeglass case from the bag.
Please give Ali the red cotton socks.
Please give me the red leather glass case.
Please take the yellow silk tie from the table.
Jose is wearing brown leather gloves.
You are wearing a yellow silk tie.
I'm wearing a blue wool fez.
Are you wearing or holding the black wool beret?
Are you holding the blue wool fez?
Am I wearing a black wool beret?

5. I selected these patterns because I observed your students saying “silk red socks, wool gloves brown, blue fez made wool.” I hope the practice will increase the number of correct uses of adjective order, specifically the placement of color followed by material before object. If you use the sentences with *take* versus *give*, I also hope students will increase the number of correct uses of these verbs as well.

However, I also had another reason for giving this assignment. But the teachers had to wait till I reported my observations to find this out.

Your ways of dealing with student responses

Task: Here are some of the sentences students produced in one of the classes. Write what you would say or do as the teacher after each one before reading further.

1. Maria: I hold silk yellow tie.

Your response as teacher: _____

2. Yoko: I holding black wool beret.

Your response as teacher: _____

3. Mervat: Maria, give me the blue fez wool.

Your response as teacher: _____

Comparing your options with those I recorded and analyzed

I video taped the teachers as they taught the lesson I has provided. After they taught the class I we found time to work together to transcribe the lessons. Here are some segments from those transcriptions:

Colin's Class

1. **Maria:** I hold silk yellow tie.

The blue fez wool

Colin: (Ignores Maria's error)
(Gives the black beret to Yoko and gestures for her to say what she is holding.)

2. **Yoko:** I holding black wool beret.
Colin: (Writes “m” and “a” on the board.)

3. **Mervat:** Maria, give me the blue fez wool.
Colin: Maria, give me the blue wool fez.

Richard's Class

1. **Ali:** I hold silk yellow tie.
Richard: O.K.

2. **Okon:** I holding black wool beret.
Richard: Again.

3. **Aya:** Maria, give me the blue fez wool.
Richard: (Asks another student to say sentence.)

Mariko's Class

1. **Juan:** I hold silk yellow tie.
Mariko: Contraction, article, color first.

2. **Rafael:** I holding black wool beret.
Mariko: (Shakes head sideways to indicate “No. There is an error.”)

3. **Rashida:** Maria, give me the blue fez wool.
Mariko: No.(Orally indicates there is an error.)

How teachers treated errors

There were a total of 943 reactions or absence of reactions by teachers to their student's errors. Initially, the teachers were quite surprised by the fact that around 43% of their 943 reactions did not indicate anything was incorrect:

No treatment	18%
No treatment and says “OK” or “Yes.”	4%
No treatment but says “Again”	6%
Repeats the correct form but does not ask student to try again	15%
Total	43%

[Table 1: Teacher reactions which did not indicate anything incorrect in student sentences.]

Here are the most frequent ways they implied or indicated something was incorrect:

<u>Gives part of the correct answer in a different medium</u> example 1 S: Wool T: (Writes an 'n' on board.) example 2 S: He holding. T: (Makes a 'zzz' sound.) example 3 S: A silk yellow tie. T: (Crosses arms to indicate that words have to be switched.)	19%
<u>Indicates "No" with a gesture: shakes head, grimaces, or shakes finger</u>	8%
<u>Repeats with rising intonation</u> example S: I hold. T: I hold?	5%
<u>Repeats student response and says "no" or "uh, uh."</u> example: S: Linen. T: No, not linen.	4%
<u>Gives indirect information or a clue</u> example: S: Linen. (Holding a silk tie.) T: The material is from China.	3%
<u>Presents alternatives</u> example: S: Where are you holding? T: Where or what?	3%
<u>Stops student from continuing response</u> example: S: I holding . . . T: (Holds up hand like a policeman indicating: STOP.)	3%
<u>Gives Information</u> example: S: Woolen black beret. T: Color first.	2%
Total	49%

[Table 2: ways teachers indicated something was incorrect with student sentences.]

No other types of reactions from teachers totalled more than 1%--14 out of the total of 943. So the treatments in Table 1 and Table 2 made up 92% of the teachers' treatments of errors.

Any surprises?

Task: Write down any surprises you experienced after comparing your error treatment methods to those these teachers used and seeing the percentages of their different types of treatments.

When the teachers listened to the student responses as we replayed the video and transcribed what their students had said, they realized that in the class they had not heard many of the omissions of “-‘m”, “-ing”, or “a”, nor many of the reversals such as of black and wool before beret. They realized they had not dealt with some of the errors because they had not noticed them in their classes.

In *Twose key words other understand*, I make this claim: What a person we are talking with says and what we hear are frequently different. By transcribing what they and their students had said practicing the patterns, “I’m holding a blue wool fez,” “I’m wearing brown leather gloves,” etc., teachers found evidence to support my claim.

They also saw that out of 943 reactions to student errors—those that omitted words or changed the word order—among the 11 teachers, “no” was said only 14 times (1%). However, teachers shook their head sideways to indicate that what students said was not correct 73 times (8%). Often, as the teachers were shaking their heads sideways, the students were either in the act of taking an object from another student or were looking at the object they were holding, so it is hard to say how many students even noticed the teachers’ head movements. The teachers were surprised by this discovery. They said, “Aha!” frequently, and with a great deal of intensity.

The low frequency (9%) of indications that a student had left out words or changed the word order (repeats response and says no (4%), presents alternatives (3%), gives information (2%)) is of course tempered by the fact that the teachers had not heard most of the errors.

The prevalence of various treatments obscures something else that was unexpected: when giving feedback, some teachers tended to focus on the meanings of individual words. The most shocking discovery teachers made was that they each used the name of a different material to describe the yellow tie. Here are the materials different teachers determined the tie was made of: cotton, linen, silk, polyester and wool. This was in spite of the fact that “Made of pure silk” was sewn on the label. And despite the fact that, in the lesson plan provided, I had specifically noted that the goal was to practice the sequence color then material before object and not to be concerned about the names of the materials, some teachers still corrected the students when they said a material name that was different from the one the teacher thought, often erroneously, the material was.

In the case of *wearing* versus *holding*, they also focused on the words in isolation rather than the words in sentences. To illustrate the meanings, teachers would hold the fez in their hands and say, “hold.” Then they would put the fez on their head and say, “wear.” They demonstrated the different meanings of the words, but ignored the difference between *hold* and *holding* and *wear* and *wearing* in statements such as “I’m holding a blue felt fez,” “I’m wearing a blue felt fez,” or “I’m wearing a blue wool fez.”

“It’s OK to make an error.”

I have seen hundreds of teachers say the words in the subtitle of this section. As they say it, their students are often erasing mistakes they have made.¹ When first writing this chapter, I thought that it might be better to use another word for error. The origin of error is ‘stray from’, which is not neutral. But if you check a thesaurus, other words are even more negative sounding: blunder, delusion, boo-boo, and misconception.

And some people like to distinguish between error and mistake, the former being something one doesn’t know and so says or understands or does wrongly and the latter being something one does know but says or understands or does wrongly by accident or by chance—by mistake—in this particular instance. I find this difficult to use in practice because I cannot know if a student actually does or does not know something on the spot without checking in rather great detail, which I cannot do constantly in a lesson. Also, the movement from not knowing something, to possibly knowing something, to definitely knowing something is a process. Sometimes it is fast, and sometimes it is slow. The same goes for knowing something in our mind to being able to use it or do it correctly. So, I have decided just to stick with the word error.

When I have asked students how they feel about the word *error*, they say they are comfortable with it. They say that in math class, they know if they add 243 and 320 and say the total is 663, it is an error. And those who play baseball know that if they miss catching a ball and a person gets to first base as a result, they have made an error.

When I have asked students why they erase mistakes at the same moment that their teachers are saying, “It’s OK to make an error,” many of the students say that though their teachers say this, when they make a mistake in writing, they lose points. When they say a word or sentence wrong, the teacher says, “Who knows the right answer?” rather than giving them another chance or help to correct what they say. So, these are the reasons they give for why they erase and correct errors and why often they do not say anything in class.

Like the teachers who recorded and transcribed their lessons about color-material-object word order, it is crucial that you also record and transcribe how you treat errors. Once you have a transcript, you have to compare what you say at one time in the class—“It’s OK to make mistakes”—with how you actually treat students’ errors at other times. You also have to ask students their opinions about how you deal with errors and their feelings about the word itself.

In my own teaching, I have found that the more frequently I use the word error, the more students get used to it and are not bothered by it. They know that errors are a part of learning and see how the frequency of errors decreases over time. At the same time, I find a way to accept anything a student might say in class. If there is an error, I write the student’s whole response on the board and suggest clues and then provide time for all the class to re-write the response in their notebooks. I then circulate around the class and look at each student’s changes and give more information or nod my head or say something like “Yes, you got it.”

¹ I saw one teacher tell her students to keep their erasers in their pencil cases and to simply edit what they had written, say, during a dictation. She had them re-write the edited versions on a separate page in their notebooks. The students said that these steps enabled them to see their progress. When she asked them for other reasons why she preferred that they not use erasers they came up with a range of reasons: we make a mess on our desks, erasing what we wrote incorrectly takes more time than just adding letters or re-writing words.

As important as correcting students' errors might be, I also believe, as was explored in *Nveer epxailn gaammr relus or aks yuor sdutens to and Albabka fur !* that we need to provide our students with enough information so they do not mis-learn patterns in the first place.

Reasons for their surprises

During our discussions of the videos and transcripts, the teachers were hard put to give reasons for what they had said and done and not said and not done. None of the teachers had previously recorded or observed their teaching. They were so surprised by what they observed—loads of Huhs!—that they could not immediately state reasons for their reactions and lack of reactions to student errors. They were perplexed.

Most teachers said that their focus on individual words was totally out of tune with their idea that they should teach patterns of language rather than individual words. Some said that their students had asked explicitly asked to be corrected. And keeping that in mind, the teachers thought that they had been correcting their students. But they realized that most of the corrections they made were in what their students had done in written assignments, not what they said in class.

I explored these teachers' corrections and perceptions of what they did along with them 35 years ago, long before the focus on so called communicative language teaching, in which accuracy has been valued much less than getting the message across. The teachers I worked with had read about the importance of accuracy and the mastery of patterns, not about the importance of fluency. I do not accept the juxtaposition of accuracy and fluency. The first definition of fluency in most dictionaries is “the ability to speak or write a foreign language easily and accurately.” So why the juxtaposition?

Breaking rules by trying alternative treatments

Since the teachers were perplexed about what they had been doing, we decided to stop trying to justify or explain the teachers' reactions we had observed together. Rather, we decided to make a list of what had been done and then suggest opposite treatments to each item in the list.

Here is a list of what teachers did and opposite options they wanted to try:

What teachers did	Opposite options to try
<i>Implicit/indirect feedback</i>	<i>Explicit/detailed feedback</i>
Repeating with rising intonation what student had said	Saying: - 'T' is wrong. 'I'm' is right.
Saying the sentence correctly	Saying: - Color, material, thing. - Red/plastic/eye glass case. - Blue/wool/fez. - I holding a tie. 5 syllables. I am holding a tie. 6 syllables - Say 6 syllables. - Say 5 syllables.
Avoiding saying "No" or "It's wrong."	Saying: - No. It's wrong. - It is not correct.
<i>Focus on individual words</i>	<i>Focus on sentences, patterns and groups of words</i>
Teacher said: - wear, silk - hold, wear	Saying: - I'm holding a yellow silk tie. - Ali's holding a blue wool fez.
<i>Speech alone</i>	<i>Speech and writing</i>
Asking students to speak only and unconsciously ignoring spoken errors because were not heard	Asking students to write responses and correcting errors in their notebooks before they speak

Next Steps

I have only written some of the suggested opposites for how to deal with student errors. I believe it is more useful to illustrate ways you can create alternatives by doing the opposite of what you are doing in class than to simply prescribe a new and limited number of alternative options. I hope as you break rules in your own classes, you will generate alternatives I have never imagined.

Another source of opposites that you can find and apply to your classrooms is from teachers who teach different subjects. So, record and transcribe teachers who teach math, IT, history, etc., and observe how they treat errors. When I have observed math classes, I have rarely seen a teacher say "Good." after a student says, "two plus two equals five." I have never heard a math teacher say, "As long as I know that you understand the process, your mistakes are OK. You added rather than subtracted, fine." Of course math teachers want their students to understand the processes, not just get the right answers, but getting the right answer is also important.

In IT classes, students get feedback from the software they are trying to use. Each time they click an option that does not produce the result they want, they are being told “No”. And so they try an alternative. Those who learn Microsoft word in IT classes get feedback from using the Spelling and Grammar Check. Those who learn to type either in IT classes or on their own using software programs decrease the number of errors because they can look at the screen on their laptops as they type and see corrections that are suggested.

In sports, players get feedback from other team members and their coaches, as well as from their opponents. “Hold the bat lower;” “Imitate the way I move my arms when I do the breast stroke;” “Face forward not down as you run.”

Though I frequently say, I do not want you to believe what I say, I think it is important for you to understand my assumptions so that you can see to what extent they are true. I do not believe for a moment that teachers who make the following types of statements do not respect their students, but I think that such comments could imply that the students are incompetent: “As long as I think I get the message my students are saying, I don’t correct them. I think that if I correct them, they will feel bad and will not try to speak or write. I do not want them to feel afraid of using English.”

If a student says, “Please give me the blue fez wool.” and we give the student the fez, I believe we are not fulfilling our responsibilities. What if a nurse gave a patient three pills rather than only one as prescribed? Would that be OK? Or if one carpenter tried to take the hammer from his partner when, in fact, his partner had asked that he take the nail he had just bent when he tried to hammer it into a piece of wood?

Learners of English want to be just as accurate as math students, members of sports teams, nurses, and carpenters. And they can be. ESOL students can use English correctly, just as they can do math problems and other daily activities correctly, by seeing, hearing and using the correct forms over and over. If students make more than 1 or 2 errors in something they say or write, we are asking them to perform above their level of competence. And so we have to lower the difficulty level of the material we are using.

A Final Thought

When I have shown video clips of ESOL teachers to people who have never taught, they often ask, “Why are these teachers so condescending, so patronizing?” ESOL teachers are shocked when they hear about such comments. ESOL teachers consider themselves to be supportive, helpful, understanding and caring. Though the way ESOL teachers treat errors is only one activity that might contribute to these kinds of negative comments, as you examine ways you treat errors, if you ask yourself how caring might be interpreted in another way, you might see some aspects of your teaching you had not seen before. A possible big “Aha!”

3,690 Words, rounded Flesch Reading Ease 71% Grade Level 7.2

1.7b. “OK or NOT OK?” *Assisting students in the development of their abilities to evaluate the accuracy of what they write, read, say, and hear*

Huh! moments

The student with his hand on his forehead has just realized that what he had written was not only different from the original text but also incorrect. He had been doing Read and Look Up, which I introduce in 1.1a *Albabka fur!*



Once your students have become familiar with the steps for doing Read and Look Up, you can help them learn ways to evaluate the accuracy of the written versions of the passages they read silently and then say, listen to, and write. A key goal of my version of Read and Look Up is to read, think about, say, listen to, and then write the meanings of larger and larger groups of words, not to simply say and write the sense groups that were initially read silently.

Paraphrasing and substituting different words as students say and/or write the sense groups is not only allowed but also encouraged because such changes show understanding. But, if the spoken versions are not written, differences between what students say and/or write and the original text cannot be analyzed in detail. If either you or your students do not have a chance to evaluate the written versions of what they say, they cannot develop either fluency or accuracy. And you cannot see what structures they need more practice with. Said another way, students have to move beyond saying and writing sections of text to evaluating the accuracy of what they produce vis a vis the original text.

“OK or not OK?”

Initially, students will need your guidance to determine which changes are acceptable and which are not. And so, your key role is to provide feedback to enable your students to become more aware of what altered versions are acceptable or not.

There are five steps in this process:

- 1) Students identify differences between their written versions and the original texts.
- 2) They rate each difference as either OK or Not OK.
- 3) They revise each of the Not OK differences.
- 4) They compare their evaluated and corrected versions with their partners.

Finally: 5) you evaluate their ratings and corrections.

As you reiterate this process over time, students will develop their own inner criteria for identifying acceptable changes. Developing the ability to create acceptable changes takes a great deal of time, yet is of crucial importance. Being able to say and write what we first silently read with acceptable substituted words and paraphrases is an unambiguous indicator of language competence.

A reminder about the difficulty of the text

When the material students are reading is too difficult, they are not only unable to paraphrase, but they often cannot say and write the sense groups on the page. Ask students to draw an x to partially hide words they do not understand. If they X-out more than 2 or 3 out of 50 the material is too difficult for this activity. They should understand 95% to 98% of the text.

Before students engage in the Read and Look Up activity, tell students to look up words they do not understand in their bilingual dictionaries. If the electronic dictionary or internet dictionary they are using allows them to hear the word pronounced, make sure to encourage them to listen to the words they don't know a few times before they engage in the Read and Look Up activity. Students should know the meanings and pronunciations of all the words before they say and write them. Otherwise, some of what they say and/or write will have no meaning for them; it will be pointless nonsense.

Just as you can say *Albabka fur!* orally, in spite of the fact that you do not understand what the words mean, so students can often say words from the opening lines of the story *A short trip in 1800* (printed below) such as "reins" and "dismount" without necessarily knowing their meaning.

As students read, knowing that "reins" are things and "dismounted" is an action shows partial understanding. But knowing that reins are leather straps and knowing that dismounted is getting off of a horse is better. Knowing the word equivalent in one's first language shows the meaning most clearly, in many cases. At least it often brings one closer to the meaning of an unknown word faster than through a definition

"OK or not OK?"

given in the foreign language or through guessing from the context for less than high intermediate level learners.

Below I add steps to those I introduce in *Albabka fur!*, to write on the board when your students are ready to move to the checking and editing stage of Read and Look Up. This is but one way to help students edit what they wrote during a Read and Look Up activity. Whether you follow these specific steps or some others that you and your students develop is not important.

Also, if your students normally use erasers, ask to keep them in their pencil cases or desks. Why? Initially, I told students why I wanted them to cross out rather than to erase or white out what they wanted to change. But after explicitly explaining why I didn't want the students to use erasers, during a break between classes, I asked a couple of them what they thought about not using erasers.

They came up with many more reasons for not using an eraser than I had thought of. They said using erasers were not good for the environment and made a mess on their desks, for example. I had told them that that if they erase, they cannot see their progress and that I wanted to be able to see what patterns they needed more time with. So, ask your students their views on editing versus erasing and you may get some surprising insights, as I did.

Here are the first two paragraphs of the reading passage in *Albabka fur!* again along with the additional steps:

*A short trip in 1800**

The three men dismounted from their horses / as soon as they arrived /
at the fisherman's house. / After they took the saddles off of their horses
/ and tied their reins to a tree, / the fisherman's son / gave water and
food / to the horses./

The fisherman asked, / "Do you want water and food now / before
you go to the island?" / The oldest man said, / "No, / we must get
there before dark. / We can eat and drink / as we travel."

1. After the you have read the passage silently, paused, said it to your partner and you and your partner have written it down, individually, compare what you both wrote with the text.

"OK or not OK?"

2. Circle any differences between your version and the original, either in your version or the original or both.
3. Write OK above those items you circled that you think are acceptable changes—different words but correct grammar.
4. Write NOT OK above those items that are different in meaning and/or incorrect grammatically.
5. Change the items in your version that were NOT OK so that they are OK, using a different colored pen so it will be easier for another person to check your corrections.

As you walk around class checking your students' work, be sure to remind them that when they add omitted words or change words, they should not copy. Rather, they should look at the original sense groups, read the words silently, cover them and wait ten to fifteen seconds or so to think about the meaning and then write the words. Also remind them that there is no rush. The goal is understanding and accuracy, not speed, and not just the general meaning.

In Appendix 1, I have printed substitutions some students made along with the teacher's and students' evaluations of the substitutions.

If your students think their edited versions are too messy, they can re-write them neatly without omissions or inaccurate language on separate pages in their notebooks. But again, it is crucial to ask them to consider how copying the final edited version is different from looking at the sentence to be rewritten, then covering it, waiting ten to fifteen seconds or so, and then writing it again with no incorrect substitutions.

My students came to realize that they could copy words written in a script they knew even if they did not understand what they were copying. They came to believe, as I do, that copying fails to engage our minds in learning as much as looking, thinking, and then writing do. We can all copy very easily without understanding even when using a script we are not familiar with.

Also, one of my students, who was taking a course in history, mentioned that he had just read that many of the monks in the middle ages, before the printing press was invented, could not read, and yet a great many were required to copy pages from the Bible to produce new books. As the Bible is so very long and as they did not understand the meaning of what they copied, it is no wonder that there are different versions of many pages.

Raising the ante

In poker and many other games, people constantly increase the amount of money they bet. In chess, to increase the challenge to each player, the amount of time allowed between moves is decreased. In *The sound of silence*, I illustrate two ways to raise the

“OK or not OK?”

ante for students doing Read and Look Up: changing the format and the amount of time between reading silently, thinking, speaking and writing.

Doing the same activity in the same way leads to routine, which dampens curiosity. I have used the words “sense groups” in this episode and others without any explicit information about what the term means. Others use the words ‘meaningful mouthfuls’ and ‘breath groups’ to describe the same idea.

As your students do Read and Look Up, they will draw slash marks in various places. Some of the breaks between words will help them make sense of what they read, and others will not. Over time, as they draw lines at different places in the sentences they read, they will begin to see that there are natural boundaries that identify sense groups. Again, if we cannot read a group of words silently and then, after waiting a short time, say them aloud while looking at another person, then the group of words is not a sense group for us.

Punctuation is the first signal most notice as an indication that it is time to take a break and say what one has just read silently. Prepositional phrases signal another type of sense group. Reading and saying “dismounted from their” or “dismounted from their horse as,” rather than “dismounted from their horses,” makes little sense.

As your students draw slash marks you dictate, as I explain in *Albabka fur!* and then draw their own, they will begin to see what grammatical signals communicate meaningful chunks of language. To the extent that your students and you are reading to understand the meaning, you will begin to see what boundaries signal sense groups.

As you check the changes students made which they marked “OK” and which they marked as “Not OK,” you can check where they drew slashes. If the words between two slashes do not contain a sense group, you need to write “Not OK” above that group of words. For example, the slash marks after *three, from, soon, arrived,* and *the* do not indicate sense groups:

The three / men dismounted from / their horses / as soon / as they
arrived / at / the / fisherman’s house./

If we cannot read a group of words silently and then, after waiting a short time, say them aloud while looking at another person, then the group of words is not a sense group for us. Having students indicate differences between their written versions and the original, rate their differences, and make corrections and compare their ratings and corrections with fellow students, followed by teacher evaluations, leads to an awareness of how structural words, patterns, singular and plural word forms, and vocabulary bind together in a more powerful way than having students memorize rules about how English works.

1,995 Words, rounded; Flesch Reading Ease 64%; Grade Level 9

“OK or not OK?”

1.7b Appendix 1: Substitutions some students made along with the teacher's and students' evaluations.

Task: Look at each items and mark it OK or NOT OK. Try and think of a clear rational for your choice.

1. / They took saddles of their horses / _____
2. / The fisherman ask / _____
3. / The old man said / _____
4. / The fisherman's son / gave drink and food / to the horses. / _____
5. / and tied their ropes to a tree, / _____

Here are how other teachers evaluated the above substitutions:

- Leaving out glue words like *off* in 'they took saddles of their horses' was not considered to be acceptable. Teachers felt that the grammar has to be correct. NOT OK. (1)
- Accuracy is important. Saying the wrong form—*ask* for *asked*, *old* for *oldest*—was not considered a proper substitution. NOT OK. (2, 3)
- Substituting *drink* for *water* was constantly evaluated as being OK. Similarly, some students substituted *ropes* for *reins* in students Read and Look Up exercises and these were also evaluated as being acceptable. So words with meanings that match are seen as acceptable even if the meaning is slightly different. OK. (4, 5)

Here are a few more evaluations of common substitutions:

- If the same part of speech is used correctly but the word has a different meaning, it was considered to be NOT OK. For example replacing the word *house* with the word *shed* in the sense group / at the fisherman's house / was considered to be wrong.
- Most grammatical mistakes were also considered to be NOT OK as substitutions. For example substituting the single word *boat* in place of *a currach* was considered wrong, whereas replacing *a currach* with *a boat* was considered to be an acceptable substitution.

1.7c. **Tempting blind alleys:** asking to what extent what we think is useful and effective is not and to what extent what we think is not beneficial is.

Earl Stevick who died in 2013, wrote some of the best books on language teaching and learning in the past 50 years. Two of my favorites are *Helping People Learn English* and *Memory, Meaning and Method*. In his writing and in conversations he called activities and fads which sounded good but when examined were detrimental to learning, “Tempting blind alleys”.

I just returned from two conferences and the two most tempting blind alleys that I heard about over and over were 1) if students made mistakes it did not matter as long as they got their point across and you understood them and 2) correcting students’ mistakes makes them feel bad.

Consider these words a student said in one of my classes:

“Police shoot thief”

Which of these sentences did the student intend to say?

1. A policeman shot a thief.
 2. The police shot a thief.
 3. A policeman shoots a thief.
 4. The policeman shoots a thief.
 5. The policeman shoots the thief.
 6. The policeman shoots at a thief.
 7. A policeman shoots at a thief.
 8. A policeman shoots up a thief. (In a drug set up.)
 9. A policeman shoots up a thief. (Shoots many bullets into the person.)
 10. The policeman shoots up the thief. (In a drug set up.)
 11. The policeman shoots up the thief. (Shoots many bullets into the person.)
- 12-23. If we substitute *policewoman* for *policeman* in 1 to 11 we have 11 more possibilities.
- 24-47. If we substitute *policemen* and *policewomen* for the singular form, we have 23 more choices.
- 48-95. If we substitute *thieves* for *thief* we have 47 more options.

Of course the person might have been asking a question rather than making a statement! Did a policeman shoot a thief? When we hear the three words we do not know if the speaker intended a statement or a question since we cannot see a question mark or a period. We might hear a slightly different intonation. But we might not.

Unless we write out the 95 options I just suggested and ask the student which one was intended, how can we know what he or she wanted to say? The words *a*, *the*, *at* and *up* and the different forms, *shoots* versus *shot* and *police* versus *policeman/policewoman* all change the meaning in very big ways.

As I’ve mentioned before, the words *a*, *at*, *up* and *the* are called function words. Since all the functions words can be written on one piece of A4 paper, another label for them is ‘A4 words’. But when I asked some students to suggest a name for these words they suggested mortar words. They

Tempting blind alleys

said that words like *policeman*, *shoot* and *thief* are brick words. Without mortar words we cannot be sure what is intended. We then noted that mortar is made from lime, cement, sand, and water. So the students said that lime could be word order; cement different forms of words like *shoots* and *shot*; sand could refer to words like *the*, *at*, *a*; and water could be upper case letters and punctuation which indicate when a sentence begins and ends.

Lets go back to that first tempting blind alley idea. It might sound positive to hear that as long as we get the intended message from a student that it does not matter if the sentence is incorrect, but exactly which of the 95 options do you think the student intended? I have just asked a question that it is impossible to answer. And today and everyday around the world millions of students are saying incorrect sentences which many teachers think they know the intended meanings of but which, in fact, there is no way they can know the intended meanings of.

If we ask students to write a sentence that we say and they write something quite different, we are faced with the same dilemma. How can we determine that they got the message we intended? Here is a sentence that a teacher said which she asked her students to write:

I like ice cream.

Here are some of the renditions students wrote:

1. I spring.
2. I like spring.
3. I ice.
4. I cream.
5. Like cream.
6. Like ice.

Which of the 6 show that the student understood the meaning? I would say that none of them understood. They wrote a few words they thought they heard, but they did not understand what the teacher said.

At one of the conferences I just attended where I heard these tempting blind alleys, a group of teachers were staying at the same hotel I was staying at and wanted to go to dinner together. I was familiar with places to eat in the area close to our hotel so when I saw one of the teachers over the course of the day, I would mention that there was a tapas bar very close to our hotel. Nine of the ten teachers said something along the lines of, "I have never gone to a topless bar!" The tenth teacher lives in Barcelona and he said, "I am not interested in going to a tapas bar since I can eat them every night."

Penny Ur was one of the plenary speakers at the 2013 JALT conference. One of the questions she discussed was whether students want to be corrected or not. For decades I have asked students how they feel about being corrected when I chat with them after classes I have observed. All the students say they want to be corrected and corrected explicitly. They do not find it useful for the teacher to say "I saw him yesterday." after the student says, "I see him yesterday."

My questioning of students has been incidental and in usually in conversations. Penny has given questionnaires to hundreds of students in Israel asking them about being corrected when they speak

and when they write. She reported that 90% of the students want explicit feedback both when they speak and write!

The idea that students do not want to be corrected because they are embarrassed is another tempting blind alley!

In most of my writing I remind teachers that we have to constantly ask ourselves how what we think is useful and productive might not be useful or productive and how what we do not think is useful or productive might actually be useful and productive. In Earl Stevick's books and conversations and in Penny Ur's work and her plenary in Japan the same questions are asked.

But you do not need the support of Penny Ur, Earl Stevick, or even myself in order to challenge fads—or even widely accept teaching norms for that matter. Tempting blind alleys are tempting because they provide seemingly simple answers to complicated problems. Just remember, no teaching difficulty was ever solved by underestimating the capabilities of our students! And no expert, regardless of how many books they have written, is in a better position to know about and challenge your students than you are. Enjoy! Enjoy!

John

1,198 Words; Flesch Reading Ease 73%; Grade Level 6.8