

A lesson in observation

In a new series of articles John Fanselow invites teachers to step back and take a new look at the way they teach; here he shows how you can develop new ways of teaching reading by observing reading habits outside the classroom.

Observing people reading on train platforms, subways or buses and in classrooms and libraries presents a number of striking contrasts. On platforms, people are standing as they read, either checking schedules overhead or holding a book or newspaper in front of them as they wait for their train. Once in the vehicle, some sit, others remain standing. But either way, people seem able to read in spite of noise and a range of space limitations that render upright sitting – the usual posture in libraries and classrooms – almost impossible.

In classrooms and libraries, except during the times when individuals are called upon to read aloud to the class, everyone is sitting upright. (In libraries oral reading is of course forbidden.) Those on trains, except individuals studying for exams, are usually reading materials they have selected. In most classrooms, materials have been selected. In libraries, those not studying have even wider selections of material available than those who depend for their reading materials on kiosks at train stations.

Though such observations are obvious and you have no doubt made them many times, such observations are not usually seen as one source of alternatives for our own classroom practices. But if we look at characteristics of the reading act outside of classrooms and compare them with the characteristics we see in classrooms, we have a source of alternatives to try in our classes.

Reading alternatives

Years ago, I read Michael West's enthusiastic description of 'read and look up' or 'read and speak'. I played with the technique for a long time, asking students to look at a sentence, read as much as they could silently and then turn the book over and look at me or another student and say what they could remember. Both the students and I learned the difference between paraphrase and word calling, eye to mouth reading in contrast to eye to brain to mouth reading or reciting words versus saying words with expression, and many other lessons.

In retrospect, I think I was too dependent on written materials as the sources of such alternatives. I kept looking in methods books and teachers' manuals for suggestions. I failed to realise that I could generate alternatives by simply observing. In fact, shortly after I started playing with 'read and look up', I noticed that singers on the train I took looked at their scores, then looked up at the window on the train or at a fellow passenger who was not looking at them and whispered the words they had just sung silently. To rehearse their lines, they were doing a variety of read and look up!

I have often seen people on trains try to read papers that other passengers are holding upside down. I have also observed myself reading exercises the students are doing while standing in front of their desks, thus reading upside down! We often have to read signs that are reflected in a window which requires that we read backwards. Yet, it took me some time to realise that this practice we engage in outside of the classroom could provide the basis for an alternative teaching practice in my reading classroom.

Guess the meaning

You no doubt have seen people on trains try to read the headlines of newspapers which are held next to another passenger's body, under

the arms of other passengers. Since the arms cover some of the words, we each have to guess at the meaning of the headlines. We usually hope that before either we or the newspaper owner leave the train, either a sudden stop or a need to move position forces the other passenger to reveal some of the words that we could not see so that we can compare our prediction with the actual headline.

Cloze passages in which we delete every nth word can be seen on one level as an attempt to duplicate the activity so many of us engage in outside of classrooms when we try to steal meaning from newspapers, books and magazines others are holding in such a way that they obscure some of the words.

As you move around, observe others reading in a range of settings and consider any differences you observe as a possible source of alternative practice for classroom use.

Start a new trend

Another source of alternative practice for reading classes – or for any classes for that matter – is our own behaviour in our classrooms. In fashion and art, trends are often started by turning present conventions or practice upside down and inside out.

Using this concept in our teaching, we can generate an almost endless number of alternative practices. All we have to do is be aware of our current practice and find some exact opposite. For example, in reading classes, a common instruction is to ask students to underline the words they do not understand. One opposite of this instruction is to ask students to underline the words they do understand. Another opposite is to ask them to cross out and obscure the words they do not understand, thus having each student develop a personal cloze passage!

After some students underline the words they do understand rather



switch positions, as if you are in a debate. For example, if you considered item 1 *How many men were there?* a 'comprehension task', write down one reason why it could be grouped under the heading 'other tasks'. If you did not consider item 1 a 'comprehension task', then give one reason why it could be grouped under this heading. By comparing positions and then switching positions, some new features of each task usually emerge.

Using these characteristics of the tasks that emerge from your disagreements, make up two new pairs of categories by dividing the tasks into different pairs twice. For example, some thought that 10 *Draw a loaf of bread.* fits under 'comprehension tasks' since it was not a linguistic task. From this disagreement, the pairs *linguistic/non linguistic* were generated. Some thought that being asked to tell how many men there were in the story, item 1, was specific to the story and thus a 'comprehension task'. Others thought that general questions such as 'What did you think of the story?' was a better index of a reader's comprehension. From this disagreement, the pairs *specific to story/general* were generated. As before, you are of course free to format your new pairs of categories and items as you wish. Some have found this type of format – large T's, – the easiest.



Below are three groupings others have made. Write the numbers of the tasks that you think fit these pairs. There is no need to write numbers for every grouping, only those which intrigue you.

Matching your examples with the labels others have given will help you see features of the tasks you had not seen before.

Three groupings others have made

1 involving right hemisphere	involving left hemisphere
2 story-related questions	non-story related questions
3 referring to objects	not referring to objects

Here are 13 other pairs which others used as headings: 4 open-ended/not open-ended; 5 exploratory/one right answer only; 6 alcohol/no alcohol; 7 important task/unimportant task; 8 personal feelings/no personal feelings; 9 can lead to further interaction/likely to stop interaction; 10 asking for knowledge/asking for memory; 11 emphasising memory/asking for more than memory; 12 easy to answer before listening to the text/difficult to answer before listening to text; 13 conventional/non-conventional; 14 requires only the use of language/requires drawing, sketching but not language; 15 ridiculous activity before, during or after listening/reasonable activity before, during or after listening; 16 contrived task/natural task.

By looking at a range of groupings, the fact that each task has multiple features becomes more evident. Perhaps the groupings you made will increase your confidence in your perceptions as well. The groupings others made, like your own groupings, do not always neatly accommodate all of the tasks. For example, task 9 *What type of man was the one who drank the wine and ate the bread?* is clearly story related. But since it also requires some knowledge beyond the story, it is hard to get 100 per cent agreement to put task 9 under story-related questions, alone. This task has features of both of the

groupings in two.

Task 19 *How did you like the story?* fits under grouping 12 – *easy to answer / difficult to answer*. But which side of the grouping is not as clear cut. Easy for the student? Easy from the teacher's point of view? If the teacher is really keen on the student's view then task 19 also fits under grouping 8 – *personal feelings/no personal feelings*. But if the teacher is setting the task only to practise a pattern such as *I liked it a lot.*, then the task has to be put under *no personal feelings*. In short, though we can group each of the 21 tasks into many groupings, without the responses of the students and the subsequent reactions of the teachers to the responses we cannot be sure which characteristics each task has.

If we find that we use a small number of questions we have grouped as 16 *contrived*, then by increasing the number of questions with this characteristic, we are generating an alternative. If most of the questions we use or see in listening materials we use fit under the first column of 11 *emphasising memory*, then, in order to introduce an alternative, we have to increase items similar to those we noted in the second part of 11 *asking for more than memory*.

Consciously matching words we use to discuss teaching with activities we observe not only provides us with a way to generate alternative practices. The matching also provides us with a way to make our beliefs more conscious. Each title for a grouping reflects some part of our beliefs. And each example illustrates actions which we think reflect our beliefs. Doing this type of matching in a spirit of playfulness can reveal the degree to which our beliefs and practices are congruent. Grouping can also show how different teachers mean something different by the same term or the same thing by different terms.

Seeing how our meanings and those of colleagues match and mismatch is not the end of such discussions, however. Such discussions are the means to discovering new ideas, to seeing something we have not seen before. The usual discussions we have, in which we accept our day-to-day explanations for the successes and failures we have and accept the diagnoses for their causes, are sometimes inadequate.

Discussing our teaching activities in order to see something we have not seen before implies that we are often unaware of our beliefs and unconscious of many of our teaching practices and that there is sometimes a mismatch between them as well as between the words we and others use to discuss them and our beliefs and actions.

Such discussions imply that we do not know what good teaching is. Consequently, some feel freer to try alternatives. Seeing that all activities are multi-dimensional makes it much harder to make statements such as 'If I ask comprehension questions, I know that the students understand'. By using a range of terms rather than one to describe the same activity, we see the limitation of such one-dimensional cause and effect statements.

The use of single terms such as *comprehension*, *important*, *easy*, etc. leads us to make cut and dried, black and white descriptions that fail to reflect the complexity of the teaching act. If we do not look at multiple characteristics of the same activity, we often begin to group tasks with a particular term whether or not they have the features originally associated with the term. Each single term becomes a 'ready made' label rather than an actual description of features of the phenomenon being explored.

Generating alternatives by noting additional characteristics of the practices we use not only provides a wider range of practices, but also provides a means to explore our beliefs and teaching practices.



See next page for information about the author, John F. Fanselow.

than the words they do not understand, they might gain a totally different perspective about their reading ability. Crossing out words we do not understand can remind some readers that not all words are important. The activity can remind others that they can guess the meanings of the words that they don't know. Then, later, after they write words in the blanks formed by the words they cross out, they can compare the words they wrote, or sketches they drew, with the words in the original passage. Some will see that they had the meanings right and thus have provided some definitions of the unknown words that they had crossed out.

Record your lessons

If you tape record or video tape your class, you will provide yourself with a number of examples which you can turn around 180 degrees. For example, when some teachers record their reading classes, they find that they define words with descriptions accompanied by sketches, or the making of sounds without any words. Yet, when students define, we expect them to use only words. One opposite practice would require that students draw the meanings of words sometimes. Another would require that they make sounds to show the meaning of words. In neither case would they be allowed to show that they understood the meaning with words, either spoken or written.

Observe yourself and others reading in a range of settings. Write down some of the practices you observe in as much detail as possible – position, type of material, time provided or available, topics, sounds and silences, use of pencils or pens during reading, use of dictionaries, etc. And, tape record or video tape your class, or that of a colleague. Listen or view a few minutes over and over and note as

many specific details as you can. Then, from the details you note, generate some alternative practices in your classrooms by doing the opposite of what you normally do.

There are other ways to generate alternatives other than the ways described above. These will be introduced in subsequent columns. In the meantime, though, it is important to consider some of the implications of the self generation of alternative teaching practices.

Perhaps one of the most obvious implications is that neither the authors of methods books or teachers' manuals nor we know for sure which reading practices are good and work in all cases. Another implication is that the usual range of reading acts we introduce our students to is probably narrower than the range of reading acts that they will be required to engage in outside of our classrooms. Finally, recording our classes and observing what we see others do outside of reading classes implies that we are not completely aware of what we are doing. Much of what we do is done automatically and unconsciously and in spite of beliefs we might have about the reading process, our classroom practice does not necessarily reflect our beliefs. Changing our practices often enables us to see incongruities between our beliefs and what we actually do in class.

Received August 1991



When John F. Fanselow wrote this series, he was coordinating the M.A. TESOL Program at Teachers College in New York and the off campus M.A. TESOL Program that he had started in Tokyo. He is the author of many publications about classroom observation and analysis, now often referred to as Action Research or more recently Scholarship of Teaching and Learning—SLOT.

Here are some of his most frequently quoted publications: "Beyond Rashomon—conceptualizing and describing the teaching act. 1977. *TESOL Quarterly*. Vol. XI, March. (Reprinted in *Observation in the language classroom*. 1988. Edited by Richard Allwright. London: Longman.) He expanded this article into *Breaking rules—Generating and exploring alternatives in language teaching*. 1987. White Plains, New York: Longman. "Let's see—Contrasting conversations about supervision and observation." 1988. *TESOL Quarterly* Vol. XXII, March. (Awarded the Malkemes Prize from the American Language Institute of NYU and LINC, 1988; reprinted in *Second language teacher education* edited by Jack Richards and David Nunan. 1991. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. and in *Enriching ESOL Pedagogy—readings and activities for engagement, reflection and inquiry* edited by Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack. 2002. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.) He expanded "Let's see—into *Contrasting conversations—activities for exploring our beliefs and teaching practices*. 1992. White Plains, New York: Longman.

His most recent publications dealing with classroom observation analysis and observation are "Take 1, Take 2, Take 3—A suggested three-stage approach to exploratory practice." 2005. with Roger Barnard in *Understanding the language classroom*. Edited by Simon Gieve & Ines Miller. London: Palgrave Macmillan and the Afterward and co-authored Introduction to *Creating Communities of Learning: International case studies and perspectives*. edited by Roger Barnard and Maria Torres-Guzman. 2008. Clevedon, England. Multilingual Matters.

In addition to these publications dealing with classroom observation and analysis, he has written a book of dialogs with Japanese teachers discussing ways to explore their teaching and try alternative activities called *Try the Opposite*. (1992). Tokyo: SIMUL Press. (Printed in Japanese) An English version of *Try the Opposite* as well as many other publications cited are available in PDF Format by e-mailing John at jff15@columbia.edu