

LESSON 2 COMMENTARY:

FROM MEANING TO FORM

***This commentary goes with the plan for TB Lesson 2:
North Pole/South Pole.***

***It may be useful to have a printout of the lesson plan by you as
you work through the commentary.***

There are some questions which get people talking:

- What is the most poisonous creature in the world?
- Is our climate really changing?
- Can animals talk?
- Which language has the most speakers?

I think of these as *intriguing questions*. I like to build lessons round them because the question itself provides a reason for learners to talk. They actually want to engage in discussion on these topics, and framing the topic as a question gives us a good starting point. We can ask learners to commit themselves to an opinion right from the start. One such question is *Which is colder, the North Pole or the South Pole?*

Throughout the first eight stages of this lesson until we come to language study in section 9, the emphasis is on meaning. The aim is to put learners in situations where they use language for meaning. This lesson has a lot in common with a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach (see: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/clil.shtml>). Another term for CLIL is *content-based instruction*. The belief behind such approaches is that learners acquire language most efficiently when their attention is on content rather than form, and that the best way to teach English, for example, is by teaching geography or science or some other subject through the medium of English.

So in sections 1-8 it is useful to think of yourself in the role of a geography or science teacher. You want to ensure that learners understand what is going on and take an active part in the discussion, but you are not too concerned about the accuracy of their language. At times you will rephrase what they say, just as a science or geography teacher would, and in this rephrasing you will often correct what they have said. But the correction will be an integral part of the classroom discourse. The geography or science teacher does not stop and offer grammatical explanation or ask learners to listen and repeat.

Two important questions come to mind. The first is how can learners take part in the lesson if they don't have the language for it? But of course they do have the language for it. They don't express themselves in the same way as an accomplished speaker of the language would, but they do get their message across. They will begin by saying things like *North Pole is cold than South Pole* or *North Pole cold past South Pole*. As they get exposure to appropriate forms they will begin to approximate more closely to them, even though they may still make errors.

The second question is why not simply give learners the language they need? We could easily begin the lesson with presentation and practice. But this would have had two unfortunate effects. First after the presentation and practice the learners would not be primarily concerned with meaning. Their efforts would be focused on producing the appropriate forms not on using all the language at their disposal to communicate effectively. Secondly they would be so taken up with the target forms that they would be blind to other useful learning opportunities. Any task-based or CLIL lesson is full of a host of learning opportunities from which learners can benefit.

Another point which needs to be made is that even if we did begin with concentrated language practice that does not guarantee that it would have the desired effect. As teachers we know very well how difficult it is for learners to incorporate new language into their repertoire. It takes a long time before they begin to use things like *do*-questions with any consistency even though these questions are presented and practised assiduously.

There is another, very positive, reason for A PPP approach starts by giving learners a form and then goes on to demonstrate what they might do with this form. It seems to me to make much more sense to start by focusing on meanings and then saying to learners *Here are a number of ways of communicating those meanings*. If we do this learners will search actively for forms as opposed to receiving them passively under teacher direction. And the forms when received will have a real point of reference to make them memorable.

But research does suggest that a focus on grammar and vocabulary makes learning more efficient. So we do come to a focus on form, but at the end, rather than at the beginning of the teaching cycle. Here is a brief commentary on the language study exercises.

9 Language Study

Up to this stage learners have been working to get their meanings across. They have been doing this in a range of communicative settings. In the group work they have not been too worried about grammatical accuracy. In the preparation and report stages they have been striving for accuracy. The meanings they have been working with are prominent in their minds. Now is the time to look in detail at the way these meanings are normally expressed in English.

9.1 Consciousness-raising

The first stage in learning is actually taking notice of what is to be learned (see Batstone 1996: <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/50/3/273.pdf>.) Consciousness-raising activities are an excellent way of helping learners to notice. One advantage of consciousness-raising is that it encourages good learning habits. It encourages learners to look for things for themselves rather than wait for their teacher to do things for them. It encourages active learning.

9.2 Vanishing words

There are several good reasons for using this activity:

- Learners really enjoy it. They like the challenge.
- It is easy to adjust the level of difficulty to make it appropriate for a particular class or group.
- It is much more than a rote memory exercise. Competent speakers of the language can remember a fairly long sentence because they have a strong feel for the structure of the language. They also remember a sentence as a string of phrases rather than a list of words. So *Both poles are very cold, but the South Pole is much colder than the North Pole* may well be recalled as *Both poles/ are / very cold, / but the South Pole / is much colder than the North Pole*. Learners too have to reorganise a sentence as a string of phrases if they are to have any chance of repeating it. Another facility which competent speakers have is the ability to predict. Once you have *Both poles are very cold, but the South Pole...*, then the completion is very likely to be *is ... colder than the North Pole*. So the vanishing words activity encourages learners to organise language in productive ways.
- If a sentence is well chosen it will contain a number of useful language items. The sentence *Both poles are very cold, but the South Pole is much colder than the North Pole* is a very useful frame. We often say things like *Most/Some/Lots of --- are very ---, but -- -is/are ---er than ---*. There is growing evidence that to use language fluently we need to carry in our minds frames and patterns as well as words and grammatical rules. (See, for example, Willis, D. 2003 chapter 7, *Lexical Phrases and Patterns*.)
- Because the exercise demands quite intense effort some phrases are likely to stick in learners' minds. Phrases such as *much colder than* are useful in themselves. But, once learned, they provide a starting point for the acquisition of numerous other phrases: *a lot/a bit/loads bigger/older/ than ...*
- Even if learners do not make these phrases a part of their language repertoire the phrases will stay in their minds. When they come across parallel forms in the future those forms will be more recognisable and more accessible as a result.

9.3 Link to Grammar Book

I do not believe that students can learn from a grammar book unless they have already had exposure to the item to be learnt. The role of the grammar book is to help them to systematise the language they have already encountered. So it is very useful to look at the grammar book to consolidate language that has been studied in context.