

# ON THE NECESSITY FOR SPECIALIZED MATERIALS IN ESOL

by Ted Plaister

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages are forever searching for specially prepared materials to teach the different language skills; consequently their eyes light up whenever a brochure from their favorite publisher comes across their desks with ESL or EFL somewhere in the title. What will be suggested here is that there are plenty of language teaching materials readily available which are not specialized at all. In addition, this lack of so-called specialization does not detract from the usefulness of such materials. In support of this argument, a technique will be detailed here which uses readily available materials costing practically nothing, yet which involve the students in real communication situations requiring them to talk, listen, interpret data, take notes, and summarize.

One such type of non-specialized material consists of charts and graphs of the kind which can easily be found in such publications as TIME, NEWSWEEK, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT or in sales reports, newspaper articles, etc. These charts and graphs are collected and mounted on suitably-sized cardboard and the resulting cards numbered. The more varied the types selected the better, e.g., bar graphs, line graphs, pie-diagrams, those using objects as symbols (i.e., bushels of wheat, automobiles) which show relative amounts of specified products, etc. (Note that charts and graphs of this type can be kept current as new ones appear regularly.) A sufficient number of these charts and graphs should be collected to ensure that each student has a different one to work from, or that a large enough sample has been presented in class to assure adequate coverage of the major types.

Once a collection of suitable charts and graphs has been assembled, classroom work begins. The cards are passed out to the

students. The teacher then explains that individuals will be called on randomly and questioned about the kinds of information their chart or graph communicates graphically. Having done this, the teacher calls upon a particular student and the questioning begins. (For his use, the teacher has a photocopy of each chart.)

Basically this use of charts and graphs is an exchange—a dialog—between teacher and student concerning a particular chart or graph. Obviously this involves questioning and answering, but it also includes note-taking as mentioned earlier. While one student is answering the teacher's questions about his chart or graph, the others in the class are listening and taking notes on the basis of the information contained in the exchange. What does this activity accomplish? First of all, it requires that the student who is doing the talking speak so others can understand him. If a class consists of a Thai, two Iranians, one Indonesian, two Koreans, one Samoan, and eight Cantonese (a not uncommon situation in some schools), the students will speak English with their own unique accents which constitute a potential—more often, real—barrier to understanding. The language communication in the classroom is English and so the situation of trying to understand another non-native speaker of English is very similar to that which the student will face in his other classrooms. In this connection, many universities employ non-native speakers of English as lecturers who must lecture in English. I am convinced that if one has to communicate his message to others where an understanding is crucial, e.g., where others have to take notes and get the content down accurately for later study, he generally will take pains to make himself understood. This is especially true in the

classroom situation which has just been described. It may not be true of some person of considerable status whose attitude is: strain and understand, I am worth listening to! Further, in the classroom, peer pressure is at work and it has been my experience that in environments such as have been outlined here, students will strive to do something about their pronunciation. Indeed, motivation to pronounce with reasonable accuracy may actually be higher than it is in regular pronunciation class.

In any event, students and teacher alike should be encouraged to apply modest pressure on the students to use a "communicative pronunciation" by such remarks as "I'm sorry, I don't understand," "Would you mind repeating that?" and similar indicators of lack of understanding.

Second, some students are soft-spoken because of personality factors or their insecurity when it comes to speaking English. Being placed in a situation where they have to

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speak loudly enough to be heard in a classroom by their peers provides definite motivation to speak up.

Third, this method of generating an exchange between student and teacher which is being recorded by the other members of the class also serves as a check on how well the students are handling the skill of note-taking. It is a simple matter for the teacher to collect the students' notes, look them over, and evaluate them in terms of the information supplied by the exchange.

Should the teacher wish to structure the

note-taking (and this would be particularly advantageous for students at lower levels of English proficiency), he can order the presentation of his questions while providing the students with a form to fill out as the information is elicited. This might include such items as: title of the graph, type of graph, what the graph is measuring and so forth. Then as the students gained more proficiency, the structured helps would be gradually withdrawn until each student was taking his notes completely from the different teacher-student exchanges. A further refinement would be to tape record the exchange between student and teacher for later listening in a tutorial setting.

The teacher can easily check on-going comprehension as the dialog (which is real dialog, rather than contrived materials to be memorized at home) progresses by calling upon individual students to summarize what has been said thus far and this involves another useful skill. Such a procedure leads quite naturally to a complete summary at the end of the dialog, either by the student concerning his particular chart or graph, or by some other student from his notes. Finally, the students might write up a short summary of the data the graph presents (after all, a chart or graph is a means of representing data graphically rather than by means of print) to be handed in and checked by the teacher.

For this type of teaching to be maximally effective, the pace must be brisk but not so fast as to overwhelm, discourage or frustrate the student, but a student should feel some pressure because pressure is just exactly what he will often feel in the university (or other) classroom situation. Therefore, the questioning covering the chart or graph and what it has to communicate should move at a steady clip. Certain stock questions can be written out by the teacher ahead of time (and this would be especially necessary if one were using some kind of structured approach with beginning students). But probably the most useful and real questions will come as the dialog develops naturally between teacher and student.

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After using charts and graphs with a group of students what exactly has been accomplished? The students should have become thoroughly familiar with a wide variety of charts and graphs and learned to read and interpret them (for interpreting and drawing inferences from the charts would definitely want to come within the matrix of questioning) this skill cannot help but be useful to them in their work. Second, students have been given intensive practice in answering questions which are real rather than contrived; questions which are closely related to the kinds of questions which conceivably will be asked of them in some of their classes. Third, students have been taking notes and responding to "quizzes" on their notes. In addition, both oral and written summarizations have been made and this is desirable preparation for summarizing data in other classes for other purposes.

One further technique is to show an enlarged version of the chart or graph—either drawn for the purpose, sketched on the chalkboard, or displayed by means of an overhead projector—to the class after the procedures suggested have been completed. The teacher then "lectures" from the chart, thus simulating an actual lecture situation. Such a lecture might be looked upon as a sort of summary of summaries. By this time the content should be thoroughly familiar to the class and this particular procedure could well impart a feeling of real accomplishment to the class as they listened and (hopefully!) understood with relative ease. Quite naturally a great number of the sentences used by the teacher will be unique and this affords the students practice in listening to what might be called uncontrived English. To carry this procedure one additional step, the teacher could, having lectured from the chart once, start all over again and give the "same" lecture again. Once more the students would be hearing a slightly different version of the same information. Then, if it could be scheduled and was practical, another teacher or any

speaker of reasonably intelligible English could be brought in and the students given the opportunity to hear still another rendition. Repeated exposure to the same information cast in slightly different syntax affords the student practice in coping with paraphrased material and should be of assistance to them in listening to and comprehending other lectures. The teacher would have to exercise judgment on when to terminate activities for a particular chart or graph so as to avoid boredom.

In addition to practicing the skills we have already mentioned, the students are led to a study of vocabulary—something for which students instinctively feel a need. With this technique, all vocabulary, new or old, is presented in a meaningful context. What better way to learn a word like *trend*, for example, than by seeing it graphically illustrated on several charts or graphs and explicated by the teacher or one of the students? Over a period of time, the entire vocabulary associated with charts and graphs would be introduced in context and repeated exposures should suffice to effect learning. Much of the vocabulary used by the teacher in questioning will be spontaneous, a far better procedure than picking words out of the air for the "vocabulary lesson of the day."

Thus, we have shown how charts and graphs can be used by a language teacher to involve students in actual language learning activities which closely approximate those they will face in one segment of their life in an academic setting, or quite conceivably in other instances as well. The materials used are neither specially prepared nor adapted for students of ESOL. Instead, they are taken from ordinary sources. Charts and graphs are not the only examples of such language teaching aids which are available to the resourceful teacher. All aids of this kind have the advantage of being relevant and real, thus lending themselves to a greater degree of acceptability on the part of the student and teacher alike than many of the artificial and staged exercises often used.