

MR/RJA/46

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Dear Lola

At long last here is an article for CABLE a bit of the sort you asked for in your letter to me on 6 February 1989. I hope it is more or less what you are after.

Un abrazo

Mario  
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enc

## THE PROBLEM OF "THIRD PERSON" TEACHING AND LEARNING

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

The contact between mother and child in the early years is a firmly me-you sort. The mother holds the child, cuddles the child, tickles the child, feeds the child. Her I works with the child's you. The child learns the mother tongue through a perpetual dialogue first with the mother and then with other family members. Text external to this dialogue plays a secondary role in the child's mastering of the basic bones of the language, the sound system, the grammar system etc.... External text includes songs and stories. The mother sings the child a song, the father reads him a story and shows him the pictures in the book, and so the texts are absorbed into the I-thou relationship.

In the average foreign language classroom the situation is very different since what the teacher says to the students, what they say to the teacher and what they say to each other is largely governed by a person none of them have ever met: the coursebook writer. This mysterious third person offers the people in the classroom text to listen to, to read, to imitate, to transform and to emancipate from so that they can finally say their own things in the target language. This is what I mean by the title of this article: the problem of 'third person' teaching and learning. When you think about it carefully it is extraordinary that 20 students should come together in a room with a fluent speaker of the target language and need target language text provided by a third party who knows nothing about them and whom none of them care about.

This same third party has taken major decisions for the teacher and the students in areas like grammar progression, what vocabulary to work on, which are the difficult sounds in the language and how to master them. What a cheek! The presence of the coursebook in the classroom directly militates against a natural, untrammelled dialogue between teacher and student, and student and student.

### What can we do with the coursebook?

We can draw it into the dialogue between teacher and students, we can use it in ways that personalise the texts and make them ownable by our students. We can domesticate the coursebook. Enough of grandiloquent talk and down to practicalities - here are some real things you can try with your students.

### The Piepho way of tackling a unit

Professor Piepho, of Giessen University, when asked to teach a textbook unit, tells the class to look through it carefully and pick out anything they individually find

- a) good
- b) bad
- c) intriguing.

Each student shares his list with the group. Piepho starts his work with the group from leads given to him by students. For example when Piepho was teaching a unit on the comparative one boy picked this sentence out of a substitution table:

"My brother has more socks than me".

Much of the rest of Piepho's lesson focused on presenting and practising the comparatives in the context of sibling rivalry (this was a teenage group). What happened here was that a student showed the teacher the relevance he had seen in this mass of cold, third person text. This enabled the teacher to organise a lesson in which the students could say real, personal things to him and to each other.

### Words and phrases you like

The textbooks are full of dialogues and reading passages. These were chosen to illustrate certain language points, because the coursebook writer liked the texts or because s/he couldn't find anything else. Ask the students to read a passage and to underline any words, phrases or sentences they like, for whatever reason. Then ask each person to read out what they have chosen and explain why they like it. Sometimes more than one person likes the same phrase but for different reasons. Your role in all this is to listen attentively and without intrusive comment. People in this exercise need to feel that they can say whatever they want and for whatever reason.

This is a very simple, direct way of allowing a class to appropriate a text, to make it their own in purely individual ways.

### Domesticating text with beginners

Imagine you are learning modern Greek. Please make a coherent dialogue with the words below. You can use single words as complete utterances. You can put words together into rudimentary sentences.

garsoni = camarero  
meze = bocadillo  
ochi = no  
evcharisto = gracias

ne = sí  
thelete = Quiere  
mia bira = una cerveza

akuste = oiga  
Kirie = Señor

Possible, student-made dialogues might go like this:

A : Akuste kire, thelete mia bira?  
B : Ochi. Meze.  
A : Evcharisto, Kirie.

or

A : Akuste, garsoni!  
B : Ne, kirie. Thelete...?  
A : Mia bira.  
B : Thelete meze?  
A : Ne.. evcharisto.

You the student, have had a chance to create a text of your own based on some of the words from the textbook dialogue. You have domesticated the words, made them less strange. People round the class read out their attempts, thus establishing dialogue among the students. The students are now ready to listen to the text or to read it:

Ramón	Si. ¡Camarero! ¡Oiga!
El camarero	¡Diga, señor!
Ramón	Déme una cerveza grande, por favor. Y algo para comer.
El camarero	¿Quiere usted un bocadillo?
Ramón	Sí, déme un bocadillo de queso, por favor.
El camarero	Muy bien. ¿Quiere algo más?
Ramón	No, no quiero nada más. Está bien, gracias.

Had the text been in Greek you would have understood about half of it from the active work already done. The creative work prepares for the receptive, decoding phase. (This text is from ESO ES book I, but could be from any modern language textbook anywhere in Europe).

### Using the textbook less

One way of dealing with the intrusion of the textbook into the dialogue between you and your students is to use techniques that encourage students to inject it with their real experience and feelings. Another way is to spend less of your class time round the textbook and draw much more text directly from the students.

### Students' own readings

Take a student aside and explain you need a reading for the next day's class. Get him/her to tell you a personal anecdote. The student does this in the target language as best/s/he can. You take notes and then write the story up at the right level of difficulty for the group. Before the class you go through the reading with its originator to make sure you have not got things wrong and to check that she fully understands her own story in its new version. She presents the reading to the rest of the group and helps them with language problems - during this part of the lesson I have often got off and had coffee in the teachers' room. Why get in the way?

In one class, over a six weeks intensive course, I drew 30 or so readings from people in the group. A 'textbook' that was unique to our group. Each and every reading, including those of least interest, were part of a real dialogue between student and student - this was home-grown food, not imported, other stuff.

### Students' own drawings

There may be some justification for course books being full of target language text but why are they also crammed with pictures? Even a group of beginners are perfectly capable of producing their own visual text.

One of the most useful drawing exercises is a group picture on the board. Tell the students they are going to create a group picture with each person drawing not more than one item at a time. Student A comes out and draws a bird, a second adds a mountain and third puts a tree halfway up the mountain etc. The process of group drawing is full of collaboration, competition, aggression and complementation. What is created is a strong statement of the mood of the students at a given moment. From a group picture you can easily move on to any of these: vocabulary work  
story writing  
dialogue creation  
comparison of this picture with other pictures people know etc....

It takes the kind of deep common sense any primary school teacher has to realise that exercises done round a group creation have more meaning than exercises done round a six colour picture in the coursebook.

### **Writing to your students**

The nearest I have come to establishing the kind of parent-child dialogue mentioned at the start of this article with my own second language learners has been via an exchange of personal letters. At the start of a course I write a letter "Dear Everybody" and tell the students a bit about myself. I invite them to reply and so individual correspondences grow up between me and some of the students. On intensive three month courses I may write anything between 10 and 20 letters to an individual and receive as many in return. Exhausting, rewarding and very illuminating.

I refuse to correct any of the letters I receive, even when asked to. Correction would change the way the students write, they would no longer try desperately to say things they can't yet say - they would take many less language risks. To correct the letters would be a disaster.

I have found that the information students give me by letter and the fact that I have to focus on them as individuals for a short period every two or three days modifies the way I run the group and changes the atmosphere of other things we do in class. (The idea of writing letters to students is taken from the New York primary school: Herbert Kohl).

### **In my work - and in your work?**

In my work I find the dialogue with the students much too passionately interesting to want to submit them and me to guidelines and materials proposed by some extraterrestrial in the shape of a coursebook writer.

How about you? Maybe you are able to teach the same beginner's book through for the sixth time and still find new things in it? Maybe you use the coursebook for part of your teaching time but work directly with the students for part of the time too.

Maybe .... Why don't you write to CABLE about how you cope with the problem of the coursebook. This is an area of vital interest to at least these people:

- students
- teachers
- coursebook writers
- capitalists who put their money into coursebooks
- parents who interfere/help their children with homework
- teachers' spouses

CABLE is the right place for such a debate. Let's hear you.

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