

BOL O G N A - April 1984

AN INTER-ACTIVE PLenary

TRAINING TEACHERS TO MAKE GRAMMAR EXCITING

WORKSHOP

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The point I was trying to make to you at the Bologna conference went well beyond this or that way of teaching grammar, important though grammar is. The point of the 45 minutes we worked together for was that you acted and I simply provided a frame in which 1800 of you could act usefully. You were in the nominative case. You were not asked to be the object of my action, of my speech, you were asked to act as subjects and to experience the sentences so created. I provided a frame for your activity but you were the main actors in what followed.

Several months have passed since that morning in the conference Centre, so let me remind you of what you did:

- You put your bags and papers down
- You stood up
- You yawned and stretched if you felt tired (you had been in a listening mode for two hours)
- You were asked to imagine that your partner's back was a dirty blackboard that needed cleaning. You were asked to rub your partner's back - the idea here was to reduce the physical tension many people feel after sitting for a long period with little chance to move.
- I asked you to revise the irregular past participles in English using back-writing, a technique of Eve Ogonowski's. One person wrote a past participle on her partner's back, using capital letters. The partner replied silently by writing the corresponding infinitive on the first person's back.

This was the first grammar exercise we did and I fully understand why it shocked you worried some of you. From the podium I observed that about 30% of the people in the hall felt too shy to do the exercise. Symbolically I was asking you, in a vast lecture theatre, to throw off the passivity, the comforting, sleepy passivity of the lecture tradition. I was asking for a rejection of the ancient university tradition of 2000 listening to 4- I was asking for a commitment to learning by doing, to learning by experience, to learning by allowing oneself the right to feel. My message was very simple, but inevitably shocking to those of you who hold that teaching is a process of pouring information from one vessel into another. I was prepared to tell you nothing, to explain nothing: all I gave you was a bare frame within which I invited you to experience, feel, think, evaluate and finally judge for yourself. Disturbingly democratic in a deeply autocratic profession.

From back-writing we moved on to an interactive dictation. I dictated the sentence stems given below and you had to complete the sentences writing truthfully about yourself. Here are some of the sentence stems:

Continued ....

- When I go into an empty restaurant, I usually sit ...
- In a cinema I like to sit ...
- On a bus I tend to be ...
- On a train I prefer to find a seat ...
- At mealtimes I sit ...
- When I look out of my bedroom window I see ...
- I prefer to sleep with my head towards ...
- When I first went to primary school, I sat ...
- As a small child my favourite place in the house was ...

You were then asked to turn to your neighbour and read out your sentence completions to her, commenting and enlarging where necessary. Perhaps 70% of the colleagues in the hall gave themselves to this exercise while the rest withdrew into silence, programme reading or chatting of other things to their friends. The majority who worked round the sentences they had produced made liberal use of the spatial prepositions which are the grammatical heart of this exercise. This activity is one of a whole family of activities in which the teacher can confidently prescribe the grammar to be used while the students totally control the content which is directly drawn from their personal lives. The students' own personal lives are several million times more interesting to them than the doings of semi-characters they may meet in books, on audio-tapes or on video.

The large number of you who refused to do the dictation exercise seriously made me aware of the inevitable initial problems in inviting people to move from a passive, spongy state of mind into one of active experiencing. I reflected on the 15,000 hours we have all spent seated in rows, imprisoned in passivity, listening to the teacher's voice, or rather the teachers' voices. The 15,000 hours do not include our time at university - they account for the 12 years between the age of six and Maturita. No wonder some of you declined my invitation to be yourselves and to show yourselves to others.

After the second exercise I pointed out that contracting out of exercises would leave you with nothing at the end of the session. In the third exercise abstentionism fell to around 15%. Of course, in saying this I was adopting a dictatorial stance. Implicit in any lecture of the traditional sort is the right for the 'listener' to contract out, to dream or even sometimes to go to sleep. Humanistic teaching does not reduce the group leader's power - it considerably increases it and establishes it on a deeper plane. To think otherwise is to deceive oneself.

I launched the third exercise by telling you the story of the four men on the tube train on the Bakerloo line. One man was wearing black socks. A second man was wearing white socks. Taking off their shoes, they exchanged one sock each, so that they both walked off the train at Marylebone wearing one black and one white sock. I explained that I had spent several months trying to work out why they did this. I appealed to you to offer me more

hypotheses in the form of sentences like this:

	( but ...
	( because ...
	( so as to ...
They exchanged socks	( although ...
	( to ...
	( despite ...

You were asked to work individually and write six sentences using each of the linking words. After the writing phase you compared your hypotheses with those of a couple of your colleagues. The exercise concluded with half a dozen people coming to the microphone on the podium and reading out their ideas.

The 'socks' exercise is one of a family of problem solving activities in which the teacher controls the grammar to be used but the students are free to propose any solutions they want to the problem. You could say that such activities are highly guided in terms of grammar but free in terms of intellectual and human content.

During my 45 minutes at Bologna I refused to lecture to or at you because I feel passionately that teacher-training sessions should closely model the sort of situation the trainer proposes that you should create in your classroom. How could I object to you monopolising your learner's thinking time if I had done exactly that to you that morning in Bologna? A teacher trainer must try and follow the same learner centred principles she often finds herself preaching, which implies no longer preaching!

I also refused to lecture to you because I feel that the way forward for national and international language teachers conferences like Bologna is the introduction of experiential learning into the conference itself and the relegation of the traditional lecture format to the natural history museum.. Let's hope next year's conference sees a lot more workshopping and a lot less dreary lecturing.

Should any of the grammar exercises outlined above interest you you will find plenty more in the following three books:

GRAMMAR GAMES, by Mario Rinvolucri, forthcoming with Cambridge University Press (probable publication date November 1980) currently available as a Pilgrims Pilot Publication from 8 Vernon Place, Canterbury, Kent, UK.

GRAMMAR IN ACTION, Frank and Rinvolucri, Pergamon, 1983

CHALLENGE TO THINK, Frank, Rinvolucri and Berer, Oxford University Press, 1982.