



Tips for Teachers

Ambiguous Phenomena May Be Used Positively In ESL Classes

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Ambiguity in language refers to a word, a structure, or pronunciation of words in a sentence that can be understood in more than one way. Each language has its own specific ambiguous phenomena. Such phenomena may be obstacles for learners of English as a second language, but if we use them positively, they can be extremely helpful to the learners. It sometimes happens that what seems most difficult in an endeavor turns out to be a window of opportunity for solving a problem. So, when students are confused by ambiguous phenomena in the English language, knowledge of how to deal with them will not only make the learning of the language less painful, it may also offer positive advantages. For this reason, the teacher should not be afraid to focus attention on ambiguous phenomena from time to time.

Helping students to grasp various meanings of a word, phrase, or sentence in different contexts is an example of this. One might focus on the word "bill" which has many different meanings as a noun. The following sentence with "bill" can be explained in four ways.

"The bill is large."

The jaw of the bird is large.

The paper shows a large amount of money must be paid.

The paper money is of high value.

The printed notice is large in size.

We can see that this one word may be difficult because it has any of a variety of meanings, with its correct meaning arising from the context in which it is being used.

The ambiguity can be explained, then, by teaching the students to look always for the context. In learning new words they should form the habit of learning them as they are used in sentences, or sentences that reflect the various possible uses of the word. This is, in fact, the way in which any good foreign language dictionary presents foreign language words in their various meanings.

Linguists have classified different types of ambiguity with a number of labels including: Lexical, Semantic, Non-lexical, Grammatical, Structural/Constructional, Syntactic, Derivational, Ambiguous in Scope, or Ambiguous in Speech. But it is usually treated in three broad categories: Lexical, structural and oral.

Lexical ambiguity is exemplified above by the various noun meanings of the word "bill." Structural ambiguity may be demonstrated by the meaning of the same words arranged in different sentence structures.

For example: "The dog looked longer than the cat." Either the dog appeared longer in its bodily length than the cat did, or, the dog looked (at whatever) for a longer length of time than the cat did.

Ambiguity in speech arises from peculiarities of pronunciation as in the case of homophones and homonyms. For example, the homophones "bear" and "bare" both pronounced /b r/ or the homophones "write," "rite," "right" and "wright" all pronounced /rayt/. The homonyms "fair" (having a good clear clean appearance or quality) and "fair" (a market) are the same both in spelling and pronunciation, or "bark" (to make the sound that dogs make) and "bark" (the strong outer covering of a tree), or "minute" (one of the 60 parts into which an hour is divided) and "minute" (very small, in size or degree); or the sentence: /ð s nz rey z miyt/ can be understood as follows:

The sun's rays meet.

The sons raise meat.

My students benefit in three ways from their careful study of ambiguity. First, they more easily overcome difficulties in comprehension. Secondly, they acquire more extensive vocabularies. Third, they maintain a higher level of enthusiasm for their language study. The last of these may be most critical.

In class, the students are presented with ambiguous sentences. First, they try to infer the meanings of such a sentence. They are encouraged to tell as many of the alternative meanings as they can. Students see this as a challenge, and compete in supplying meanings. As they provide various meanings, I write them on the chalkboard, adding any that they are unable to recognize.

Some further examples:

Hugo is drawing a picture of a cart.

Hugo is drawing a picture of a cart.

Hugo is pulling a cart.

She couldn't bear children.

She couldn't give birth to children.

She couldn't put up with children.

She took in the stranger.

She brought the stranger inside.

She deceived the stranger.

She received the stranger and provided the stranger with lodgings.

The boy looked better than his companion.

The boy appeared handsome or healthier than his companion.

The boy had better eyesight than his companion.

The boy performed better than his companion.

He looked over the old fence.

He inspected the old fence.

He looked at something on the other side of the fence.

Susan has more expensive clothes than I have.

Susan has a greater quantity of expensive clothes than I have.

Susan's clothes are more expensive than mine.

Smith and Lucy are married.

Smith and Lucy are married to each other.

Smith and Lucy are married, but not to each other.

They weren't at home for the whole day.

For the whole day, they weren't at home.

It's not true that they were at home the *whole* day.

(contrary meanings!)

In each class, when we touch on ambiguous words or structures, I treat them, not as “another difficulty of the English language,” but as a fascinating, even amusing, peculiarity for which there is an easy method to gain clear comprehension: consider the whole, consider the context. We say “where there is a will there is a way.” Equally true, “where there is a way, there is a will.”

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Class Parties: Making them Part of the Curriculum

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Due to the intimate atmosphere developed in many ESL classroom settings, it is felt appropriate or even desirable to have a closing class party or celebration. Oftentimes the party is hurriedly planned with the teacher or class leader making last minute food and other assignments. Sometimes a short discussion may pursue on what video to watch or what activities to do. On the day of the party, the class sits around, eats, watches a video, or does some other meaningless activity that adds little to the advancement of the student’s English skills.

Over the years I have experienced many of these meaningless parties. I have wrestled with ideas of how to have a successful party where the students enjoy themselves, yet English is still the focus. I believe I have finally found one answer. It lies in the preparation for the party. In this teaching tip, I shall describe how to plan and hold a fun successful party by having the students make a party booklet.

A party booklet is a task that combines several language skills. It is assigned about three weeks before the scheduled party date, giving the class plenty of time to brainstorm, plan, write, and revise. Below is an outline of things that could be included in a party booklet.

Booklet	Definition
Cover	The cover adds professionalism to the booklet. Students good in art or graphic design could apply their talents here. It also helps the students to choose an appropriate title.

Title Page	The title page restates the title, lists the authors, and recognizes for which class or institution the booklet is being made.
Table of Contents	This lists the order and page number of the items included in the booklet. It builds global organizational skills.
Introduction	The introduction summarizes what is in the booklet and states the purpose for having the party.
Agenda	This is a chronological list depicting the time and venue for starting the party, each activity to be completed, and a time for the party to end. It helps to keep the party moving.
Map	The map is used in giving directions to the party (such as the teacher's house or restaurant). If the party is a field trip, the map would also mark the sights and places to be visited.
Menu	The menu involves planning and discussion. It may generate ideas for possible cooking demonstrations and explanations. Recipes for traditional food from each of the students' respective countries could certainly be added.
Assignments	The assignment page is a written document outlining what each person in the class contributed to the planning and preparation of the party. It involves planning, group work, and delegating.
Demonstrations	This is one of the activities to be done at the party. The steps for each demonstration should be written in the party booklet. The steps could be in outline or paragraph form. This builds the students' ability to plan or write a process paragraph. It also helps each student identify vocabulary words that will be needed as the student gives the oral presentation portion at the party.
Activities	These should be described in the party booklet with accompanying directions and a list of items needed to complete each activity. Possible suggestions include playing traditional games, teaching a new dance step, offering toasts, and/or presenting awards. The list of possibilities is endless once a class puts its mind to planning a party.
Autograph Page	The final page may contain a class picture or wallet sized pictures with a short biography of each student. This page is a natural place for students to collect autographs from each other.

*Many of the ideas listed could be changed or adapted, and others added, for use in a myriad of class activity situations.

A Personal Experience

While teaching in Samoa, I taught a group of college age students who were learning English as preparation for entrance into an American university. It became a tradition to have an end-of-semester beach barbecue. The plans were often hurried and the party mostly consisted of eating. When the food was gone, the party dragged or ended. Furthermore, the students often reverted back to their native language of Samoan and only used English when addressing me. I felt a bit guilty using precious class time for these parties. Finally, I was determined to turn the party into a neatly disguised learning project.

About three weeks before the end of the semester, I asked the class if they would like to have a party. Of course, they eagerly agreed. I then told them they would have to earn the party. As part of earning the party the class would have to work together to compile a small 10–12 page booklet that would require research, planning, and organization. We would use this booklet as the guide for our party. I took the rest of the class period explaining what this booklet would entail and laying down some ground rules.

Enthusiasm suddenly vanished. It seemed that the amount of work would be greater than the pleasure gained. But, with some prodding I was able to get them to choose a class leader and get started.

As the students began brainstorming about the location and the activities we would engage in, the enthusiasm started to grow again. I would even say some got rather excited. After the plans had been solidified and the booklet was being prepared, one of the students was so excited about the party that he kept asking me, “Are we really going to do it? Are we really going to have our party?” I was happy to see the anticipation and excitement building within each of my students. It appeared to me that the plans the students were making were far better than what I could have come up with on my own. They also encouraged each other to complete the various parts of the party booklet. In the end, the students planned and compiled a wonderful booklet for a beach barbecue.

On the day of the party, we followed the agenda written in the booklet. We borrowed a school van and drove to the far end of our island. There we parked the van and took a short boat ride to a small secluded island where we had our barbecue and beach activities. While the food was cooking, various students did demonstrations. Each of these demonstrations had the major steps outlined in our party booklet. One student demonstrated how to climb a coconut tree. Another showed how to husk a coconut. A third showed how to open the coconut for drinking and explained how to scrape the meat out. Others demonstrated how to weave palm fronds, peel and cook

green bananas, do traditional dance moves, and wear traditional clothing. They were all excited as they shared their culture with each other and me.

In summary, the whole point of having a party is to have fun. By getting the students involved in the planning process, anticipation builds, interest is generated, and success is insured. Furthermore, a party booklet helps the students to act and interact in English, thereby turning the traditional class party into a wonderful educational experience while providing a tangible record of names and memories.



Authentic Foreign Language Materials in the EFL Classroom

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In most European countries, English is learned as a foreign language, not as a second language. The implication for the use of authentic materials written in English in such classrooms is much greater than might be thought. In the ESL classroom, authentic materials such as transportation schedules, radio programs, and television broadcasts may be obtained locally and will have an immediacy which these learners will sense and be able to put into practice instantly. However, for the EFL classroom, authentic materials must be gathered in the U.S. or other English-speaking countries and may call for a certain amount of imagination on the part of these learners to apply. Other issues such as student age and mixed ability to deal with materials which have not been adapted will also distance some of these materials from the EFL learner. In my personal experience, most of my maps, timetables, song introduction segments on cassette, and television advertisements on video are completely lost on young adult learners unless there is a strong attitudinal link to the material, and lost also on mature adult learners unless the materials deal directly with aspects they can apply at work. The following activities are a selection of the many that I use in my lessons which make use of locally available materials written in the students' L1 and which do have an immediate usefulness for them.

I would like to make a small aside before introducing them, however. None of the activities is designed to be a translation activity. Each one of these activities is designed to give input, whether for information-gap type activities, project work, or other activities which require an input of facts and information. The language learners are expected to only use English in the output stage.

1. Gossip Columns/Articles:

Almost every film/music, fashion, or teenage fan magazine has a one-page section featuring short articles that showcase the rich and famous, and almost everybody likes to keep up to date on their eventful lives. Photocopy several different pages from these sections and hand one out to each student. Have them read about the people who they are interested in and give the class a summary in their own words. This activity has worked very well with a young adult class which had previously been very reluctant to open up. This activity may also be done with audio or audiovisual pieces rather than magazine texts.

2. Proper Names for Pronunciation:

Locally produced pronunciations of people and place names can range from the literal syllable-by-syllable pronunciations to those far off the mark. Photocopy small articles from newspapers which give a range of people and place names and have the students read them out in the L1, but concentrate on pronouncing the names properly. This exercise can be very revealing for those who mispronounce Arkansas, Tom Cruise, and so on. It may also be a chance to practice some words that are a part of the place names, but are often translated into the students' L1, such as New York, South Dakota or the Rocky Mountains.

3. Interviews with Questions:

Interviews of people in the news often appear in "question and answer" form in newspapers and magazines. Photocopy a one-page interview of this type from a suitable source newspaper or magazine and have the students read through it. Then do an exercise similar to #1 above by asking your students questions in the third person or using indirect speech and having them give you the interviewee's answer in their own words. Once they have been exposed to the English question either in the third person or using indirect speech, ask them the question in the second person or using direct speech and have them answer in the first.

4. Film Titles:

Commercial film titles vary from the non-translation to the complete adaptation. You can have students work with film titles in a three step process. First, they may be exposed to the idea of how widely titles may vary by doing a matching exercise to raise their awareness. Second, select a number of film titles as they were commercialized in the L1 and have them try to render them into English. Give them the original titles of their own knowledge and amusement. Third, have them take well-known films in their own language and try to render them for an English-speaking audience. Examine

together with them why some will work and others will not, whether the reasons be linguistic or pragmatic. The film titles to be used can be selected on the basis of linguistic components to be practiced.

5. A Critical Look at Dubbed Material:

Often dubbed material sounds strange and foreign to the L1 ear, but this is not entirely the fault of those responsible for the dub-readers' script. Oftentimes, mouth movement determines a linguistic choice, however inaccurate it may sound to the L1 native speaker. Have students keep notes on expressions of this type while watching T.V. at home or films in the cinema, and discuss them in class. Try to stimulate your students to produce the English of the original. Be flexible in accepting the "original" sentences they offer up.

In summary, I encourage teachers to think creatively about the term "authentic" materials and not be afraid of the wider use of local sources that can offer fertile points of departure.