

"AWARENESS" EXERCISES FOR TEACHING

LANGUAGE STRUCTURES

SUMMARY

This paper falls into three sections:

Introduction  
Exercises  
Worries and Conclusions.

The introduction gives a couple of examples that suggest that the thing students are most interested in is themselves, classroom individually and as a group. The make-believe world of EFL text books is roundly attacked.

The main body of the paper consists of outlines of five "awareness" or group dynamic exercises and their use for teaching particular grammar structures.

Each exercise outline is followed by considerations of the class grammar structures.

The final section of the paper deals with my worries, doubts and conclusions about the work done so far.

MARIO RINVOLUCRI.

Why the fatigue  
of coursebook for  
writers, teachers + STS?

ACTIVITIES  
"AWARENESS" EXERCISES FOR TEACHING

LANGUAGE STRUCTURES

by Rimodun

INTRODUCTION

*For some years ago*  
~~A couple of years back~~ a publishing house decided that its employees needed to improve their knowledge of French. A special purposes course was designed to cope with the needs of the group. Considerable analytical thought was given to the sort of language people in an English publishers' office needed to communicate with French opposite numbers, telephone language, letter writing language etc.

The course started: suddenly a new social situation sprang into life. The directors were learners side by side with their secretaries. It was new to all of them. Very soon it became clear that what the group really wanted to do was to explore the new non-hierarchical social situation created by the language class, and *S.P.* French began to take second-place. What they really wanted was group-exploring French.

And these were serious, professional people who needed the target language in their jobs.

In the winter of 77-8 I taught a class of beginner Chilean refugees using Charles Curran's Community Language Learning approach. In this method the group proceeds to completely spontaneous conversations through use of L1 and translation (see Counseling Learning - Whole Person Model For Education by Charles Curran). The Chileans chose to talk about themselves, their children, their living problems, their language difficulties with the host community, their propaganda and political activities. Halfway through the language course the women in the group formed a 'mothers centre' to organise activities for local children and to collect money for starving children in Chile.

The point I wish to bring out with the stories of the publishers and the Chileans is that, when given a bit of freedom, the thing people seem to most want to talk about is themselves. If this is the case, then, why should writers of EFL materials strain their imaginations trying to create make-believe 'worlds' which the students must enter on their way to mastery of the language? Why should students across Spain and North Africa wade through three years of Martin and Gillian's platonic love affair and marriage in G. Broughton's Success with English? Why should thousands of Eurocentre Swiss have had to come to grips with the English verb system, while mentally focussing on the cardboard characters of the presentation section of O'Neill's Kernels Intermediate? (I am not here referring to the Coke story).

The major drive of the huge EFL publishing industry is to bring "brighter and better material" into the classroom. Better *such as Challenges and Follow-me.*

Marvellous, but why bother?

Why import material into the classroom when the students come each one with a whole world of ideas, sensations and feelings that can easily be made the 'content' of the language activity?

The exercises that follow are a first step towards trying to use the real internal world of the students as the content of the language courses.

## EXERCISES

### COMPARATIVES

Some instructors teach these by getting the students to compare pictures of objects in the course book. Others bring in objects of different sizes. Silent Way practitioners have the students compare different lengthed rods.

Why bring anything in at all? Much simpler to do it this way:

#### STEP 1:

Ask each person to silently write sentences comparing him or herself to each other person in the group.

The teacher goes round behind the students querying errors.

#### STEP 2:

The teacher calls out the name of a particular student and all the others read out their sentences about the person in question.

This is done round the class.

Selective correction of this oral phase is best done with Gattegno's finger correction technique.

(N.B. in the description of all these exercises I am noting the procedures appropriate with a group of 10 to 14 people - a large group would need splitting into groups of ten or so).

#### ADVANTAGES:

- (a) Each student has to think about all the others in relation to him/herself.
- (b) Each student experiences a whole range of comparative thoughts, most of which he censors for social reasons. The experiencing of the comparative concept happens at a deep level because the ego is heavily involved in the exercise.
- (c) The initial written phase allows the teacher to do individual, private correction of structure errors without the whole group being involved.
- (d) Vivid interest is maintained all through Step 2, the oral stage, because people want to know what other people think of them. In a group of 10 students 90 comparative sentences are produced orally and listened to attentively. Try getting that amount of practice of structure some other way without the students going into a behaviourist coma!

(e) The teacher is allowed to take his/her correct role as a language expert - s/he is allowed to shed the role of group clown, group mentor, group leader, gobbler-up of group thinking and speaking time. In the above exercise teacher talking time can easily be reduced to less than 5% if the correction in stage 1 is done by simply querying and in stage 2 with the finger technique.

### Present simple + adverbs of frequency

If students study this area of language using Abbs and Freebairn's Starting Strategies, they will spend a good deal of their time making up sentences about the travelling habits of a group of people the authors have 'invented' who work at Focus Films. A bit better is the 'extension' work in which students are asked to think about the travelling to work habits of real Mancunians, though not much better if Manchester is just a blob on the map to the student, or not even that.

By far the least boring part of the unit is the 'open dialogue' in which the student is asked to talk about his/her own getting to work habits. The 'open dialogue' is one of many good things K.V. in Stockholm has had to offer language teachers.

But why a whole unit on this in both teacher and student book? Overkill? Why not something simpler and more involving:

#### Step 1

The students write their names on slips of paper the teacher takes in and shuffles.

The students then pick a random name from the pile. Nobody must pick his/her own name.

#### Step 2

The teacher puts up on the board or the OHP the following cline of patterns:

I always .....  
I often .....  
I sometimes .....  
I hardly ever .....  
I never .....

Each student now imagines s/he is the person whose name s/he has got. The task is to write five sentences as the other person about their habits, using some of the patterns given.

#### Step 3

A student is invited to read out one or two of the sentences s/he has written as X. X is then asked to respond, agreeing or disagreeing. At this stage students usually begin arguing, freely using the patterns given.

Advantages:

(a) This exercise is one of several that are based on 'role reversal' between students. Students are asked to 'become' other people, not the nebulous "character" the role card prepared by the omniscient teacher, but other class-mates. Each student in this activity effectively prepares his own private role-card of what the other person is like.

Even when a group has only been together for a few hours it is amazing how accurate many of the students' projections on each other are. This is probably because the sub and semi-conscious very quickly builds up a picture of other people in the group.

Both the written and oral stages demand strong self-involvement from the students. Step 2 can not be done without thinking and Step 3 is heavily punctuated with laughter, a major group-building lubricant.

So, a main advantage of this role reversal exercise is that the student is heavily involved, which can hardly be said to be the case in some EFL role-play situations.

(b) Meaningful, listened-to and focussed-on oral production of the target structure is copious. We are light years from the obedient Skinnerian mental haze. The students' minds and emotions are engaged.

(c) In certain situations membership of the learning group is very important to its individual members. This is true just as much of an Iranian teenage learner in Britain who is struggling to replace his extended family peer group in a racist and alienating society, as of the German house wife who sees in her VHS evening class an opportunity to broaden her limited acquaintance. In both cases belonging to the group is vital to the individual and so very important to his/her learning process. The exercise we are looking at helps forge the people in the class into a real group - I would venture to claim that five hours of work in which people focus on, observe and wonder about each other does more to build a warm, understanding group than 100 hours conventional structurest behaviourist or notional-behaviourist learning activity in which the students focus (a) on the teacher (b) on the card characters in the text book (c) on the yawn of their own non-investment and under-commitment.

Students who suddenly come together in a class group are already members or ex-members of many other groups. Among the most powerful of these groups are their families of origin. The setting for their interaction in this group is the home, the most intimate and deeply known of territories to a human being. What better context than this could we find for practicing spatial prepositions?

### Spatial prepositions

#### Step 1

String pair the students. Have ready a number of pieces of string (18 inches long) equivalent to half the number of people in your group. Hold them up - get people to take hold of the ends - you let go - each student will now be randomly paired with the person at the end of his/her bit of string.

#### Step 2

Get the students sitting back to back in their pairs. Student A has pencil and paper at the ready. B gives him/her information A needs to draw the ground-plan of B's house.

Very soon there will be a lot of question and answer work going on all round the room.

#### Step 3

The partners turn round and look at the ground plans done. Misunderstandings are sorted out.

### Advantages

(a) This exercise gets people to make conscious and to communicate things that are super-evident to the unconscious. The shape and disposition of the home is deeply known, so deeply that some students find it hard to understand that their partner actually does not know this already! The self-engagement in this exercise is such that if the teacher tries to cut off the activity too early s/he gets heavy looks.

The personal commitment is such that spatial lexis supplied by the teacher to the pairs is learnt just like that. It is being taught after a deep need for it has been created.

(b) All the pairs work, which is rather amazing, as in most pair work you tend to get 'lazy' or 'unhooked' ones. It does not seem to happen with this exercise.

### Disadvantages

The exercise is so gripping that when all the students share the same L1 it is hard to make sure they keep speaking English.

### The Present Continuous

As suggested earlier the students come to the class group as full members of their own family groups. In the average class group how much does the individual find out about the families of those round him? Precious little, and yet in many cultures the extended family is the basic peer group. Finding out about other people's families can be excellently combined with practicing the present continuous, as follows:

#### Step 1:

Each person tells the group what time it is in his country. (We are dealing with a multi-national group in Britain).

#### Step 2:

Each person writes as legibly as possible what three of his/her close relatives are doing right now. In referring to the relatives they must rite pronouns, not names.

#### Step 3:

The pieces of writing are taken in by the teacher and shuffled.

A given student draws one and reads the three sentences on it out to the group. The group has to guess whose relatives these must be. And so on round the class.

#### Advantages

(a) Students are viewing each other realistically as members of family groups. They are getting to know each other more in the round.

(b) They are exchanging real information by using the present continuous which is hardly the case when this tense ss practised round a picture which shows with perfect visual clarity what the people in it are doing.

Students come to the language class with a rich background of past experiences. These can well be drawn on for any exercise in which the teacher wants the group to practise past tenses.s In the example that follows the grammatical focus of the activity is the

### Simple Past Interrogative

#### Step 1:

A student is asked to put up on the board the visual outline of some experience that has been important for him/her and to speak about it for 30 seconds. What goes on the black board could be a picture, a map, numbers etc.....

#### Step 2:

All the other people in the group now write five questions they want to ask the student about his/her experience.

At this stage the teacher goes round silently querying grammatically wrong sentences.

Step 3:

The group fire their questions at the student in the 'hot seat'. What in fact happens is that they very soon forget to ask their written questions, which are often superceded, and frame entirely new, spontaneous, oral ones.

Advantages

(a) The sparseness and non-verbal quality of the information given in Step 1 creates a situation in which people want to ask questions. In one class I did this with, the initial student simply wrote these figures on the board:

1960  
1964  
1970  
1974  
1975  
1976

In his 30 second spiel he told us that these were the dates when he first met his wife, when he first noticed her as a female, their engagement, their marriage, first child and second child.

This generated a marvellous questioning session in which these lower intermediate students mixed cheeky with profound questions. The hot seat student sensed the group's interest and respect and gave for-real replies.

(b) The written stage allows the teacher to remind people of the did system, the "to be" past interrogative system, etc silently and individually.

When the students come to the oral phase and want to make up new questions they do so with the help given in mind, and tend to make less mistakes.

(c) Unlike many of the exercises described before, this one can be used many times, with a different person in the 'hot seat' each time, until all those who want to lead the activity have had a chance to do so. (Not everybody in a given group does want to be in the hot seat).



WORRIES, DOUBTS AND CONCLUSIONS

A major worry I have with the exercises presented above and with the much larger corpus of work from which they have been drawn, is that a small minority of students may be secretly hurt or embarrassed.

The word secretly is the operative one, as students do not tend to produce overtly aggressive or unhappifying material about other individuals in the group. It is evident that a lot of censorship goes on in people's minds as they do these exercises. The problem is to know whether certain reticent individuals in the group may have been secretly hurt or angered, and this by definition is very hard to know. I have not yet found a way out of this wood.

Another worry is to do with the extent of cultural taboos on the exchange of personal information in a group. The exercises presented here are born out of the climate created by US group counselling and encounter group work. They are further spin-off from the work of men like Carl Rogers. Such exercises work well with 'Europeans' eg. French Germans, Japanese, and they have been 'accepted' by Middle Easterners in classes in the UK. From my personal experience there, I know they would go down well in Latin America. Would there be barriers to their working in an African context? The material has not yet been tested with African groups, so I have no way of knowing.

A third doubt is generated by the conflict within me as a teacher over the contrast between the invasiveness of this material and the brilliant neutrality of all Silent Way materials. The stark, cognitive brilliance of Gattegno's entry into the students' mind is in diametric contrast to the 'whole person' involvement, emotions, unconscious and all, that this approach precipitates. I have a feeling that this worry will take me quite a time to sort out internally.

I have strong doubts as to the immediate publishability of this material for the very simple commercial reason that it militates against the idea of a student book. Fully student centred material implies the disappearance of student books, which can hardly be in the interest of the Lord Cowdrays of this world.

On the other hand this kind of approach to Language teaching would be economically ideal in countries where buying textbooks is impossible for economic reasons - this would be a very real reason for the British Council to be interested, pace the publishers.

Though I feel that this 'awareness' material may not be immediately publishable this will not always be the case. Once the photocopying revolution has spread across the whole metropolitan world, institutions will no longer buy class sets, and so the publishers will start being interested in selling single-copy books (such as teacher's books) and they will so price them as to make them profitable.

I have found 'awareness' material to be ideal on teacher training courses, ideal in speeding up the formation of the trainee group, while at the same time teaching them techniques that can be profitably used for teaching ligaments of language, lexis, structures etc. There is a Russian doll effect here: when you show trainees group-creative techniques of language teaching this in itself makes them become a group.

It ought to be made clear that I am not advocating that 'awareness' exercises should become the only element in a reasonable language teaching programme. I personally mix drama techniques of the sort illustrated in Alan Maley's forthcoming book (CUP), with problem solving exercises, Silent Way work, CLL work, and awareness materials.

What I am saying is that there is no excuse, other than ignorance, for teachers to go on using inadequate material like a good deal in Kernels Intermediate and Strategies, to pick out two well known books from the plethora of inadequacy reeling off the presses.

(The exercises outlined in this essay have been selected from a much larger corpus of material due to appear with the Pilgrims Pilot List of publications this Autumn under the title TALK TO EACH OTHER.)

(If the panel of judges wish to see the material described in action this summer we would be very happy to welcome them to Pilgrims, at Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury.)

(The opinions and feelings expressed in this paper are my personal ones and in no way represent Pilgrims' pedagogical policy.

Pilgrims' policy in this sphere is to remain open to all trends - our team comprises structuralist-behaviourists, notional-behaviourists, North American humanists and some others less easy to pigeon-hole).

Principal back-ground books to this paper are:

AWARENESS GAMES, by C. Hooper, U. Kutzleb, A. Stobbe, B. Weber, 1975, St Martins Press, N. York.

A HANDBOOK OF STRUCTURED EXPERIENCES FOR HUMAN RELATIONS TRAINING, edited by Pfeiffer and Jones, University Associates, La Jolla California. 6 Vols. (Obtainable in Britain from: People at Work, 3 Poplar Avenue, Hove 4, East Sussex.

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