

The English Teacher Vol XVII October 1988

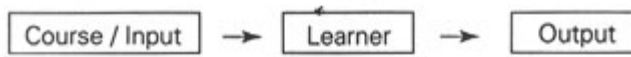
Teacher Beware!

H. Hepburn

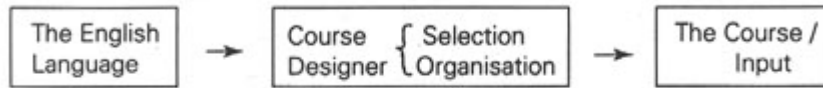
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With the new K.B.S.M. syllabus now in operation and other new syllabuses in the pipe-line, it might be appropriate to consider some of the techniques which course designers urge teachers to use when presenting items to the learner. These techniques may be described as the teacher's friends, but a closer scrutiny of their value, often suggests that they are not so much friends, but false friends - so teacher beware!

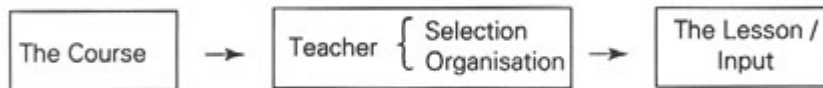
Any course in English allows learners to come into contact with certain parts of the English language. These are the parts chosen by the course designer who organizes them in a particular way to form his course which will later be presented to the learner by the teacher. The process may be shown as follows:



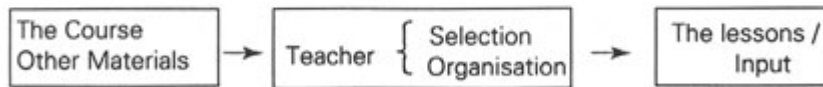
Such a process involves the course-designer, the teacher, the learner and the course. The first stage is the course-designer's.



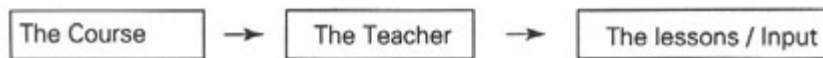
The next stage is the teacher's.



If the teacher is relatively free to use the course as he wishes, then he will probably select parts of the course and organize them (plus other material) in his own way:



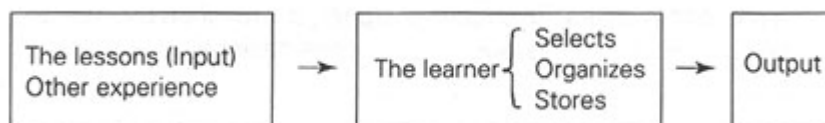
If the teacher is not free to use the course as he wishes, the situation may be shown as follows:



This is the model most course designers prefer even though the teacher (being a different person with different attributes) cannot present the course designer's ideas perfectly. However, course designers do try to control the learner's experience by providing teacher's handbooks as well as recorded tapes, video films, workbooks and the like.

The third stage belongs to the learner. In Malaysia, English is taught as a subject in school and for many learners, especially in rural areas, the school lessons are likely to form their only and total exposure to English. In the urban areas where English is often a second language, or even a second first language, the English lessons may, as a result, form only part of the learner's exposure to English.

It is also thought that once the material has been selected and organized by the course designer and presented by the teacher, all the learner has to do is store it, especially if the course is a structurally based one. However, the fact that the learner's output does not always correspond with the input (lessons taught or material presented by the teacher) indicates that the learner also selects, organizes and stores the material presented to him. This situation may be shown diagrammatically:



If the input is inappropriately presented, the student will have difficulty in processing the data, which means the selection, organisation and storage, by the learner, of the material presented to him, may be rather less than systematic. As a result, retrieval of that material will be somewhat haphazard,

leading to faulty output or unwanted forms. The realisation "that certain methods of teaching do not produce the results claimed for..." (White 1975), has recently been accompanied by a growing interest in what the learner contributes to the language learning process. It has become clear that the learner's errors are not random but conform to a pattern which reflects both the cognitive and developmental characteristics of the language acquisition process. It is felt that "... far from indicating a weakness in the learner... learner's errors provide a guide to the way in which the Language input (i.e. the lesson input) is dealt with by the learner". (ibid).

A brief examination of some of the techniques advocated by course designers for teachers to use when presenting new items, will show that great care is needed in dealing with them as they can help to produce non-standard or unwanted forms. The techniques are all taken from a syllabus used in South-East Asia. I have named them as follows: Captain Contrast; Mrs Include-All; Miss Use of Ordinary English; Mr. Overlap and Miss Order of Input.

(a) Captain Contrast

Frequently two items are presented together as a teaching device. It is contended that such a technique makes learning harder and not easier. For example, in one item, the contrast between his and her is advocated by the following sequences:

(a) This is Ahmad. (b) This is Piah.
 He's a boy. She's a girl.

Apart from the wanted forms, this process can also produce **He's is Ahmad*, **This a boy*, **He's a Ahmad*. If (a) and (b) are combined, then one is likely to meet, through cross-association, forms such as *This is Piah*. **He's a girl*, especially if the L1 does not distinguish male and female personal pronouns. "This distinction of gender does not generally exist in the native languages of S.S.E.S.M. (sub-standard English of Singapore and Malaysia) speakers." (Tongue 1974: 118).

It is suggested, therefore, that only one item should be presented and that should be the most frequent one. The teacher can return to the second item when the first one is established.

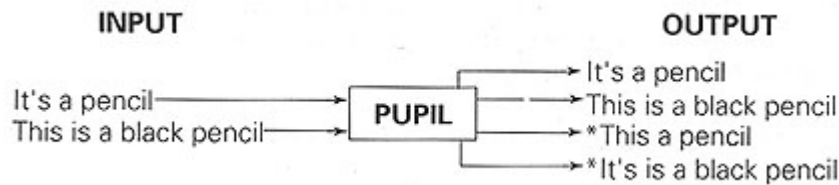
(b) Mrs Include-All

The syllabus also seems to include items which do not really meet a language need which the learners will appreciate. Thus for the item dealing with the attributive adjective of colour, the sample lesson advises the teacher to display different colours, using the following sequence.

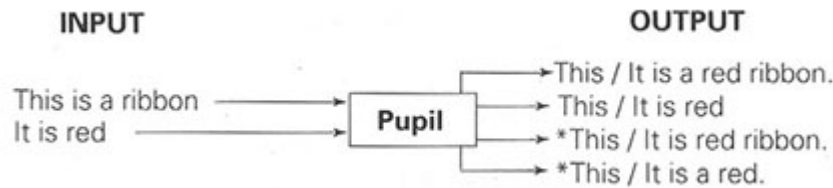
This is a pencil.
It's a pencil.
This is a black pencil.
It's a black pencil.

Though adjectives are useful in providing a means of identifying objects in a group, there does not appear to be a need at this beginning stage to state the same thing in a different way. An alternative (It's a pencil) appears to have been used because it exists in the language and it seems methodical to include it at this point.

However, it also allows for errors of cross-association.



Later, the following items are used as part of a sequence to teach "What colour is her ribbon?" The teacher has to say "Look at this. This is a ribbon. It is red." Here alone exists opportunities for crossassociation.



(C) Miss Use of Ordinary English

There are also occasions where it is doubted whether the language used represents the ordinary use of English. Thus the present continuous is presented by advising the teacher to perform a series of actions and to describe what he is doing. "Teacher does actions and says e.g. I'm running." Later in the course it is indicated that the teacher should contrast the presentation of 'now' in the above presentation with the use of the simple present to represent every day examples. "(iii) In this item, the only meaning taught is the use of the tense for habitual actions. (iv) In this item ... the simple present should be associated with phrases like "every day... etc." From the learner's point of view the distinction between the two forms at this stage, is that habitual acts are indicated by the use of the simple form and events concurrent with speech are indicated by the progressive form. Against this position, the following points are to be made:

(i) We do not describe what we are doing to people who see us doing it, unless we are demonstrating some process in which case the simple present or imperative is used.

This reflects the essential unnaturalness of the common procedure for teaching the use of the progressive form in English, whereby a teacher performs an action and describes it at the same time: 'I am opening the door, etc.' In fact a person is most unlikely ever to need to do this.... precisely because it conveys nothing that the hearer cannot see for himself."
(Wilkins 1974:85)

(ii) "Verb form counts at C.I.E. in Hyderabad, 1963 ... showed that when the reference is 'now', the simple present is used on 95% of occasions and the present progressive on only 5% of occasions." (McEldowney 1972).

In other words the forms used do not represent the ordinary use of English.

"What is wrong here is not the form - but the situation. For the teacher is demonstrating and ought to use the simple form, but he is pretending not to be demonstrating but acting in a 'normal' non-demonstrating type of situation. The class-room unfortunately creates a

situation (that of demonstration) in which the progressive would not normally be used, and, therefore cannot be taught naturally.... in this case the difference in the forms used in the pretended situation and those likely to be used in the actual situation (in the classroom) can only create confusion."

(Palmer 1965:85)

(d) Mr. Overlap

There is also the technique which brings into close association two or more items which are similar in form but different in function or usage. The prime example is bringing into association verb forms which normally occur in separate contexts and differ in usage. The learner who has to carry out a conversion exercise from 'present to past' tense is confronted with the problem of manipulating within the same context two different verb forms each with a quite different use as in this example "Begin this passage with 'last Month'"

"A favourite device used by many teachers and books is to bring out the contrast between the use of the present progressive and present simple tenses by bringing them together in the same situations. It may be the fact that the same situation is being dealt with in examples of this kind that helps to confuse the student. There is always this possibility of confusion if two competing verb forms are used with reference to the same situation, if the two forms have not been firmly established before they are brought into competition."

(Bruton 1964)

The result is generally a muddling together of both forms and usage because the learner is unable to associate each form with the context in which it typically occurs.

Nonetheless the item dealing with the "Simple Present (Habitual)" tells the teacher that "Since this tense is often confused with the present continuous, it should be taught and practised in contrast with the present continuous. The sample presentation juxtaposes "I'm cleaning my teeth" and "I clean my teeth" thereby inviting by cross-association, the incorrect forms of */ cleaning my teeth and * I am clean my teeth.

(e) Miss Order of Input

The final point about the syllabus is that the teaching of certain items in a certain order tends to undermine the learning of previous items. One item contains this sentence, "The '-s' in the third person singular causes a lot of trouble... Pupils need to associate it not only with 'he', 'she' and 'it' but also with names and singular nouns". Yet in the next item, the teacher is instructed to elicit statements in the simple present by questions, e.g. "Do you eat rice every day?"

Within the same unit on the next page, there appears the following technique for the presentation of the negative of the simple present:

John eats fish every day.

He doesn't eat meat every day.

Still within the same unit but on the next page appear the question forms in the simple present e.g. "Does he...?"

If it is difficult to establish 'John eats', a too early introduction of questions and negative statements provides opportunities for potential unteaching in that in sentences such as "He does not eat..." or "Does he eat...", the pupil experiences *'he eat' rather than 'he eats'. He perceives the -s as being redundant. "The principle which we can derive from this is that learning is more likely to be facilitated if formal features associated with different usages and functions are presented and practised in separate, distinctive and authentic contexts." (White 1975).

The syllabus, with its structural progression and its presentation techniques outlined above, tends to initiate interference and redundancy. Here there seems to be a need for minimizing the effects of interference and redundancy.

The tendency to reduce and simplify as a means of diminishing the learning load is promoted by the presentation technique which brings into close association two or more items similar in form but different in function. An item should hence be selected because it has a certain function to perform, distinguishable from others and not because a grammatical description of it exists. Where an item has more than one function, then only one (the most frequent or useful) should be established at any onetime. Contrasting items which are similar tend to lead to cross-association and therefore such items should be separated. When one item has been firmly established, then the other may be introduced. Questions and negatives should be delayed and taught as systems in their own right, rather than as transformations.

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