	FROM READING TO ROLE PLAY
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Abstract

This paper examines how to use short past tense narrative text to teach a multi-phased lesson, based on theories of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and involving a range of skills and activities. The model is as follows: students predict contents of a newspaper story from the headline and write pre-reading or pre-listening task questions. Following the comprehension task, students assume roles of characters in the story and answer questions from the reporter who wrote the article. In this context I will discuss several key issues that I have considered important in TEFL in the course of more than 20 years at the chalk-face. These issues include: motivation, the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and learning/learner strategies, the integration of the four skills, relating teaching to learning theory, the development of pragmatic competence, and teaching without text books. A copy of the text has been included in Appendix.

Introduction

There are a number of things that worry me about "General English" or standard "Oral English" language textbooks available on the market today. While PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approaches, grounded in largely discredited theories of audio-lingualism or behaviorism (Skehan, 1996, p. 18), and where success in language

learning is synonymous with successful imitation of native speakers, the approach seems to have been terminally engrained in the lesson or unit structure of countless textbooks such as *English Firsthand* and *Passport*. Worse than this, there seem to be few better alternatives on the market. In these textbooks it is assumed that the aim of the lesson must be to introduce or present target language items, drill them, practice them, listen to conversations or read texts which contain this target language, and finally, allow students a free practice stage, a role play, for example, where students may practice this language in a "real communication context". One of the main problems with this approach was pointed out by David Willis (1996 p. 47) who complains that learners are at pains to produce the target language in free practice stage. For example, if the target language is HAVE TO, the students have to use HAVE TO in the free stage which may be, for example, explaining to another student how to make a potato omelette. Finally, even if an approach to teaching is validated by research, it is no good for you, the teacher, if you don't personally happen to believe in it.

More serious problems with this approach to teaching concern the development of learner autonomy, linking teaching approaches to theories of Second Language Acquisition and classroom opportunities for demonstration of teaching skill. Regarding autonomy, while it is hoped that learners may learn strategies or get ideas for how to study outside the classroom, most PPP-style books and lessons seem to convey the notion that they are dependent on teachers for language learning. How can students then go home and choose target language, drill themselves, find texts with examples of the target language and role play situations in their bedrooms? In sum, if you want to train

your students to be good learners and create the optimum learning environment, you may be best advised to develop your own materials and lesson plans. Here is one such lesson plan.

Step 1   Understanding the headline

Headlines, or article titles, in newspapers, magazines or on internet sites are obviously important because they allow the reader to read selectively according to interest. It is also clear that if teachers wish to develop our students reading ability, we should encourage them to read as extensively as possible in L2, or the target language. It is worth noting here that extensive reading is often regarded as the gateway to learner autonomy and learning success (Goshi, 2001 p. 129). However, learners are often faced with significant problems under-standing what these headlines mean, which may negatively affect their ability to make choices about which articles to read in the way native speakers do. This situation may arise due to insufficient vocabulary, and it often does in this model lesson where I begin by writing the following headline on the board.

GIANT PYTHON ATTACKS BOY

The focus of potential difficulty is the word PYTHON. The number of options available for teaching, or having students understand the meaning of a new word is surprisingly limited. In this case, the options are showing a picture or a model, supplying a translation, providing a definition in English, or using mime or non-verbal communi-cation techniques. Rather than fret over option selection, I like to employ as many of the above techniques as I can to teach one word. I would begin by asking one student in each pair to close their eyes

("blind" students) and then show a photograph or illustration of a python (with the Japanese translation written beneath it) to their "sighted" partners. After withdrawing the photograph, I ask the "blind" students to open their eyes again and ask the "sighted" students to try to explain what a python is in English until the "blind" students can guess the word NISHIKIHEBI. The main goal of the activity is to develop communication, or compensation, strategies, often considered to be more important than vocabulary knowledge itself, especially in lower level learners. In this activity, I notice that students use non-verbal communication to express what a python does, usually as a result of vocabulary deficiencies such as knowing how to say SHIMERU (to squeeze) in English. This creates a need for language which I introduce in the next stage where I ask the class questions to re-enforce the meaning of the word and elicit background knowledge of the snake's attributes. The questions are either display, where the teacher knows the answer, or communicative, as categorized by Thompson (1997). Display questions re-enforce meaning while the pupose of the communicative questions is to elicit personal responses which may help learners to internalize meaning. The questions which I ask are listed below.

Questions	Possible answers	Question Type
Where do they live?	South East Asia, India, South and Central America, Australia, Africa	Display
Can they kill you?	Yes	Display
Are they poisonous?	No (or not usually)	Display
Can they strangle you?	Yes	Display
How long are they?	Up to 5 meters	Display
Do people keep them as pets?		Display

Would you like to keep one as a pet? Why, why not?		Communicative
Have you ever seen one in a zoo?		Communicative

As mentioned before, when one unknown word is introduced, it probably draws in other unknown words, snake-related words in this case, such as POISONOUS, and provides a context in which they may be more easily taught and remembered. It also brings in words which may appear in the text which they are going to read, such as STRAN-GLE, and gives an idea of the content, such as a possible location of the attack and the length of the snake. At least we are teaching vocabulary in task context rather than by having students memorize long lists of vocabulary items for testing purposes in courses designed by practitioners who believe there is a clear relationship between what is taught and what is learned.

Language problems with newspaper headlines may also arise due to their special grammar. In order to retrieve meaning from headlines, they often have to be "rehydrated" with changes made to tense for example. It is often said that as long as students receive carefully graded input at a level just around or above their present level, language acquisition will take place naturally. In other words, languages items need not be explained because learners have innate capability to deduce meaning, and if they do not it is because they are not ready to tackle the new language item (Krashen, 1995). However, some commentators point out that while natural acquisition processes will take place, it is the duty of the teacher to point out key language concepts and other problems which may not be immediately available to induc-

tion (Tonkyn, A. 1994).

In this case, the headline PYTHON ATTACKS BOY, with the present simple verb form, implies that the attacks are regular or routine and the learner could be forgiven for wondering why nothing is done about the state of affairs. The next challenge is to elicit the rehydrated form from the students, namely: A giant python has attacked a boy. Note that the present perfect is preferred to the simple past because the former tense implies a link between some past action or event with present consequences. Hereagain, we have a grammar concept which, in my experience, tends to cause trouble for learners and promotes the case for inductive approaches, or for the teacher to make the concept explicit. Some grammar textbooks have recommended this headline rehydration process for the purpose of testing and developing the learner's knowledge of tenses, particularly Present Perfect and the Present Perfect Passive (Ur, 1988. p. 236). However, as I shall explain again later, I prefer to deal with these grammar issues within the context of a task, rather than through textbook exercises with a numbered series of unrelated items.

Step 2　Preparation for listening or reading comprehension

"When reading a newspaper, construct a mental precis first by reading the headline and skimming the story quickly for facts. What it is about? Who are the protagonists? Form a mental picture of the story, then read it properly. The pre-prepared structure will improve how much is remembered".

Nigel Hawkes. *The Sunday Times*. September 08, 2005

I believe this to be very true, but, surprisingly, the author was not writing about how to approach the teaching of reading in a foreign language. It was simply one of many activities listed in an article about how to keep the mind young and alert during old age.

Having established the meaning of the headline, it is time to prepare students for the listening or reading comprehension task. The best way to do this is to invite the students to speculate about the kind of information they would expect to find in the article judging by the headline alone —— accompanying photographs are useful here, too- perhaps even by telling the students to imagine that they are the reporter who wrote the article. What questions would the reporter ask? With large classes, these questions can be written down on slips of paper by students in pairs or groups and then collected and written on the blackboard by the teacher. This may improve the atmosphere of the class since it gives the learners the chance to rehearse or construct the questions with their peers, thereby reducing the risk of anxiety and embarrassment.

Questions which I would hope to elicit include the following:

Where did the attack happen? When did the attack happen? Why did the attack happen? How seriously was the boy injured? Was he taken to hospital? What was his name? How old was he? What was the boy doing at the time of the attack? Did anybody help him? How did they help him? What happened to the snake? How big was the snake?

With more reticent classes where students are reluctant to volun-

teer questions, possible answers can be suggested. For example, write Thailand, India, South America? to elicit the question: Where did the attack happen?

While textbooks typically include lists of text comprehension questions, which appear to save the teacher time and energy, I would argue that it is better for the students to write their own comprehension questions for several reasons. First, it encourages the student to employ a higher degree of critical thinking skills than would normally be expected when comprehension questions are provided by the text-book or teacher, even generating discussion. For, example, in my experience, students often ask questions such as: Was the boy dead? The question is not necessarily incorrect, but it is highly likely that the meaning of the question is not the one intended by the learner. In other words, do you mean: Was he dead when he arrived at hospital? Was he already dead when the python attacked him? In any event I will write them up on the board. Apart from allowing the teacher an opportunity to explore language forms and their relation to meaning, this is a good chance to de-teach, or confront, some common mistakes.

While this can be a delightful opportunity to teach grammar within the context of the task, teaching grammar is not always much fun. I even prefer not to actually say the word because it has a peculiar effect on many students. If you say the word TEST in class, it inspires fear, say GRAMMAR and the boredom is palpable. I often notice that textbooks have special grammar sections but the content often fails to motivate the students. I suppose practitioners who select textbooks prefer to have books with a grammar section since it suggests the title has substance, rather than being simply a low-quality conversation

book. However, when students see *The Present Perfect* written at the top of the page they often complain: "But teacher, we do the present perfect already". (The sentence is incorrect. It should be "we *have done* the present perfect already") Furthermore, isolated grammar exercises through their inevitable focus on form, often discourage the learner's interest in content. For example, one tense discrimination exercise item which I remember from The Cambridge English Course 2 reads: My brother *had/has had* a fight with his neighbor last week. The answer is "had", but what the students may be more interested to know is why my brother had a fight. Let's return to the issue of the question sometimes volunteered by students regarding the python's victim: Was he dead?

Another advantage of this style of eliciting comprehension questions from the students is that it encourages debate over the validity of the questions. Usually some students notice that if the boy had died in the attack, the headline would have been GIANT PYTHON KILLS BOY, rather than "attacks boy". In a similar vein, students sometimes ask: What was the snake's name? The assumption here is that the reptile was a pet or zoo animal. In any case, I like to write up on the board all questions supplied by the students for two reasons. First, it trains the listener to quickly reset their predictions when they learn that, for example, the python was a wild snake. Confidence is usually associated with learning success, but the other side of the coin is that the learner's misplaced confidence in assuming that an errant prediction is correct may give rise to a situation where the learner constructs a meaning from the text which is at complete odds with the one intended by the writer. In other words, confidence can be a major cause of communication failure.

Second, having questions for which answers cannot be supplied after the first listening or reading allows for a situation where better students have to listen or read again to confirm that no answer is available.   This helps to prevent the situation where students finish the comprehension task on first exposure to the text.

This style of preparation for the comprehension task serves additional purposes.   First, by training students to predict content, and even vocabulary, and to ask comprehension questions in this way we are introducing students to strategies for autonomous learning because this is an activity which students can do at home alone, or with a partner or group of students working together without too much help from the teacher in the classroom.   Predicting content and using student's knowledge of the world in pre-task stage is also a learning strategy that can aid comprehension (Rost. 1990, pp. 134-138).   In other words, having students think about the situation and activating students' background knowledge should motivate them to read and assist in comprehension.

Certainly, it is worth pointing out that the learner's motivation cannot be taken for granted.   It must be orchestrated and the approach outlined has proved to be an effective means for orchestrating or raising levels of motivation in the pre-task stage (Porter Ladousse, 1982, p. 30).

Step 3   Comprehension task

There are certain advantages to basing lessons around listening or reading texts which the teacher brings to class.   Firstly, if they are

authentic texts from newspapers for example, it is possible that they may be more popular with Intermediate level students than non-authentic texts (Peacock 1997, p. 152 and Gower, 1983 p. 83). More importantly, the teacher can be sure that the students have not previously read the text, as they might have done if you are working with a text which is printed in the textbook. It is a shame that what might appear to be a good student, or a student who studies the contents of a textbook before the class- thereby defeating activities based on prediction- is not in fact a good student at all from the teacher's point of view when adopting this approach.

There are several ways to introduce the text to the class. First, you can distribute copies of the text to one person, or "reader", in each pair or group with instructions that they do not show the text to their partners, and that "listeners" ask questions to the reader and write down the answers. Second, post several copies of the text on the classroom walls and have the "readers" stand up, find the answers, and report them to the "listeners" in the group who write them down. Third, you can cut the text in half and give one copy of each half to each pair of students. These three methods all require them to interact verbally to complete the task. Fourth, you can display the text on a monitor and scroll down fairly quickly to encourage scanning of the text, an activity which may help to develop the important reading skill of scanning a text for comprehension task answers. This discourages the use of word-for-word translation, a bottom-up text-processing approach favored by Japanese students as a result of their secondary education learning experience.

Dictionary use should be forbidden at this stage, to encourage the

students to complete the task by guessing unknown words. Since it may be irritating for students to be told not to use dictionaries, it may be worthwhile explaining the reasons for the dictionary ban to the students. In other words, explain that it is *sometimes* possible to guess the meaning of unknown words in context, or even to complete or "survive" a comprehension task without knowing all the words, and finally because when taking tests like TOEIC, candidates are not allowed to use dictionaries.

Alternatively, students could be allowed to look up a limited number of words, perhaps five. Nuttall (1996. p. 66) describes an activity to accommodate this principle. A text with a number of difficult lexis is supplied and the group of learners are allowed to check the meanings of only five words. This encourages a discussion of which words should be ignored, "skipped", or "thrown away", and which should be looked up in a dictionary as unguessable but important for the purposes of task completion. The activity also involves free-dom of choice in strategy use, which is vital in the development of learner autonomy.

My personal preference for delivering text is as follows. With the comprehension questions in place I like to read the text aloud to the class once, perhaps, pausing after each sentence. This is a listening activity and the speed with which the text is delivered can be adjusted to raise or lower the level of challenge to suit the level of the students. It also provides an opportunity for students to ask for repetition. I have always found this kind of positive learner behavior difficult to do in Japan because lack of comprehension implies the learner has "failed" or simply been inattentive. However, asking when one doesn't under-

stand happens to be one of the most useful, effective, even powerful learner, listening strategies when dealing with incomprehensible input, and this is a good time and place to explain why. If you are in an English-speaking country, what do you do when you don't understand? What will happen when you don't signal failed communication? How will the native speaker know when you haven't understood?

If students are expected to write down names of places which they have never heard of or cannot spell, this provides a good opportunity for encouraging students to ask questions to facilitate task completion. To counter this negative classroom culture of silence, the teacher should at least give even more positive feedback to students or classes who employ these strategies than to those who answer questions successfully. This is what training students to become better learners is all about. Of course, it would be preferable to have some task questions to remain unanswered so that there remains a purpose for the students to "attack" the text again.

Following the first reading aloud of the text, I prefer to allow time for the students to compare answers in pairs or small groups and to do so in English without looking at each other's written answers, a useful activity for the promotion of speaking, listening and communication skills. Hopefully, there may be some disagreement about answers before a possible second listening or first reading of the text.

However, I would prefer to distribute a copy of the text for reading to allow students to complete the task before finally writing up the answers on the board. This is a good opportunity to invite students to come to the board to assist in the write-up, an activity or GTP (Good

Teaching Practice) recommended by Blanche (1994).

Step 4 Optional Vocabulary Task

An optional stage to the lesson involves having students match a selection of underlined and numbered words from the text with their definitions following completion of the comprehension task.   If dictionary use can be successfully forbidden, it creates an opportunity for students to guess meanings of words from context.   For example, students may be able to deduce from context that a machete, the instrument used by the victim's parents for attacking the snake, is a long heavy jungle knife used for cutting bamboo.   While checking the answers to the vocabulary matching activity, it is important to have the students pronounce, or attempt to pronounce, the items.   This is teaching pronunciation how it should be, in task context.

Step 5 Role Play Developing communicative competence
through practice

Needless to say, interaction in the target language, or using the language effectively to achieve a pre-determined goal, is a cornerstone of SLA, (Ellis, 1994, p. 244), and it is often missing in language courses based on approaches such as grammar translation.

The role of the teacher in the next stage of the lesson is to set up optimum conditions for a successful and enjoyable role play with the aim of fulfilling the need for interaction in the classroom.   In this lesson, the role play is between the reporter and one of the other characters in the story.   The key rules of thumb for effective role play

are firstly that the participants know the time and setting, and I usually write these up on the board, for example: Friday 3pm. The Dryden's House. It is easy to dismiss this as trivial but in the role play students must be able to choose appropriate greetings -"Good morning" or "Good afternoon". They also need to be able to respond to questions such as "How long ago did the attack happen?". The attack in this story happened on a Tuesday night. If the setting for the interview or role play is in the house of the victim's family, students can include lines such as: "May I see Bartholomew's bedroom?" Alternatively, it could be a telephone call from Sydney to Cairns. If the setting is not established, students literally don't know where they are.

Students also need to have adequate information about the characters they are to assume. This includes their names of course, and I also write these up on the board. However, rather than allow students to have a copy of the text in front of them as they are doing the role pay, I prefer them to write down important information, such as place names, on a separate piece of paper. If it's already written on the board, then students can be asked to turn their scripts over. This pre-role play activity requires students to organize information and plan ahead, and doing this well is an important part of the successful learning experience (Foster, P. 1996).

One of the reasons that this particular newspaper story is a good one is that there are several potential characters:
Role A: The reporter who wrote the article
Role B: Bartholomew Dryden, Kathy Dryden, Mr. Dryden, or the snake!
There are two advantages here. First, it allows students an element of choice, and choice is a key element in student autonomy for reasons too

numerous to mention. In brief, successful learning or successful performance in language courses, at least in my own experience, is all about making good choices. Secondly, I encourage students to repeat the task two or more times and having a choice of characters means that students can do this with some variation. It is worth adding here that task repetition is considered by some commentators (Bygate 1996. p. 145) to be a key tool for driving the language acquisition process since learners can notice improvements in their task performance through continued rehearsal. During role play, the teacher's role is to monitor student output and to note down any problems that surface during learner interaction.

Step 6   Observing how native speakers do the task
Focus on Pragmatic Competence

It is often thought that if students can perform a role play with flawless English delivered with native speaker like fluency then there can be nothing more that a teacher can desire from a student. However, there is a third element in the learner's competence which must be explored. To highlight this reality I may like to play a recording of one of the role plays acted out by two native speakers. The recording is of a telephone conversation between the reporter who wrote the article and the victim's mother taking place on the Wednesday morning, the day after the attack.

Here is the transcript:

Kathy Dryden: Hello?

Reporter: Is that Kathy Dryden?

Kathy: Speaking

Reporter: My name's Shane Warne and I work for the Associated Press

in Sydney.

Kathy: Hello.

Reporter: I understand your son was attacked by a python in his bedroom last night.

Kathy: That's right.

Reporter: Was your son injured in the attack?

Kathy: Well, he got some cuts and bruises.

Reporter: Did you get a photograph of the snake?

Kathy: No.

Reporter: That's too bad. I'm afraid we can't make this a front page story without a photograph. Do you have a photograph of your son?

Kathy: Yes.

Reporter: Alright, send one to us at this address. Got a pen? Our office is 228, Mandelson Street, Sydney. Bye.

The point here is that while the conversation is perfect in terms of both linguistic and communicative competence, hopefully the students will notice that the reporter demonstrates pragmatic failure in his handling of the discourse. In other words, his language is inappropriate for the situation. For example, he fails to use appropriate greetings and strategies to open and close the conversation, and more importantly, he fails to express sympathy to the victim's mother. However, if the students fail to notice this problem, it may be difficult to raise levels of socio-pragmatic awareness.

In addition to, or as an alternative to, the above, a recording of the same dialog, but one which is pragmatically appropriate, in other words, without the same incidences of pragmatic failure that occur in the script above.

Kathy: Hello?

Reporter: Could I speak to Kathy Dryden, please?

Kathy: Speaking.

Reporter: Hello.   My name's Shane Warne and I work for the Associated Press in Sydney.

Kathy: Hello

Reporter: I understand your son was attacked by a python in his bedroom last night.

Kathy: That's right.

Reporter: Oh, it must have been a terrible experience.   Was your son injured in the attack?

Kathy: Well, he got some cuts and bruises.

Reporter: I'm sorry to hear that.   Do you mind if I ask a few questions about it?

Kathy: Not at all.   Go ahead.

Etc.

This practice is recommended in TBLL (Task-Based Language Learning) where students are given the opportunity to notice the features of the native speakers performance immediately after having performed the same, or a similar task themselves.   The theory is that motivated learners observe and select features of the native speakers performance for incorporation into their own repertoire.   Of course they may need help here from the teacher.   Following this, the role play can be repeated a final time.

Step 7   The write-up stage

In the interests of preserving a balance of skills, a write-up stage

would be recommended wherein students write up the dialogs which they have practiced orally in Step 5 and 6. This can, of course, be done as a homework activity, but it allows the teacher to give feedback on error which may be difficult or impossible in large classes where the teacher cannot provide feedback and correction to a large number of pairs of students practicing role plays simultaneously. However, aside from providing writing practice and the opportunity for the teacher to give written feedback to individual students, having students perform speaking tasks without prior focus on language forms and strategies is fundamental to TBLL. As mentioned earlier, in PPP, where students are primed with pre-determined target language forms, students may be led to believe that the purpose of the "free" speaking stage at the end of the lesson is to produce target language forms accurately. As mentioned before, in TBLL, the task serves to drive forward the acquisition process by encouraging learners to use their existing language resources to complete the task, and then to focus on language forms in post-task activities, through a writing activity with feedback from the teacher

Step 8 Towards autonomy

In my experience, in subsequent lessons, using the same approach, I have found that students become more adept at making predictions from headlines and producing their own comprehension questions. Having reached this stage, or having trained students thus far, I would then proceed to invite students to practice the above procedures alone by surfing the internet or skimming through newspapers for interesting headlines. In other words, students find a headline, write some predictive questions, and then read. I would also ask students to bring these

texts to class. Students in pairs can then invite their peers to make predictions and perform some role plays. In this way, teachers have a way of training students to become autonomous learners, and having them work at home as independent researchers of authentic English text and making choices could be the key to learning success.

Conclusion

Eliciting questions is worthwhile for both teacher and students. When students have a part in the design of tasks, these become learner strategies which can be applied to other listening and reading comprehension activities. Repeated practice with eliciting questions about stories from headlines in subsequent sessions should result in learners becoming more adept at forming and confirming hypotheses about an article. Grammar problems may arise in constructing questions, but this creates ideal conditions for teaching grammar within the context of the task. Students may make incorrect predictions, which may lead to them making irrelevant questions. Although these unanswerable questions may temporarily interfere with comprehension, they may result in a positive learning experience as students readjust their predictions when dealing with spoken or written input.

In sum, the above procedures can be a powerful medium for developing the learner's linguistic, communicative, and pragmatic competence and for integrating the practice of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Finally, and most powerfully, a framework for autonomous study can be established.

Appendix

GIANT PYTHON ATTACKS BOY

CAIRNS, Australia (AP). The parents of a 7-year-old boy awoke to find their son smothered in the coils of a giant python and slashed the reptile with machetes until it slithered into the jungle, the boy's mother said Wednesday.

It was like a horror movie. "All I could see was my boy's head and toes", Kathy Dryden told the Associated Press by telephone from the tropical town of Innisfail, 1,150 miles (1,840 kilometers) north of Sydney, in Australia's tropical northern state of Queensland.

Dryden said her son was treated for lacerations to his legs and bruises but was not seriously injured. Innisfail police said the incident had been reported to them but they did not plan to search for the snake.

Dryden said she was awakened early Tuesday by screams from the room of her son Bartholomew and ran to the son's room along with her husband Peter, a school teacher. There they found a four-meter (14-foot) long python crushing and trying to swallow Bartholomew.

It was a hot night and Bartholomew was lying under a mosquito net. He suddenly started screaming. We rushed to the bedroom to find this huge snake trying to strangle him, she said. "It was coiled three times around his arms and neck and was going down his body".

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