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TRENDS IN THE TEACHING OF READING

By Virginia French Allen

Some thirty years have passed since Michael West developed his NEW METHOD READERS, primarily for schoolboys in India. For many years thereafter, the main thrust of reading instruction was toward smoothing the road for non-English speaking students, first by limiting the vocabulary and then by controlling the grammatical constructions used in the materials. The aim was to enable learners to read English without encountering discouraging difficulties.

Today this effort persists, and it is still needed—in order to encourage students and

give them the satisfaction of readily grasping ideas through the medium of print. In recent

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times, however, teachers have become increasingly aware of the need to train students to cope with unsimplified prose, the kind of prose found in materials for native speakers.

There are several reasons for this shift in emphasis. One reason is related to contemporary recognition of the fact that the reading of written English requires special skills beyond the skills needed for understanding the spoken language, because most conversational speech is different from most written prose.

In the history of TESOL, there used to be a time when it was assumed that writing was simply talk written down—give or take a few features of intonation and punctuation used by one medium and not by the other. It was

CONTENTS

- Trends in the Teaching of Reading
by Virginia French Allen .Page 1
- Lesson in Creative Drama
by Eloise Hayes and
Richard ViaPage 3
- Some Restrictions on Reduplication of
Adjectives in English
by John T. PlattPage 6
- CCH BATESL Graduates Page 10
- "Intercultural Communication"
Training: A Bridge for Human
Understanding
by Kenneth E. Mann ... Page 12

further assumed that any second-language learner who had mastered the rudiments of oral English could easily learn to read English since writing was merely a "record" of what is spoken. One seldom hears such claims nowadays. As David Eskey pointed out in a recent TESOL QUARTERLY, "Anything that can be written can in theory be said, but the kinds of sentences that actually *get* said and the kinds that actually get written are by no means identical." Consequently, there has been a significant shift of attention toward sentence types and grammatical constructions commonly written and read, but seldom heard. Some types of constructions that are never learned by TESOL students for conversational purposes have to be taught for reading. These include patterns with transposed elements, e.g., adverbial clauses in initial position (e.g., *Although most people deplore it, graffiti is widespread*) and prepositional phrases in initial position—often accompanied by inversion of subject and verb—(e.g., *Of special interest to teachers is the Language Methodology Center*). Participial constructions of various kinds also present great difficulties, since they are rarely taught for oral communication yet frequently occur in written English. Furthermore, they may turn up anywhere in the sentence.

Examples:

Funded by the Office of Education, the project will begin on March 1.

It occurred at a meeting called by the district superintendent.

Included in the discussions were comments by teachers planning to attend the meeting scheduled for January 3.

Since such patterns occur repeatedly in written discourse, there is currently much stress on these patterns in classes for intermediate and advanced TESOL students.

For more precise identification of grammatical constructions commonly found in expository prose, teachers are indebted to a number of linguistic studies. Jean McVochie, in a computer study of

engineering textbooks, discovered many instances of postponed subjects after *It* and *There*. She also found an extensive use of nominalization, as well as many prepositional phrases used as noun modifiers. Most of all, she found much use of *passive* constructions. An interesting sidelight upon this last point is provided by an article by Louis B. Trimble in the current issue of the *English Teaching Forum*. The article maintains that "it is inaccurate to say that passive constructions occur more frequently in technical writing than elsewhere, "because many of the so-called passive constructions found in scientific prose are actually *stative* constructions. A stative construction, like a passive, consists of a form of BE plus the past participle form of a verb, but statives differ from passives in at least three ways. First, they express states or conditions rather than actions or processes; second, they may not occur with an optional agent or instrument; and third, they may not co-occur with adverbs like *slowly*. Hence the following is an example of a stative construction:

The wells are located near the perimeter. Whereas the following illustrates the passive construction:

The heat is recirculated in the fuel-vapor zone.

Though this distinction between passive and stative constructions should doubtless be made, the implications of the McConochie study for the teaching of reading remain valid. She concluded that TESOL students need not only to learn how to form the passive, but also to attach meaning to many irregular past participle forms which are often touched very lightly in TESOL classes. All too frequently, students are sent off to memorize long lists of irregular past participle forms, without much chance to master them. What advanced students need is guided practice in reading material comparable in difficulty to what is read by their English-speaking counterparts. If the reading component of the course deals exclusively with simplified material from which troublesome patterns

(continued on page 15)

READING

(continued from page 2)

have been eliminated, students will forever find textbooks outside the TESOL class almost impossible to read.

Another recent study designed to help teachers train students to cope with unsimplified prose is a Ph.D. dissertation by Mary Eleanor Pierce, who was teaching in Egypt when she first perceived the special problems TESOL students encounter while reading textbooks intended for native speakers of English.

Gradually she came to realize that TESOL students need to be trained to make speedy predictions about what to expect from each succeeding sentence in a passage of connected discourse. Without reading the entire sentence, students need to decide instantly whether or not the sentence advances the theme to any significant degree, whether the sentence merely offers illustrative detail, whether in fact the sentence just restates an idea previously presented—in which case it can safely be left unread.

The Pierce study stresses the need for teaching TESOL students how to "take advantage of the high redundancy in written English by following procedures which the native speaker uses automatically." In particular, as the writer points out, students need help in (a) distinguishing between main ideas and supporting details, (b) recognizing repetitive statements, (c) identifying the subject of a complex sentence, and (d) developing expectancy for the type of predication such a subject might require.

In a related vein, Thomas Buckingham (addressing the 1971 TESOL Conference) urged teachers to give students practice in "guessing what might come next."

In effect, both statements emphasize the importance of increasing the student's awareness of the specific roles played by individual sentences within a passage of prose. Both also call attention to the able reader's habit of predicting from the Subject of a sentence how the rest of a sentence will probably go.

What classroom activities might be

suggested by these observations? To illustrate, let us look at a passage constructed for the purpose by Mary Eleanor Pierce, and then decide how it might be used.

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(1) A college is not just a place for studying. (2) Most colleges offer many other things. (3) Students can meet people from different places. (4) They can learn from these people as well as from class work. (5) A student's most valuable and useful information is sometimes gained from such informal conversations. (6) Many opportunities for cultural activities are also present on the campus. (7) The theatre workshop, or drama group, is always popular. (8) Students who are interested in music can join the band or the orchestra. (9) Those wishing to develop their ability in painting can join art classes. (10) There are many additional pursuits for those who are interested. (11) It is possible to find something for every taste.

If a passage like the Pierce paragraph is used, students might:

1. identify the Subject of each sentence (separating it from the Predicate by a /);
2. discuss the kind of predication which they would expect to find for each Subject;
3. discuss the degree to which each sentence either introduces a main idea or repeats an idea previously presented;
4. discover the words that link one idea to another (e.g., *other, they, these, as well as, such, also, additional...*)

In short, exercises related to such a passage ought to train students to react to written discourse as experienced English-speaking readers do.

Now that we have looked at some reading material and considered some procedures for using it in class, we might ask how these procedures relate to current trends in reading. One of the most obvious is the

emphasis upon *expectancy*. TESOL specialists are devising techniques which specifically train second-language students to form expectations about forthcoming sentences on the basis of specifically identified linguistic clues.

A second, related trend has to do with *redundancy*. Students are being trained to make use of the redundancy found in language. Their natural tendency is to treat each sentence as though it imparted an important new idea. This is a habit they must learn to overcome, through exercises in discerning and assessing the relative significance of succeeding sentences—and of becoming aware of the redundant nature by language.

A third emphasis today is the emphasis upon *connected discourse*—upon paragraphs and whole essays. While isolated sentences are, and perhaps always will be, the subject of much analysis, there is now a growing concern with the problems which arise when sentences are woven together into the fabric of a paragraph.

Hence we find evidence of a third development in TESOL reading obviously related to expectancy and redundancy. This is the current concern with *sequence signals*. Special attention is being paid to sequence signals like *moreover, however, nevertheless, under such circumstances, then, too,*—etc. These are elements which do not enter into the construction of a sentence uttered in isolation; each of them presupposes the existence of other sentences, in an utterance larger than a single sentence.

A fourth emphasis in present-day reading instruction is clearly related to all of these. It has to do with a *means* of developing expectancy, with regard to certain types of sentences, a *means* of interpreting the grammatical constructions commonly found in written prose. I refer to an instructional policy which is not new, but which has taken on added significance in recent years. This is the policy of having students practice *writing* the kinds of English prose which they will need to *read*. In composition courses for native speakers of English most teachers have traditionally stressed the “reader-writer contract” and the close relationship between the way something is

written and the way it is to be read. But it seems to me that today we are finding renewed emphasis on composition as *training for reading*. This may be due in part to the generative grammarian’s concern with deep structure *vis a vis* surface structure. It may also arise out of the fact that, in many schools today, TESOL is taught by elementary school teachers for whom the “experience chart” has long been a standard instructional device. Such teachers have commonly encouraged students to compose orally a story or essay, which is then written down and edited into a form appropriate to connected discourse. It is during the “editing” stage that students learn to apply processes of deletion, embedding, and transposition. In the process, students become engaged in what H. Douglas Brown calls “creatively struggling with the language.”

Through such cooperative ventures in constructing written prose, students may note how constructions like participial modifiers relate to simpler constructions. They also learn to recognize synonymous sentences, to detect potential ambiguities, to appreciate the function and force of various sequence signals. We might say, then, that a fourth trend in present-day TESOL reading instruction is toward increased attention to *writing as training for reading*.

Ventures in cooperative composition writing can begin well before the advanced stage of instruction, and the students may be either children or adults. For younger learners, the exercise in prose writing may evolve from something as simple as a passage of “Tarzan Talk.” Suppose the following is written on the chalkboard:

Big crocodile swim river. Pretty girl swim river. Girl see crocodile. Crocodile see girl. Crocodile hungry. Crocodile open mouth. Eat girl?

Using this as raw material for a story, the class decides what to do about the first sentence. What other words should be added in order to convert this “Tarzan Talk” into the kind of writing normally found in

books? Someone may suggest: "A big crocodile is swimming in a river." Another may propose: "A big crocodile was swimming in *the* river." A third may choose to combine the first two sentences: "A big crocodile and a pretty girl were swimming in the river." A fourth may think the story would be improved by writing, "While a pretty girl was swimming in a river, a big crocodile was swimming there, too."

Guided by the teacher, the class discusses the possibilities, and the effects of the various arrangements are considered. Thus the students learn that a single idea may be expressed in two or more different ways, and that various effects are produced by choosing from among various grammatical constructions.

Teachers who engage their students in such exercises avoid the *misuse* of linguistics that Dwight Bolinger must have had in mind when he deplored the fact that, in his view, "Both structuralism and transformationalism concentrate on the form of sentences and their parts, and neglect meaning, which is the part of language that most eludes the student's grasp." The group-composition session, in which students work from idea to surface structure, can show how writers arrive at the forms of sentences found in written prose.

Another exercise leading to a meaningful grasp of surface structures is suitable for junior or senior high school. Classified ads clipped from a newspaper are distributed among the students, and each student interprets his ad to the class. For instance, "LOST: Child's glasses, brown rims" may be interpreted as "Some child has lost his glasses. They have brown rims," or "Glasses with brown rims have been lost by a child," or "A pair of child's glasses with brown rims has been lost." The student is encouraged to explain the ad in as many different ways as possible. This sort of exercise develops versatility with regard to surface structures. It prepares the student to recognize synonymous sentences when he meets them in his reading. Practice in comparing various types of sentences is excellent preparation for the reading of textbooks in the subject-matter fields.

All too often, the development of skill in

recognizing synonymous sentences is left to chance. Teachers have traditionally called attention to synonyms for individual words, but less has been done with alternative ways of handling larger units. Hence, in many classes, students need practice in deciding which two sentences from a set of three have approximately the same meaning. Sets like the following may be considered and discussed:

1. (a) The boys did not mention their suspicions to the mechanic.

(b) The boys did not say anything to the suspicious mechanic.

(c) The boys did not tell the mechanic that they were suspicious.

2. (a) Reaching out desperately, Frank grasped Ken's shirt.

(b) Desperately, Frank reached out and grasped Ken's shirt.

(c) Frank desperately reached Ken; who grasped his shirt.

3. (a) Ed had to stop running long enough to catch his breath.

(b) Although Ed longed to stop and catch his breath, he had to keep running.

(c) Ed longed to stop and catch his breath, but he had to keep running.

Thus we might sum up this fifth trend by noting that there is growing emphasis upon the *comprehension* of the very complex network of linguistic features found in written discourse.

All of these efforts and emphases are related to a sixth over-arching phenomenon in TESOL which becomes apparent as we move forward through the 1970's. I have saved it for last, since it is in many ways the most significant of all those mentioned. Furthermore, it is implicit in most of the other tendencies I have touched upon. This is the move to restore Reading to a position of high priority in the process of learning a second language. In the not-too-distant past, it was fashionable to assume that reading instruction could and should be postponed until after several more important matters had been attended to. In many programs, in fact, there was an attempt to "protect" students

from the damaging effects of contact with the written language. It was often said that an oral command was a necessary prerequisite to reading, and that even if reading skills were the air of the program, oral/ aural work provided the only defensible means of reaching that goal. After three decades in which Reading was thus down-graded, I find impressive significance in the title of a 1972 article by Robert Lado in the *Foreign Language Annals*: "Evidence for an Expanded Role for Reading in Foreign Language Learning." Lado cites data derived from several studies, one of which involved Japanese junior high school students studying English at the beginning level. The experimental group was not presented with the written language until after the first month of instruction. The control group learned the written form along with the spoken form, beginning with the first lessons. The control group demonstrated superior skill in tests of aural perception, and also in comprehension and integrative tests.

On the basis of findings from such experiments, Lado arrived at the following conclusion: "...although it is possible to learn to speak without reading, it seems a more effective strategy to learn to read simultaneously with learning to speak."

Thus we find that Reading instruction is back in style. Reading is even to be given an expanded role in beginners' classes. How much more vital, then, is efficient reading instruction in courses for intermediate and advanced students, many of whom are forced to cope with textbook prose during their non-TESOL hours, every school day.

I hope that ESL teachers will never lose sight of the need for oral practice, especially at the elementary levels. But the recently renewed appreciation of the role played by reading bodes well. It should improve our teaching of the more advanced classes.

Luckily this trend toward a greater sense of responsibility for the teaching of reading coincides with other current developments, as

we have seen. It comes at a time when teachers are gaining new insights into the reading process, into the uses of redundancy, into the features that distinguish written connected discourse from conversational talk. Many of today's new insights are proving useful in helping TESOL students learn to read.

Another fifth tendency in present-day reading instruction is suggested by the foregoing four. Today there appears to be a trend away from *simplifying* the language learning process, a trend toward acknowledging its complexity. In an earlier day, the emphasis was upon streamlining the process, on identifying the *smallest* number of language features and elements essential to the expression of ideas. Teachers in my generation were brought up on the Fries dictum that "language is learned when within a *limited vocabulary* the student has mastered the sound system and the *basic structural devices*." In those days—and even today in elementary courses—the stress was on supplying a limited set of signalling devices for the student's use in *production* of English sentences. Today attention has shifted—particularly in more advanced classes—to *comprehension* of a vastly expanded repertoire of patterns.

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