

## ***"It's Too Damn Tight" – Media in ESOL Classrooms: Structural Features in Technical/ Subtechnical English\****

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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. This presentation describes specific ways we can make a better match between the types and uses of mediums outside the language classroom (on jobs in particular) and inside classrooms.

First, I want to highlight some differences between the way we talk about objects and actions in language classes, in skill classes and on jobs. Then, I want to suggest what you as a language teacher can do to make the talk in your language classes for vocational students more similar to the talk they will need in skill classes or on their jobs. The suggestions can be applied to the teaching of English for any specific purposes; they are not limited to vocational training.

### **1. Characteristics of Communications in Language Classes and Other Settings**

Since it is often easier to see differences if some of the examples are close to home, I would like you to write down on a separate piece of paper what you would ask your students to say and what you would say to them about at least two of these objects: a pair of asbestos gloves, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and a hammer. It would be easier to write about the objects if they were actually in hand, but you can of course just imagine the types of communications you and your students would make. Feel free to do this exercise with a fellow teacher—you need not do this exercise or read this presentation alone!

Here are some communications other languages teachers wrote down.

\* This article grew out of a presentation I made for TESOL at Lackland Air Force Base in 1979. I would like to thank James Alatis for inviting me to make that presentation, and J. Ronayne Cowan of the University of Illinois, Urbana, for suggesting its submission. Mr. Fanselow is Associate Professor at the Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication, at Teachers College, Columbia University. His articles have appeared in several books and journals.

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#### **1.1 Communications about Objects in Language Classrooms**

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 the shape? What jobs can it do? I'd show them how to use it. I'd ask how they could use a screw driver 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 "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.

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

But in fact, what types of things would you say outside of a language classroom if you were using gloves, a screw-driver, 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.

### 1.2. Communications about Objects Outside of Language Classrooms

Here are some communications others have collected.

About Gloves

Bob: Where 're my gloves? Who the hell took 'um. I need 'um 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, Too fucking fast!

About a Hammer

John: Ow! Damn, damn, damn. (after hitting his finger with the hammer) Quick, gimme my gloves!

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

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classrooms were. We are given few details about the objects themselves 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*, *one*. When the names of the objects are used it is mainly when they are not there and someone needs them: "Where're my gloves? Quick, gimme my gloves!" You also have noticed that commands are frequent, blending occurs—*took 'um* and expletives are used, both in addressing objects and people. Few of the words have meaning without the objects and actions that accompany them.

### 2. Making Communications in Language Classes Closer to those Outside

One of the first steps to take to try to make the language of the language classroom more congruent with the language students will use in their subsequent specific skill classes or on their jobs has already been suggested: samples of communications have to be obtained. Video recordings of the communications would provide somewhat more data since you could see the objects and actions that accompanied the language. But because of what you as a language teacher know about language use, you can fill in many of the objects and actions from a transcript of an audio recording, as the following exercise shows. Fill in the actions and objects you can infer from this transcribed audio-recording taken from a lesson on driving a car.

1. Driver Trainer:

2.

3.

4. Driver:

5.

6. Driver Trainer:

7. Driver:

8.

9.

10. Driver Trainer:

11. Driver:

12.

13. Driver Trainer:  
Front Seat of a Car\*  
Put your indicator on and turn right.  
That was good.  
I go left here?  
Yeah.  
Good.  
Now, compare the actions and objects you filled in with those I put in.  
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: (puts the indicator on)  
5. (turns the steering wheel)  
6. Driver Trainer: That was good.  
7. Driver: (an intersection referred to by "here")

\* Transcribed by Joy Noren.

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8. I go left here?  
9. (starts to move into left lane)  
10. Driver Trainer: Yeah.  
11. Driver: ( turns on left hand turn signal)  
12. ( turns the steering wheel)  
13. Driver Trainer: Good.

In fact, you might have filled in a great many more actions or objects than I did. In line 9 you might have indicated that the Driver checked the traffic behind him by looking in the rear view or side view mirror for example. In line 13, you might have written that the Driver Trainer pointed to the indicator as he said "Good" indicating that it was the fact that the driver had put it on that led him to say the word "Good" rather than the turn itself. Whether a video or audio recording is used, the same problem remains—how many of the objects and actions should be transcribed? The advantage of the audio-recording over a video-recording is that it forces us to attend very carefully to what the language refers to. And audio recordings remind us how meaningless most language is if we separate it from the objects, actions and experiences it is integrated with.

### **3. Pitfalls to Avoid in Collecting Authentic Material**

When gathering authentic communications students will need, it is difficult to avoid looking at the data as a teacher trained to develop materials on the basis of word lists. I talked with some teachers who had carefully transcribed a series of exchanges involving the use of a great many tools by mechanics. After they finished transcribing, they extracted the names of all the tools, arranged them in alphabetical order and glued sketches of each tool next to the name of the tool. They converted authentic data into communications found only in language classes in which language was taught solely as a means of naming objects. Widdowson (1976) has discussed other issues involved in determining the authenticity of language materials.

I will describe the case of another group of teachers I visited since it illustrates some of the pitfalls of trying to make the language we teach more congruent with the language our students need. They had recorded the communications and used the authentic results for their language lessons, but the communications they recorded were not those needed by their students. A grant was awarded to this group of teachers to help prepare a group of Chinese to be chefs in Chinese restaurants. A master chef was hired to teach cooking, but he did not know English. One of the language teachers was bilingual and recorded, transcribed and translated the language used by the master chef during the cooking lessons. The language teachers taught the patterns. After a while many of the students could repeat many of the sentences that had been taken from the cooking lessons. The sequence in which the students said different sentences in the language classes were different from the way they

heard them in cooking classes though since the language teachers did not know much about Chinese cooking. And the students were not always sure whether

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they were ordering someone else to “chop” an onion or “dice” an onion or “fry” or “boil” rice since the meanings in the language classroom were separated from the food and cooking in the cooking classroom. But many of the students could utter many directions to each other about how to cook Chinese food and these utterances were made in comprehensible English. By now you must have begun to wonder why Chinese chefs have to be able to say what they do in English since they were not being trained to be teachers of Chinese cooking but rather to be Chinese chefs. Julia Child may need to know the English of teaching cooking but even the master chef who was training the group of Chinese chefs did not know how to teach Chinese cooking in English, and this lack did not prevent him from teaching Chinese cooking to Chinese speaking trainees.

If Chinese chefs do not need to know the English of cooking to cook Chinese food in Chinese restaurants with Chinese waiters, what do they need? What Chinese chefs probably need to know is the English for ordering food on the telephone, for complaining about late deliveries or poor produce or old meat and high prices. Thus, it is clear that it is not enough simply to gather the language your students will be exposed to in their subsequent classes. You have to look at what they do outside of class or their job that relates to the tasks they are paid to perform.

The teachers of the Chinese cooks failed to look beyond the cooking class to assess their students’ needs. Many of your students might have to read technical manuals off the job to prepare for the job or to keep up in what they do. Sometimes, new directives come out in print from manufacturers that require maintenance changes for example. These materials may be very brief but are often vital to successful maintenance. Likewise, some may have the need to spend time socially with native speaking Americans. A few formulas that would enable them to engage in small talk and kibitzing off the job and outside of class might be crucial to successful relations with the Americans in subsequent classes and on the job. In investigating the needs of your students, it is therefore vital to record not only what communications take place inside of their training classes but also what language skills they need that are job related or social. In basing materials on their out-of-class needs the main pitfall to be avoided is: the use of vocabulary lists and structure paradigms, and of language for its own sake and to describe what we can readily see—in short the pattern of discourse found only in language classrooms.

#### **4. Determining what to Emphasize**

With the authentic material in hand you must now decide on the proportion of time you will spend on different items. I would not determine the proportion of time to spend on different items only on the basis of frequency. Expletives for example might turn up in almost every other communication. But in class I would not do much more than help the students see that these words do little more than express anger or frustration. I would even substitute non-

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sense words for them accompanied by scowling, pounding a fist on a wall, strong falling intonation and primary stress. The literal meaning of such words, their origin, their exact spelling and pronunciation are not critical, given a limited amount of time.

Just as a high frequency of expletives should not lead you into spending a large proportion of time on them, a low frequency of yes-no or either-or questions should not lead you to spend a low proportion of time on them. If you believe that much of learning is the reduction of ambiguity (Smith 1978), that elimination of alternatives through binary choices is vital to discovery of meaning, then you would spend a large proportion of time teaching students how to ask yes-no and either-or questions even though you found only a few actually

asked in the vocational classes you recorded.

As you know, if you do not know which way to turn a screw you turn it one way and when you find it does not move you turn it the other way. When you push a door and it does not open you pull it. If it still does not open you go to the opposite edge and push and pull there. These actions are really yes-no questions. If you are told to pick up a coping saw and you see a series of tools on a bench, you pick up one at a time and hold it towards the person who asked for the tool. When he nods you take the coping saw over and you have learned which tool is called a coping saw by a series of yes-no answers represented by a series of trials with errors.

You know how the game "Twenty Questions" enables you to discover a great deal about another person's thought very quickly. Each question eliminates great numbers of possibilities by taking out of consideration whole categories of items—alive or dead, large or small, human or not, male or female, vegetable or mineral, seen or heard, and on and on. Notice that a *no* answer is just as helpful in eliminating a category as a *yes*, even more so; so in a way there are no wrong answers to yes-no and either-or questions of this type. Doctors, dentists, lawyers and private investigators try to zero in on what they are seeking with yes-no and either-or questions and most computers are built on the premise that a series of binary choices can be used to help us in most any investigation. It would be useful to see whether in fact the top few students in skills classes or in jobs used a greater number of yes-no and either-or communications than those students who did worse in such situations. Since many of the alternatives may be tried without the use of speech—turning a screw one way and then another—live observation will probably yield more information than audio recordings on this issue.

#### **5. Advantages of Collecting Authentic Material**

Recording and transcribing authentic communications not only has pitfalls but also has advantages. In addition to helping you see the relationship between speech and other mediums such as objects and actions and in providing you with material that is more congruent with the students' needs, the transcribing will teach you something of the meaning of the language you are preparing to

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teach. Perhaps in an ideal world, you might be able to learn the intricacies of jet engine maintenance, six different kinds of electronics, navigation and a score of other specialized areas. But this is not an ideal world. Your time is limited and basically you are a language teacher. Though transcription will not teach you mastery of the skills being taught it will help you to better understand them than if you were never exposed to the area or if you only had to listen to skill classes in a cursory fashion. Transcription forces careful attention; it is hard to transcribe what is utterly meaningless to you. Through transcription you can begin to gain at least a layperson's understanding of what is being communicated, just as reporters often report on sophisticated material that they only understand as observers, not as practitioners.

#### **6. Using Genuine Communications as Exercises**

When you finish some of your transcriptions, draw lines through words or phrases you do not understand and then re-read the passage as if it were a cloze test and the crossed out words simply represented blanks that you had to fill in. Fill in as many blanks as possible by using a word (or sketch or diagram) that seems to fit. Look up the original words or phrases in a technical dictionary or a picture dictionary such as *The English Duden* (1960) or a technical manual on the topic. Compare the pictures and words with those you filled in by educated guessing. This exercise of course is one you should try with your students too. Too frequently, we instruct our students to underline words they do not know and then we try to explain the meanings. What they must learn to do is guess meanings and then check to see whether the predictions they made are right. Prediction of meanings and verification of meanings by the use of dictionaries are probably more crucial skills to develop than the skill of listening

to explanations of words since it teaches students how they can be self-sufficient.

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### **7. Words in Transcriptions Tell only Part of the Message**

If you tried to draw a sketch to illustrate the meaning of items you crossed out in the transcriptions you made and if you filled in noises, objects and actions in your transcriptions, you were reminded of the fact that there are a great number of mediums other than language that we use to communicate meaning. Usually, in our language classrooms, we ask students to clarify language by using more language. Even though we as teachers often draw sketches on the blackboard or mime to illustrate meaning, it is rare to see a student illustrating meaning with a sketch or miming, either at the blackboard, at his seat or in his exercise book. In skill classrooms, the performance of the skill shows understanding. Let me say that I am always astonished at the few instances I have seen in which the use of dictionaries is taught in second language classes. Thousands of hours are spent preparing dictionaries. Oxfords *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and Longman's *Dictionary of Contemporary English* are complete grammar books as well as sources of word meanings. Yet rather than teaching dictionary use or even encouraging it, teachers sometimes discourage it. Differences between hi-lingual, mono-lingual, technical and pictorial dictionaries, if they are taught, can help students move with ease from one type of dictionary to another. The prefaces to dictionaries are so infrequently read, let alone studied, that they make very good places for hiding secret messages!

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standing, not a spoken description of what was just done. If we are told to change a bulb or a part, our changing the part shows we understood the meaning of the command. We need not say anything at all. In the transcript of the driving lesson that you filled in the actions of, the driver never said "I put on the indicator; I turned right; I am driving." Even when a mechanic goes through some type of checklist on a job to check his work and the steps that were followed, the printed descriptions of the steps are checked off; the mechanic does not usually verbally describe what he has done.

#### *Categorizing Mediums*

No secret is revealed here. You know that communications are made not only by our speech or writing, especially in classes where skills are performed and objects used. But as language teachers we see speech and print as primary and other mediums as secondary.

Rather than having students give a spoken description of a coil to see if they know the meaning of *coil*, have them draw one or hold one up. Have them try to loosen a screw that's "too damn tight" so that the action of not being able to turn the screw shows the meaning of "too damn tight" rather than a string of spoken descriptions or definitions. The meaning of speech and print can in many cases be learned only in relation to the objects and actions that accompany them.

In a way, all of speech and print is an attempt to translate the meanings of other mediums into language. If you say you are hungry you are simply translating a non-linguistic medium—your stomach and how it feels—into words. A novel with a fast plot is a good translation of a lot of action into print. You do not talk about what you have never done or experienced unless you imagine it, and the imagination is based on a reconstruction and reinterpretation of some experiences you have had. The experiences are performed with objects and actions. When we hear a siren we ask "Where's the fire?" The question is speech but the referent—fire—is a type of action. In classrooms where language itself is not the only object of study, we are trying to widen people's experiences, and though we use language—linguistic mediums—in these classrooms, we use it together with the experiences the students are having.

The maps that I have seen in classrooms around the world can be used without a common language. Different map readers can draw lines and point to cities and form symbols so that they know what they are communicating because they share the same meanings for maps and aspects of geography. Obviously, it is useful to use a common language to share meaning along with the pictures and maps. But it should be equally obvious that it is useful to use

maps, pictures and actions along with speech and print in classes set up to develop a common language. And this latter case, though equally obvious, is not equally frequent or even noticed by many language teachers.

Those who make ads for both television and newspapers and magazines have noticed the value of pictures, print being dwarfed by pictures in most **ESOL Classroom Media 149**

ads. In television commercials too, pictures of people are remembered as long as, if not longer than, the spoken words. When music is added to speech in song, we tend to remember the material longer.

When language teachers gather, they frequently do discuss objects. But they call them visual aids! And they complain how difficult appropriate ones are to find, and how hard it is to store them, and how administrators do not allow pictures to be tacked on the walls. Language teachers also discuss gestures, pointing out the cultural meanings of an upturned middle finger in different countries, for example. But these comments suggest that mediums other than speech are ancillary. I am saying that it is impossible to communicate meaning in skill classrooms with only the linguistic mediums of speech and print.

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### **8. An Observation Task to Highlight Mediums other than Language**

To highlight the central role of objects and actions outside of language classes, observe a series of short segments of a language class, a skill class and people on the job, with ear-plugs on. If you only have a video tape, observe it with the sound off. Check off in the columns below the frequency of different mediums used to communicate meanings in segments of the lessons.

Observation Guide *Frequency of Different Mediums in Language Classes, Skill Classes and on the Job*

If the excerpts presented earlier from outside of language classes are common, you will have a great many more check marks in lines 2 and 3 than in line 1 in the Observation Guide. This observation task shows that objects must not only be held and looked at to be described, as we do in language classes, but they must also be manipulated and acted on as well. Even if skills teachers spend some time in the role of a language teacher naming and describing tools before they demonstrate their use, they do not limit themselves to this role. They move from naming to using words to accompany the skills they are teaching. You 2 The Appendix contains a classification of mediums I have developed. Using it as a type of checklist, you can count the number of tasks we ask students to perform that allow them to communicate with mediums other than speech or print or together with speech and print in their responses.

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cannot just speak and sit in a chair with your arms folded if you are learning the language of a skill. You must act and speak together. A comment such as "The line is too long—it is in the wrong direction" makes sense only when it is said after one has actually drawn a line. And to know that, one must know something of what the line signifies insofar as the meaning of the sketch or plan goes outside of the realm of language itself. The meaning of the sketch in the world of architectural plans, mechanical plans or electrical circuits, must be partially understood as well as the grammatical meaning of *too* versus *very*. Gauges must be read as well as books, and circuits must be drawn as well as letters written if a language class is to be congruent with the skill classes and jobs it is preparing students for.

Obviously, you cannot bring jet engines, machines or a great variety of real tools into your classroom. Nor are you hired to teach actual maintenance or repair procedures. But you can have your students perform actions on models, pictures or sketches of the real things in response to oral commands or written directions. These semi-real communications will be more congruent with subsequent student tasks than descriptions and word definitions alone. And though you will of course have to know the meaning of words such as *twist* or *tighten* or *loosen* or *adjust*, and *screw*, *bolt*, and *nut*, you will not have to know why the screws need to be adjusted or exactly how much or how frequently nor the

tolerances allowed. These are technical matters which some of your students may understand conceptually better than you if they have had previous experience with the skills themselves, or are taking skill classes at the same time they are taking language classes. But *tighten* or *loosen* or *adjust* or *check* must be almost totally lacking in meaning even to fully skilled technicians if the words are simply taught to illustrate a grammatical pattern, or defined in relation to items such as shoe laces or belts. A pattern such as "I am tightening my belt," it seems to me, cannot be as useful to a student preparing for a skill class or a job as a command such as "tighten the damn screw" if in fact he is going to encounter commands of this type in subsequent training and on the job. I want to emphasize that I am not just advocating that students perform actions in the classroom rather than just sit in order to illustrate meaning. Years ago, Hornby (1966) developed a series of classroom actions to illustrate an entire structural syllabus, and more recently Asher (1977) has developed a book that teaches language through total physical response. I am saying that students must be allowed to communicate meaning through all mediums, not simply that objects and actions be used to show the meaning of speech and print. In this age of integrated circuits it is crucial to realize that all mediums are part of a communication system and they work together.

### **9. Characteristics of Solicits—Commands, Requests, Questions—in Different Settings**

We are now many pages from the examples of communications made about objects outside of the language classroom that I presented at the beginning, **ESOL Classroom Media 151**

but you no doubt remember that in addition to the frequency of expletives and the frequency of meaning being communicated through many mediums, the few excerpts contained many solicits in the form of direct commands. Though some direct commands are used in language classes and skill classes—"repeat, listen, look up, sit up, shut up, pay attention, watch out"—the range of meaning they convey is narrow. And, in some language classes and skill classes, polite requests such as "Would you like to . . . ?" and indirect, commands such as "Let's open our books now" are used in place of direct commands or together with them.

<sup>3</sup> The degree to which learning direct commands that request a limited range of tasks and indirect or polite comments helps one follow a wide range of commands on the job is probably minimal.

The contrast in the ways language teachers, skill teachers and job supervisors set tasks in their solicits is not limited to the degree of politeness or directness and range of meaning alone. The referents for the solicits in language classes tend to be linguistic mediums—spoken or written words: "Please define *over*; let's look at this word here— *help*; repeat *over*; look at the sentence," The referents for the solicits in skill classes tend to be non-linguistic and para-linguistic—actions, objects, drawings and noises: "Where're my gloves? Listen to it (*tapping sound*); It's (*the screw itself*) too damn tight; twist them (*the wires*) together." The degree to which experiencing solicits with words as referents helps one learn to respond to solicits with objects and actions as referents needs to be investigated. When objects and actions have to be seen to understand the solicit, you need experience in looking around as you listen. In a class, the words are usually on the blackboard or in the book and you don't have to look very far. And the oral referents you can respond to even with your eyes closed.

### **10. A Test for the Reader**

The first thing I asked you to do, quite a while ago, was to write down what you would say and have your students say about gloves and some tools. I would like to pose this same question again, asking you to take into account characteristics of communications outside of language classes that I just presented. Since I have dwelt on communications related to tools, there is no point in eliciting more comments about them. So please write down communications about a yo-yo, instead.

Here are some things I have seen and heard about a yo-yo in a range of settings outside of language classes: "I can spin it faster than you. Come on . . . Jonathan, give it to me! (tries to grab it) Wow—that's fast! (as yo-yo is spinning up and down) Shit, too fast. (as yo-yo spins out of control and stops) Now give it to me—come on (takes yo-yo, holds it, and winds up the string) Now you'll see an expert. (as he begins to spin the yo-yo) Damn! (as yo-yo fails to come up after first spin) If you're an expert, I'm an elephant. I never was good with a yo-yo." For a detailed treatment of politeness in solicits see Esther N. Goody (Ed.) 1978. *Questions and politeness—Strategies in social interaction*. Cambridge: The University Press.

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yo-yo when I was a kid. Look at how much fun some of the kids have with a yo-yo. (said with a smile)" Here, as in most settings outside of a language classroom, meaning is communicated in most cases through many mediums. If you were watching the interaction and did not know a word of English, you could infer that the speed or the skill of spinning a yo-yo was involved in the linguistic communications that accompanied the spinning. The non-linguistic objects and the para-linguistic actions and facial expressions help us figure out the meaning and give meaning to the words themselves. The literal meaning of the word *elephant* or even a picture of an elephant would not be very useful in the line "If you're an expert, I'm an elephant" since the meaning of elephant here is simply something the speaker is obviously not. The bulk of the meaning we get from the yo-yo communications comes not from individual words or patterns and not from linguistic mediums alone, but from non-linguistic objects and the people playing with the toy and from the para-linguistic facial expressions, tone of voice and distance between the actors.

If you wrote down the color, the material and cost and that you are playing with the yo-yo, you are still thinking of the discourse of language classes, what Halliday (1973) calls the "representational function" of language and Wilkins (1976) considers "synthetic" language. I am not implying that we should eliminate this function; even if I were, we could not! Both adults and children use this type of language with those they think don't know the words for objects or actions. We have all heard even very young children say to others "This is a yo-yo; it's red" as they handed a yo-yo to a new playmate. But the degree to which *this* type of statement contributes to the playmate's understanding of the new word rather than the other statements that contain the word yo-yo which have different functions needs to be investigated. I just want to point out the obvious fact that we can teach and learn words in patterns other than "This is a ." I think we should try to find out the degree to which Malinowski's contention is valid: "The real knowledge of a word comes through the practice of appropriately using it within a certain situation." (325) Teaching language to be used for a skill class or a job provides us with the opportunity to try to follow his contention.

### 11. Context is More than Other Words

The fact that words have meaning only in context has become a cliché. Unfortunately, the meaning of context in the cliché sometimes refers only to the sentence in which the word occurs. But context involves the relationships between the speakers and objects and actions and noises that are communicated along with the words themselves. Another advantage of using objects and actions and noises not as aids but as means of communication is that meaning can be more easily guessed. A normal solicit in a language classroom about a picture of a man standing next to a car holding up the hood might be the question "What is he doing?" And when a student answers "He's standing" the teacher is likely to say, "Who knows the right answer?" meaning of course the

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answer the teacher is thinking of. Nothing in the picture or the language classroom gives patterns for their own sake.

### 12. Conclusion

I realize that there are constraints that sometimes make new ideas we want to try difficult—lack of administrative support, no planning time provided, con-

stant transfers from class to class and level to level, student and supervisor expectations, mandated tests, available texts and traditions, to name a few. To prevent these various constraints from leading you to intense frustration or indifference, I would urge you to avoid judging entire lessons on any absolute scale but simply to investigate the consequences of conscious alternatives that you try in small segments of your lessons. In this way, the question "Were the communications in my language class the right ones?" is replaced by questions such as "To what extent did the students follow the ten commands I gave in reduced form at the end of the lesson?" or "When I had them draw the symbols for electrical parts did they get the meaning right more frequently than when I had them verbally describe the parts?" or "When I had a picture of an engine in the room on the wall did they answer more questions about the parts than when I did not have the picture in the room?"

Small changes in parts of lessons can over time build up and lead to large changes in the overall pattern of discourse in the language classroom. So what I urge is that you try small changes one by one and carefully look at the consequences. Though by definition we can never reach the ideal, we can move towards it. The question "Have I done it the ideal way?" can only lead to frustration or indifference. The question "What are the consequences of the conscious alternatives I am trying?" can only lead to growth or intense involvement.

Frustration at not being able to overcome constraints placed upon your teaching can also be decreased if you remember that the issue of trying to make what we do in a class more congruent with student needs has long been a subject of debate in the broad field of education. Our attempts to make the language we teach more similar to the language our students will need are part of a central issue in teaching. In *Education and Experience* (1938), Dewey highlighted the problem in these words: "One trouble is that [much of what we learn] was learned in isolation . . . so disconnected from the rest of experience that it is not available under the actual conditions of life." (48) Too frequently, in all types of classes, each period is seen simply as a preparation for another rather than as an end in itself, as something that can be useful at the time as well as an aid for some future need. Too frequently, in all types of classes teachers fail to relate the previous experiences and immediate needs and subsequent needs of the students to the material being taught.

It is not only in language classes that students are taught material unrelated to their experiences and needs. Nor is it only in language classes where sketches, objects, actions and sounds or noises are considered less vital than spoken and

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written language. In many skill classes teachers talk about how tools should be used rather than having students use them. Verbal definitions are still required by some skill teachers to show understanding rather than sketches or actions. Arnheim laments the concentration on language as the key means of communication in schools. He shows how students can be fluent in expressing concepts in non-linguistic and para-linguistic mediums in his classic, *Visual Thinking* (1969). And Olson (1976) argues that our concentration in schools on language alone, and a limited style of language at that, "grossly" underestimates the power of other mediums. Bruner has suggested the reason for the dependence on language: Formal schooling causes people to be separated from the real activities of life; to bring the world into the classroom we have come to depend on symbolic means, that is, spoken and written language. (1966:62)

### **13. Further Explorations**

Obviously, if you are a curriculum specialist or a teacher with free time you will want to collect more samples of communications in which objects and actions are a central part of the discourse, and you will want to make generalizations about the material you collect. Candlin (1976) has taped sessions between doctors and patients and shown how to use such material in classes. Munby (1978) has presented scores of detailed checklists to study specific student

needs in detail. The same checklists can be used to compare the needs of the students with the materials you prepare.

I would urge you to look at the strategies of most successful and least successful students in your language classes and in their skill classes and on their jobs in addition to looking at the types of communications made in these different settings. Do the best students—native speakers and non-native speakers of English—take more risks, ask more yes-no questions? Do they tend to be more patient or less patient? Do they judge their work in less absolute terms? Do they seem to feel more comfortable handling materials and performing actions? Teacher behavior in skill classes and supervisor behavior on the job need to be observed as well. Do skill teachers and job supervisors get annoyed with a lot of student questions or with certain types of questions? Does bad pronunciation, poor spelling, lack of subject-verb agreement get their goat? Do they resent students who speak in over-precise sentences and who use polite requests? When students don't blend or use expletives do they notice?

Finally, the consequences of the types of exercises I have suggested need to be investigated. If students learn names of objects or processes as they are handling materials, is less time needed for the instruction? Do students remember better when they learn a word in a pattern such as "Hurry up, give me the ¾ inch wrench" rather than in the pattern "This is a ¾ inch wrench?" Holden (1977) has presented scores of other exercises that could be used in English classes that prepare students for skill classes. The consequences of all of these suggestions need to be investigated as well.

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