SOME BASIC CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ASSESSMENT OF ESL MATERIALS

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In the introduction to Adapting and Writing Language Lessons, Earl Stevick remarks that "language study is inevitably a total human experience; writers and teachers ought therefore to act as though it is." (vii) Dr. Stevick was objecting, I think, not so much to some of the obvious applications of modern linguistic science and advances in technology as to the way we often regard the goals and tasks of the learner. To be sure, much current thinking about the nature of language and the acquisition processes of language learners has had an effect on many teaching materials and techniques, for the good, I think. Modern technology is also much in evidence in the form of language laboratories, mechanical reading devices, audio-visual equipment, and computer-managed instruction. While some of these innovations may seem to remove the interpersonal and human activity from teaching, they do not remove the essence of humanism from our profession.

A Humanistic View of Teaching

Before we discuss the specific questions which will arise in our consideration of effective teaching materials, we should examine briefly the relationship of humanism to teaching. A humanist, by the broadest definition, is one for whom the activities of human beings is of central importance. But an interest in humans is not enough. Today, thinking people everywhere, and especially teachers, are worried about the diminishing concern for humans demonstrated by governments, religion, schools, courts, and most of our institutions. We sometimes hear individuals talk about "de-humanizing" experiences, experiences in which people are treated as automatons, as "numbers," as great masses without individual characteristics. The effect of such dehumanizing treatment is a tendency to regard human beings as all reacting alike, responding in exactly the same way to the same forces; their behavior is regarded as entirely predictable. Nowhere is this a more dangerous assumption than in the field of education.

It would seem to be true, then, that the teacher, perhaps more than others, should guard against the tendency toward dehumanizing other people. The teacher, more than others, must be aware of the individual, the man or woman different from all other men and women, the person who has needs, goals, aspirations, thoughts, feelings, and preferences different from all other persons. Since communication is the major means of satisfying these individual characteristics, and since language is the main means we have of communicating with others, the teacher, more than others must insure that each student becomes as capable as possible of satisfying his own essentially different goals and needs. The teacher is not only a teacher; he is teacher-as-humanist, and humanist-as-teacher.

The essence of teacher-as-humanist is the abiding belief that language is the greatest liberator man has ever known; at one and the same time giving him access to the social world around him, and in turn giving his social world access to his own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, aspirations, and ideas. When we forget this, we miss the whole point of the purpose and function of language in our lives and the meaning of the profession we have chosen. The essence of good teaching, and therefore the essence of good teaching materials, requires us at all times to examine what we do in the light of its potential to help our learners become fully productive, self-satisfied participants in the total world community.

A Look at Teaching Materials

All of this may seem rather remote from the classroom, far removed from the problems of daily lessons, tests, textbooks, and the like. But it is apparent that in the past, teachers have been subject to the same tendency toward dehumanization as others. We have often assumed that a particular kind of textbook, or a specific method of teaching, or a specific technique of drill, would solve the "teaching problem." Textbook writers have made the same kind of error. Many texts tend to regard all students as likely to respond positively to drills, wall charts, reading passages, pictures, listening exercises, dialogues, games and puzzles. Many do respond in a positive way; but many don't. Text writers often make the assumption that "all children" are interested in animals, space travel, adventure. And as teachers we are often puzzled and disappointed when they fail to respond as they are "supposed to."

In the following pages, I discuss what I call "basic" considerations in the selection of ESL materials. What is central in the following suggestions, is the question that must always be asked by the teacher: Does the material I am considering here really allow the students in my classroom to fulfill their own goals and aspirations? Does it really permit each of my students to use language to communicate his own personal objectives? Materials which do not do this are dehumanizing materials, and should be rejected.

As teachers, we are both consumers and creators of language learning materials. Most of the time we choose materials which have been prepared by people who are supposed to know what they are doing. We assume that they have studied the language in depth and know both the safe ground and the pitfalls. And they are also supposed to know the learners; their strategies for learning a language as well as their motivation for learning it.

But we are also necessarily occasionally writers of materials. When we are faced with the necessity of selecting or adapting commercially prepared materials, or of developing our own, we are sometimes confused about what to look for; how to judge the potential of materials to "liberate" students for the fullest potential of a creative and productive participation in one of several social communities. My purpose, then, is to suggest some guidelines which will help to decide whether the materials under consideration will liberate our students or not.

Everyone learns something through experience and experimentation, of course, and I suppose that each of us has limped through a disastrous lesson, hobbled by a calamitous choice of materials. If we judge by the end product, in this case our students' abilities to use language effectively and creatively, we must sometimes admit that our materials have enslaved the learner with rigid, stilted, "textbook" English.

Some Humanistic Requirements

It would seem evident that the first requirement of good teaching materials for the language classroom is that they provide the student with ways to enter and interact with the social and physical world in which he desires to participate. A student utilizes a language primarily to accomplish some communication goal, and this involves, always, communicating

with someone, about something, in a specific situation. Any material chosen or created for use in the classroom, therefore, must be considered in the light of its use of relevant communication situations, topics, and people. We look carefully at materials to ask questions like these:

> Are the situations ones in which the learner will at some time in the future need to communicate?
> Do the dialogues or situations involve people he or she will likely have to communicate with?
> Does the content employ topics about which the learner is interested, and which have some real importance in his or her life, now or in the future?

The questions we ask concern meaningfulness: Is the material meaningful in the sense that the student perceives some need for the particular construction or word in manipulating his environment to his own best advantage? If material is not meaningful, in this sense, it will be neither learned nor retained. That is simply the way the human mind is organized to work. We cannot retain, nor often perceive, those things which impinge on our consciousness, unless they permit us to control our social and physical environments.

Years ago I prepared some materials which I would use with a class of adult learners of ESL in a learning skills center. My students were people at the poverty level, prevented from entering and participating in a productive life by not having a way to communicate. I wrote a simple dialogue about taking an airplane trip, a realistic and meaningful situation, for me. Not one of my students, it turned out, had ever been aboard a plane, and most of them had no expectation of ever doing so. Such is the folly of creativity unrelated to the realities of learners' lives.

Aside from the need for presenting language materials which allow participation in human experiences and sharing them with others, the student needs ways to continue learning on his own; ways to get information about language and life when the teacher is not standing beside him. The normal use of language always has many ways of getting information about language and of clarifying ambiguity. But textbooks largely ignore this necessary kind of language activity. Not many books teach students to say things like:

What do you mean?
Say that again . . .
I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.
I don't get it.
Do I understand you to mean that . . .?

Yet these phrases are often heard in real interaction.

Students must have ways to check on their perceptions of the world, to check on the validity of the guesses they are making about the language and cultures they are learning. It is clear that materials which present only linguistic forms leave the job less than half done. It doesn't help a student to learn how to say something if you do not also teach him when to say it, and when not to say it. This can only be done by providing the learner with opportunities to put the language forms to use immediately in a real communication situation. Learners who perform classroom drills have learned to perform a classroom exercise, but not to use the language in the world outside. We must agree that simply learning to handle linguistic forms, the sounds, words and sentence patterns, will not permit communicative use of language.

A second consideration for the evaluation of materials requires us to look for indications that the author has provided for the essential flexibility of language. Language is creative and generative, in Chomsky's words. There is never a one-to-one correspondence between what we wish to say and the way we choose to say it. This is, of course, true in any language. Think of all the ways we have of greeting each other, each with its own special nuance of meaning. Not simply (as in the ESL texts):

Good morning, Mrs. Phillips.
Good morning, Ben, How are you?
Fine, thanks. And you?

But sometimes:

Nice morning, isn't it, Tom?
If you say so.

The possibilities of variation in form to express similar content are great. Consider these few sentences and phrases (the examples are Stevick's):

The cook used cornmeal.
Cornmeal was used by the cook.
Use of cornmeal by the cook . . .
The cook's use of cornmeal . . .
The cook who used cornmeal . . .
Using cornmeal, the cook . . . (12)

We could go on to add many other variations.

Now it is quite true that if we teach students a simple and easy-to-remember formula which can be used to cope with a problematic situation, we have at the very least gotten her out of a pinch. But we certainly haven't done better than that. Teaching a student only one way to say something, or to write something, may permit her to communicate a need, to request information, or to provide information to someone else. She will be able to function with that in a restricted way. But when others are in control of the communication situation, the need for alternative ways to speak or understand becomes quite apparent. If a learner only has one way to ask something, and it is a way most English speakers are likely to understand (that is, it is a standard form), she will be able to communicate a message. She may be thought charming or quaint; or worse, she may be thought odd; or even worse she may be thought stupid; but the message will "get across." However, when the learner listens or reads, when she uses the passive skills, she is not in control of the communication situation, and she depends on the particular choices of words, structures, idioms, and cultural references of the person in active control. In this situation it is absolutely necessary that the materials we have chosen prepare her for a variety of ways to understand.

Are there opportunities in the materials we select and write for students to learn different ways to say things? Sometimes it is done, and done cleverly; but too much of the time it is not done at all. Look at the way we do it in our ordinary interaction with others. Someone asks:

Did you enjoy yourself at the party last night?

and we reply:

Oh, yes. I had a lovely time.

Have a lovely time = enjoy yourself. Two ways to say the same thing.

Another example:

> He's brilliant, isn't he?
> He certainly is. As bright as they come.

Brilliant = Bright as they come -- a new idiom learned. How often have teaching materials made conscious attempts to teach language flexibility and variability?

A third requirement of good materials ought to be that they provide students with linguistic and social reality. People in dialogues, stories, pictures, films, and tapes ought to say things that real people say, and they ought to say them in ways that real people say them. Not everyone lives in an expensive suburban home with a fenced and pooled back yard, and a puppy named Spot to romp with. And I do not believe that Mexican children have to speak English with their parents or with other Mexican children in the language textbooks just so that we can teach them to make comparatives. But I have seen a textbook that creates this kind of unrealistic situation, one far removed from a student's social reality.

There is linguistic unreality, too. We need to look critically at language texts to ask whether the language is what we really use. When we make or use a language tape, the speakers on the tape must speak English as it is, a human language. Too many times the speech used in language tapes is "tapese", a language spoken only in language laboratories. It uses idealized sentence stress and intonation patterns, and the phonemes are full-value reproductions of the sounds as they appear in isolation. The intonation used on these tapes perfectly fits the contours you see drawn in the textbooks. Recently a colleague pointed out a page in a new textbook, a page with the intonation contours drawn in. "I don't say any of these things with these intonation patterns," he complained. The contour patterns shouldn't be there at all; the teacher should use his own natural regional patterns. Such idealization of language not only teaches the wrong thing, but it also makes the student feel so hopless and defeated that he can neither hear those patterns in the everyday speech around him, nor reproduce them in his own speech.

Sometimes materials attempt to provide too much help for a student's own good. I am not concerned here with the fact that some books provide too many examples or exercises which

are too long, or that too many concepts are presented; these problems can easily be solved by sensitive teachers who are aware that a class eventually reaches a point where they are ready to move on to something more challenging. What I mean by "provide too much help" is that the student is given so much information that she is never intellectually challenged. Materials which do all the thinking for students allow too little opportunity for them to develop a sense of what is right and what is wrong in English. The fourth requirement is, then, that materials provide students with opportunities to make intelligent guesses and learn from their mistakes.

A current theory of learning makes the assumption that we all learn by forming hypotheses about the real world and the linguistic world, and that we test out these hypotheses as we learn more and more of the language. We actively try out our own "theories" about the English language as we learn it. If our theories are wrong, we revise them and try again. If students are not allowed to form these hypotheses about the "rules" of English, they will learn only the specific instance that is taught them. They need to test for themselves the limits, the boundaries, of the rule.

All of us have built-in sets of expectancies about what we are likely to hear in various settings. But too often, students don't get a chance to test out whether they have the right expectancies. There are many good techniques and procedures for allowing students this possibility. A picture which is accompanied by a verbal description of the picture is less effective for teaching than one which allows the student to create an interpretation for herself. The cloze passage, in which the student fills in the missing words from her understanding of the meaning of the whole, is a good technique which can provide the student with a chance to try out her knowledge of English and get some immediate information on whether she is wrong or right. A one-sided dialogue, such as you might hear if you listened to a person speaking into a telephone, is an interesting and entertaining activity that allows students to make predictions about what is being said on the other end of the line. These kinds of activities tell the teacher immediately whether or not the student is developing a sense of the contextual use of language and the conduct of social interaction.

We cannot teach all there is to know about the English language within the four walls of a classroom for an hour a

day. Whether we foster it or not, the student makes use of his environment in the real world outside to continue learning English. Every English teacher has no doubt observed students using language which was "beyond" the materials used in class.

At Houston some of our teachers in the intensive English program send their students out to take opinion polls on campus for an hour, and then come back and report the results to the class. One class, for example, was told to go out and approach at least five people to answer questions. They approached strangers on the campus with two questions: "Do you think there is much racial prejudice in Houston?" and "What groups do you think feel the effect of prejudice most?" They had to keep a record of the answers, along with information on the race, sex, and age of the person answering. When they returned to class, they pooled and tabulated the information. Such an exercise requires students to use a great many language skills: greeting strangers; making a request for information; handling noncooperation; asking yes/no and information questions; speaking with intelligibility; recording answers in writing (penmanship, vocabulary, structure, listening comprehension); using reported speech; orally discussing and interpreting results; and many others. What an opportunity to make use of the real world, to get outside the classroom and utilize it for vital learning!

Some teachers still object to the use of such communicative exercises, calling them "unstructured." This charge is unfounded. They are very structured exercises, if they are done properly. It is true that they do not have a particular grammatical focus as a pattern practice drill does. But the teacher prepares the students in class for each such experience before they are sent out; and the experience serves for follow-up teaching in the class when they return.

Others feel that this type of exercise is useful and possible only in an English-speaking country. However, in many areas of the world, English-speaking travelers might be approached with questions like "are you enjoying your visit to our city?" and "What are the most interesting things you have seen or done here?" Such experiences often lead to more real, meaningful contact with the language than many hours spent in the classroom.

Notice also the topic selected for the project described above. Many teachers feel that the controversial topics of

religion, race relations, sex, and politics should be avoided in the English class where it might cause friction or hurt feelings. While the danger exists that some emotional heat may be generated, such an experience is invaluable in teaching students how to state sensitive ideas in a non-threatening way, to pacify ruffled feelings, to soften each harsh generalization. To regard students as incapable of handling such topics with sensitivity is an assumption that they lack the intelligence to do so.

A fifth consideration of good materials is that they should permit adaptation to a local situation. We have already suggested that material which tries to do everything is often ineffective. All total language courses are based on the conception of language and language learning theory held by the author. Most of these conceptions focus on one aspect or another of the language or on one or another theory of learning. The fact is, of course, that the learner has been left out of this consideration. Learners learn in different ways; they are human, and therefore individual. A technique which is employed by one author ignores the learning preferences of one student while it admirably serves another. Certainly the authors cannot be faulted for this. But the economic facts of life must be faced in the commercial publishing world. A company must sell enough copies of a book to make it profitable, even marginally so, for the company, the author and the distributors. There are also simple factors of size and cost which limit what a text can do.

We may use one textbook because it gives a lot of oral practice, but its writing practices are so minimal that students benefit little from it. Another book has good reading exercises, but its oral exercises are stiff and formal and the people plastic and dull. A pragmatic approach is necessary and desirable, but this "supermarket linguistics", putting a little of this and a little of that in your professional basket, will never make your language teaching a tool for students to use in interacting with their environments.

We know that it is difficult to reflect local language and local culture in material which is conceived and produced by a writer and published perhaps thousands of miles from the learner, and aimed at hundreds of thousands of children with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds and dozens of regional cultures. Most teachers understand that the use of local references, names of people, places, events, stories and exercises with a local setting, dialogues which are concerned with local

custom and culture, writing about everyday events in the lives of the students, that all of these are necessary. But most of us have seen texts which are locked into a system of teaching English that doesn't permit, at least not easily, the inclusion of such material. Any book with a teaching approach which cannot be varied is a bad book.

SUMMARY

We have discussed some practical questions which the teacher can ask in considering a text for use with her class. They may be summarized as:

1. Good materials provide students with ways to enter and interact with the social and physical world in which they desire to participate.
2. Good materials provide for and actively teach the essential flexibility of English.
3. Good materials provide students with models of linguistic and social reality.
4. Good materials provide students with opportunities to intelligently form and test hypotheses about the language and culture they are acquiring.
5. Good materials permit the teacher great latitude in adapting to local situations.

All of these characteristics contribute to the "humanism" of teaching; that is, they treat students as individuals with very personal goals, needs, abilities, and values. Students, too, have intelligence and sensitivity; they have, and recognize, their own unique place in the world. Materials, or for that matter the theories, approaches, techniques and procedures of teaching behind these materials, must reflect and utilize human factors.

REFERENCE

Stevick, Earl W. Adapting and Writing Language Lessons. Washington: Foreign Service Institute, 1971.