

CHALK TALK

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INTRODUCTION

This section of the MEXTESOL JOURNAL will be reserved largely for the presentation and discussion of practical teaching ideas, activities, the use of materials, equipment, and so on. I will not normally have a lengthy introduction as in this first edition of the section.

It is fashionable and reasonable now to say that language-teaching methods have come and gone as passing fashions, and that there can be no such thing as "the perfect method". Language-teaching methods certainly have both come and gone, sometimes in the wake of developments in the related disciplines of linguistics and psychology, where each new theory has tended to attack rather than modify and add preceding theories. However, there has been some accumulation of knowledge and basic principles in linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, and one of the more important bits of knowledge is that we know we don't know exactly how languages are learnt, though at the same time, we are not totally ignorant about what conditions may favour language learning. The message is, therefore, that we should not put all our eggs in one methodological basket, but should take a fairly broad-based approach, guided by a few rather general principles rather than governed by a set of very precise principles and taboos.

This message can be rather disconcerting for the teacher who yearns for a single, simple, strict method. We sympathize (and reserve some of the sympathy for ourselves), but that's life and language-teaching for you. Many teachers, especially those who have been converted to a new method, do not have this perspective of language teaching.

Such is the case of teachers who are converted by a short and perhaps slightly doctrinaire training course; they may have been converted from total inexperience, or from years of struggling, unguided efforts, or from another approach which the new training course has thoroughly discredited in their eyes (many a grammar-translation teacher has become a fervent audio-lingual or audio-visual teacher ready to turn scornfully on any remaining grammar-translation teachers). The simple line taken by many training course instructors may be justifiable and realistic under the circumstances, and the trainees are often

much more effective in the classroom than before taking the course, they are more methodical, following a clear and coherent sequence of steps, using a clear and coherent repertoire of techniques, and, above all they approach their teaching with confidence and enthusiasm. The price they have paid may be that they are inflexible and have acquired a little bigotry, and, for a time at least, this may inhibit their further development as teachers and make it almost impossible for them to incorporate certain ideas into their teaching.

We are not suggesting that "anything goes" in language teaching today (it is probably impossible to find a teaching situation in which you could justify requiring beginners to give spontaneous 15 minute talks after only 15 hours of classes, or giving choral repetition of all the verbs that double the final consonant before adding-ing, or requiring students to give a translation in Spanish of one English preposition after another in a long list). There are some general principles clearly suggested by theory and practice. David Wilkins in Second Language Learning and Teaching (Arnold, 1974) gives three basic principles:

1. Objectives should be clearly defined.
2. Learning activities should be representative of the learning objectives.
3. Learners should model their own language performance on significant instances of target-language behaviour (i. e. not on random sentences in the target-language, but on selected sentences that represent significant generalizations about the structure of the language)

These principles require amplification, of course. Principle 1. may seem hard to apply in teaching situations in which it is difficult to predict what the future English-language needs of the students will be (or, indeed, if the students will have such needs at all). This is the case of English-language teaching in public secondary schools in Mexico. The realities of the situation (big groups, little time, etc.) demands that the objectives should be modest (or never achieved if they are too ambitious, no matter how much the militarily predictive "will" is used - "The students will understand university textbooks in English". Sorry, but they won't!). Few, very few secondary school students are destined to translate Spanish into English in their future lives, whereas a significant number may need to write letters and read texts in English; therefore it is reasonable to try to lay the foundations of written composition and reading comprehension in public secondary schools, but not to attempt to teach translation skills. The new secondary school programs do, in fact, set reasonable general-purpose objectives. Wilkins also says: "The fact that precise behavioural predictions are not pos-

sible does not mean that the teacher himself should not have thought carefully about what his objectives in teaching the language are.

He may be forced to express them in the most general terms, but they are no less valuable for that. He cannot logically take decisions about methods if he does not first know what the methods are intended to achieve". He puts the horse rightfully before the cart: methodological decisions are determined by objectives, not viceversa, i. e. we should not give aural-oral skills immense prominence because we are audio-lingual teachers, but we may use an audio-lingual approach because our students primarily need aural-oral skills. If the students already have a rudimentary knowledge of English and desperately need help in improving their ability to understand technical books, very different methodological decisions may be taken.

The major objective of most English-language courses will be that students should acquire the ability to use English effectively in some form or forms of communication. Principle 2, therefore, will require that such courses should include "communicative activities". The genuineness of the communication is, of course, dependent on many factors: a game can give elementary students a reason for communicating, but, if they have the same native language, it cannot give them a genuine reason for communicating in English (unless it can only be played in that language e.g. a word game). The real reason why students use English in an English-language class is almost always that they are trying to learn English; most students seldom forget this entirely and want to see results. Nonetheless, communicative, quasi-communicative, and (why not?) pseudo-communicative activities can switch the focus of attention from language form to language use (and hopefully produce results closer to the objectives). Many of the activities presented in "Chalk Talk" will fall into the (prefix-) communicative category.

Principle 3 applies to the efficient teaching of linguistic competence (pronunciation and grammar, principally), though it could be applied also to the teaching of the language for specific communicative functions. "Teaching Miscellany" will also contain ideas for supplying "significant instances of target-language behaviour" (i. e. ideas for presenting and giving practice in new language items, including ideas specifically for teaching pronunciation and grammar). The teaching of language structure may not be enough alone, but there must be interim objectives as well as final ones.

We have suggested that a teacher needs objectives and an available repertoire of materials and activities to achieve those specific objectives much more than he or she needs "a method" (in fact, we suggest that a teacher is better off if he or she is not devoted exclusively to a single,

strict method.) The objectives in one class may be different from those in another; for example, compare the following teaching situations:

1. A group of 60 young adolescents spending 3 hours a week over 3 school years on a general-purpose elementary course.
2. A group of 30 young adult "false beginners" spending 5 hours a week over 2 school years on a course expected to give them basic competence in reading and understanding technical and scientific texts in English.
3. A group of 20 intermediate students with ages ranging from 18 to 50 spending three hours a week on an open-ended general-purpose course.
4. A group of five biochemists with intermediate English spending 10 hours a week for a period of 2 months before taking post-graduate biochemistry courses in the U. S. A.

Not only will objectives vary, but also the features of the teaching situation (the number of students, their age, their educational backgrounds, their study habits, their interests, and perhaps their native language; also the intensiveness of the course, the level, the available materials and aids; and so on). No single method can cope with such a variety of teaching situations; but individual teachers with clearly defined and realistic objectives, with a knowledge and understanding of their students, with a variety of materials and activities to choose from, especially materials and activities which leave different learning options open, can manage pretty well. We hope "Chalk Talk" will help. We hope you will help us by sending your own ideas or discussing your own teaching situations with us.

Little space is left in this edition of "Chalk Talk" to actually produce what we have promised. But here is a little, and there will be more next time.

I. RIDDLES IN CLASS.

We are not referring again to all those problems of English-language teaching that have yet to be solved, but to Olde English riddles or conundrums.

Level: Intermediate or advanced (i. e. with students who can use the basic structures of English and have a fair range of vocabulary).

- Purposes: 1. to have a laugh in English.
 2. to get students to listen to, think about, and suggest answers to English riddles.

Procedure: Teacher: You know what a swallow is, don't you?
 Student: Yes, it's a kind of bird.
 Teacher: What's it like? / How is it different from a duck?
 Teacher: Right. Swallows fly south in winter, don't they?
 English swallows fly to Africa. Who can tell me why?
 Student: Because it's warmer in Africa.
 Teacher: That's true. But it isn't the answer.
 Student: They'd die if they stayed in England. / etc.
 Teacher: All right, Do you give up?
 Students: Yes.
 Teacher: Well, the answer is that swallows fly south in winter because it's too far for them to walk.
 Students: Ha, ha ! / Oh no ! / This is the last class I come to. / Why don't you fly south? / Etc.

If students complain that you didn't stress "fly" originally, congratulate them on their observation, and explain that you would have given the joke away if you had. If they don't comment, you may pretend you did stress "fly" and show them how "English swallows fly to Africa." You could probably stress the sentence correctly in the first place without giving the riddle away, in fact.

Here is one more:

Riddle: What has four wheels, and flies in summer?

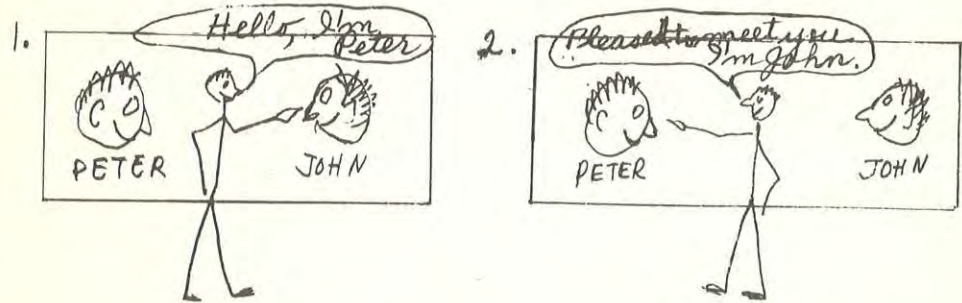
Answer: A garbage truck.

II. PARTY PRACTICE.

Level: beginners (i. e. students with a fair command of the verb "be" in the present only.)

- Purposes:
1. to mix structures in a natural sequence.
 2. to create a feeling of real and successful communication.
 3. to teach and practice how to introduce oneself in English and how to excuse oneself from a conversation.
 4. to give students the chance to use English "communicatively" without the teacher breathing down their throats.

Procedure: the teacher establishes the situation of a party with lots of people who don't know one another (this can be done fast in Spanish and with a picture of a party scene). The teacher then acts out a dialogue between two of the guests at the party, pointing at the face of each speaker (on the black-board or in the picture of the party) as appropriate:



The complete dialogue would be something like this:

- Peter: Hello. I'm Peter .
- John: Pleased to meet you. I'm John .
- Peter: Hello, John. Where are you from?
- John: Liverpool. And you?
- Peter: I'm from London. What's your job?

John: I'm a doctor. Oh, excuse me. That's my wife.

Peter: Sure. Goodbye.

John: Goodbye.

The teacher gets the class to repeat the dialogue, first in half-class chorus (one half as Peter and the other as John), then individually. Finally two, three or four pairs of students act out the dialogue at the front of the class, with names, cities and jobs changed.

The teacher then gives each student a card with a name, a city and a job on it (ones already known or easy to pronounce when given a model of pronunciation by the teacher). The teacher then gets the students to stand up and start conversations with their neighbours. The teacher must make sure students break off the conversations as in the model dialogue, circulate and open new conversations. The teacher can join in as just another guest at the party. Glasses of pop (or, better, gin and tonic) can help.