

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A LESSON

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims and SEAL

A salesperson is negotiating with you and is halfway to a deal with you. So far in the negotiation she will have used her natural inter-personal intelligence, [ to use Howard Gardiner's term from THE SEVEN INTELLIGENCES ]. some techniques she learnt in her initial training and

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maybe a trick or two she came across at a workshop two weeks ago. You are perhaps the first client to have offered her an opening to use this new awareness, technique or verbal gambit.

In any professional's behaviour there will be learnings and ideas from different time strata of her experience. [ The term " archaeology " seems apt because it describes areas that are forgotten and unreflected on.]

This article outlines a two hour lesson halfway through a three week general English course for business and professional people ( lower intermediate to advanced ) and offers you my current awareness of where the elements of this lesson came from in terms of my professional learning archaeology. I suspect that so far I have only gone back as far as the Mario Bronze Age- there will be a lot of lithic strata (neo/ paleo) that I don't have useful, conscious knowledge of. So, for example, there is nothing in this article about the influence on me of my own teachers, either in school or elsewhere. We know from Ephraim Weintraub and Jim Wingate's work that a person's own teachers are inevitably the first and maybe most powerful teacher trainers in her professional life.

#### The stages of the lesson

1. ( 15 mins ) When the learners came in they found a letter addressed to DEAR EVERYBODY waiting for them on their tables. I wrote this letter in answer to letters the students had written to me over the week-end. They were free to chose what they wanted to write about [ it is an interesting reflection on the EFL subculture that I feel the need to mention that the letters were " unguided "- we all love military training. John Haycraft and the RSA Prep Cert.(\*) ] My letter to the students quoted from and responded to things they had written to me. It was a sort of socialisation of their letters to me. The students read the Dear E. letter with the help of dictionaries and with me available when called over.

2. ( 6-7 mins ) While the students were still coming in I overheard Juanjo talking to Monica about a trip to London. At one point he asked :

" I must to tell you now ? "

I quietly wrote this up on the board and then wrote a grammar corrected version underneath followed by several socio-linguistically less abrupt ways of saying roughly the same thing.

When heads emerged up out of the letter-reading I talked Juanjo through my blackboard notes, and explained how UK

English needs loads of softeners to make the listener feel unaggressed.

3. ( 10 mins ) Two days before I had asked the group to do homework on modals. I gave them three short extracts from Sei Shonagon's Pillow Book in which she writes of the way she thinks various things should be , eg:

" Oxen should have very small foreheads with white hair; their underbellies, the ends of their legs and the tips of their tails should also be white....."

I had asked the students to write about what they thought things or people should/ ought to be like.

Their writing had a strong whiff of the style of the 10th century Japanese courtisan - amazing how contagious her elegant thought patterns are.

From this home work I picked out some excellent sentences and some flawed ones and put them in large writing on strips of paper. I gave each learner two of the strips and some blu-tak.

I divided the board into two areas:

GREAT SENTENCES

WONKY SENTENCES

I sat as near to the board as I could, looking up at it. The students crowded round and stuck their sentences the side of the board they thought correct.

I then talked TO MYSELF, but out loud, about the placing of the sentences. I moved them when necessary from one side to the other. I explained to myself why I thought a given student had made a mistake etc.....

4. ( 50 mins ) For homework each learner had been asked to write 30 questions addressed to herself, the answers to which could be of interest to others.

I asked the folk to take a partner they felt like working with for about 45 minutes and to spread out around a large room adjacent to our classroom. Person A then put the questions that she had written to herself to her partner, who answered them in terms of his life and experience.

The voice levels in the pairs were low and rather intimate. The pauses between utterances were long for a European group. All of those 8 people gave visual signs of being intensely with their partner.

Dilemma: in a crit session last week they told me to correct them a lot more. Should I go and listen in on the pairs? It felt wrong.

First I did concentrated visual ( but not auditory ) observation of each pair from two different spots in the room.

I had a lull and began to feel lonely. I wanted to be in on the action, if only the group had been an uneven number I could have joined in! Why hadn't I turned a pair into a threesome so I could join in?

I went and got them their normal mid-lesson break soft drink and did a waiter pirouette round the group. I had become functional again- what a relief!

I then went into a corner and began mentally dreaming the ideas that are coming together under your eyes in this article.

5. ( 40 mins ) In one of the letters mentioned above there was a horrific, throat-catching description in which the writer, Isabel, relived the days of a terrible fire near her town, Manresa, in Catalunya. The writing was so good I wanted everybody to read it.

I opened this last part of our two hour lesson by telling the group a fire-story of my own that naturally introduced some of the words that were to come up later in other people's own fire tales, phrases like a plume of smoke / a fire alarm / fireman/ fire engine/ sparks/ to crackle etc...

We then read photocopies of Isabel's fire text ( which I had lightly corrected ).

These first two fire stories provoked a series of other stories from other people in the group, stories in which the same area of expression and vocabulary was recycled.

#### Archaeological diary entry 1 .

Ten years ago I used to wonder a lot about the difference in mood and mask between just before the lesson started and just after. When the students come into the room and start reading a text addressed to them the "lessons" start in tune with the students' individual rhythms. I have used this beginning for FCE classes, that have to do plenty of reading and writing, for around three years, ever since Nicky Burbidge, Sheila Levy, Peta Gray and I started writing a book about the use of letters ( OUP 95).

The idea of writing a letter to DEAR EVERYBODY that quotes from individual student letters was inspired by observing social cohesion in Japanese women groups. They gave me the courage to socialise student text this way. Sue Leather and Peta Gray, colleagues at Cambridge Academy, alerted me to the danger of insensitive

editorialising- I resisted them at the time but later learnt they were sometimes, somehow right!  
A lot of people have helped me come to work with this technique.

### Diary entry 2

The idea of doing classwork around students' "unofficial" talk, talk that occurs in the classroom but before the lesson begins, was something I read about in John Farnsworth's **BREAKING RULES**. He suggests evaluating students on stuff they say when they are unaware that they are being observed. ( very fair and very unfair ).

Is this technique as I use it licit teacher behaviour, trespassing as it does across the boundaries Erwin Goffman has so brilliantly described and analysed?

I see Kuniko's flashing eyes furiously accusing me last autumn:

" Mario you are not a proper teacher- you don't correct us in class, you refuse to correct our letters to you, and then you listen to private conversation and correct in front of whole group. Mario, I need a teacher, I need a real teacher. "

How important the Kunikos and Sue Leathers are if I want to get beyond where I am. ( The people who blow a whistle and say : " Hey, think!" )

### Diary entry 3

Great to have Alan Maley in my class. It was from him that I learnt the idea of learners batheing in powerful text before writing stuff of their own under its influence. It was in Barcelona in 1989 and Alan gave us marvellous French texts to write out from. I have never written such rich and excellent French. And these students have fallen, likewise, under Sei Shonagon's spell.

She, too, is in the classroom. To me she is my wife's elder sister- they are so alike, despite a millenium gap. Both are outwardly shy, inwardly strong, arrogant and brilliantly perceptive.

John Barnett , you are here too. As I crouch at the blackboard surrounded by students you are my model. You taught me this technique and as it is so much you, when I use it I become you briefly. I am tall and strongly built- I smile a lot and think carefully before I speak- I only say a well selected bit of what I have thought. ( In reality Mario is short and fat! ). I used to feel guilty about this chameleon-like ability to virtually impersonate other teachers in class..... it seemed very dishonest and spineless. Herbert Puchta, about five years ago, saw me imitating him in front of a group ( I was

standing and moving like him ). I "confessed" what I had been conscious of doing - his reframe was perfect:

" I am delighted to be of use to you " or words to that effect.

Since Herbert somehow gave me permission I have been a much happier interioriser of others, chameleon..... or what you will.

#### Diary entry 4

Yes, this writing to yourself and then using the questions on others used to be one of my " inevitable " exercises- I did it with all groups, suitable or not!

It was Carlos Maeztu, my most powerful trainer in the 1970's, who mentioned the exercise to me and gave me Scaring and Daring in the Foreign Language Classroom (\* ) by Moskowitz, in which he had found the exercise.

I have hardly used the exercise at all over the past few years. I wonder why ? Is it because powerful voices around me currently have warned me to be careful of Moskowitz's bull-in-china-shop use of therapy stuff in FL teaching? The major voice here is that of Bernard Dufeu, who is currently one of my main trainers, though I am more dissociated from him technically than from previous guiding voices. He has greater knowledge than some of my previous inner mentors and yet I give myself more independence from him than I ever had vis a vis Lou Spaventa, Carlos Maeztu, Cecilia Bartoli ( Silent Way Trainer), John Morgan ( collaborator and major influence ) Is it something about Bernard and my chemistries or is it to do with feeling more self-standing, more needful of independence? Ich weiss nicht.

#### Diary entry 5

Morgan and I published a little unit on using " fire stories " in ONCE UPON A TIME as far back as 1984. I often use this topic in language classes, knowing, though, that I risk sailing close to the wind- such stories can be as traumatic to members of the group as witnessing UK criminal law court proceedings often is.

Usually I " impose " the fire topic, from the dais of my blind teacher power. In this group Isabel spontaneously devoted a whole letter to the topic and so, for the first time in a dozen years I had been given permission from some one in the group to bring the topic up. Do coursebook writers often think in terms of permission from the students? They have to think permission-wise about editors, inspectors, Ministries of Education, heads

of Dept, teachers, parents etc..... but how about permission from the learners?

### Tail-piece

The notes above arose from students getting so involved in teacher-exclusionary pair-work that I set to musing. I wonder what you, dear reader, do in your training or language classroom when pairs go on working for a long, intense periods of time?

What are your inner monologues like ? Are they useful to you?

Would noting their own inner monologues be useful to your trainees, especially if you are working with experienced, inset folk?

Why not ask your trainees to share their inner monologues with readers of THE TEACHER TRAINER? A boost for them to be writing for us lot, I'd've thought.

\* John Haycraft, founder of International House, felt that his military training had been crisper and more effective than his University teacher training. So when he invented the four week , introduction to teaching course that later became the RSA Prep Cert, he naturally plumped for the military model.

\* Scaring and Daring = Caring and Sharing inm the Foreign Language classroom, by Gertrude Moskowitz, Newbury House, 1978.