

ESL ADULT LITERACY

A New Use for Dialogues

by Jack Wigfield

Instruction in ESL adult literacy is an important but neglected area of ESL programs. (Wigfield, 1976) Indeed, many people in the world are just beginning to realize the importance of literacy for any group migrating to a literate industrialized country.¹ While aural/oral skills have priority, literate societies expect and sometimes require literacy for citizenship attainment, job advancement, and civic participation. And often a social stigma accompanies illiteracy.

Many ESL students are literate and are able to transfer their skills to English. With a certain amount of effort, as their a/o skills develop, their reading and writing skills do likewise. But there are a number of students who are either illiterate in their own language or who come from languages with writing systems so different from English that there is little to transfer. In addition, the use of space, or the direction of the writing, or the point of entry for eye movement in the student's written system can cause severe interference problems.

For the past several years, Alemany Adult Center in San Francisco has been giving instruction in ESL adult literacy and for the past two years we have tried to look into the whole area in more detail. Since we found no material written for ESL literacy, we have developed our own. One feature of that material is a dialogue.

The use of a dialogue in a literacy class is different from that for an a/o class. Dialogues in a/o classes should never be memor-

ized. But there are good reasons for having students drill the literacy dialogue to the point of memorization, but memorization of a visual symbol and its meaning in this instance. And whereas a new dialogue might be presented only orally to an a/o class, it is important that the literacy class see the dialogue to hear the relationship between what the words look like and what they sound like. After all, the common California expression *Wine cha go?* is a far cry from its written form *Why don't you go?*

The rationale for a dialogue in a literacy class is different, too. The dialogue introduces the content of the whole lesson. The dialogue based on the *California Drivers Manual* presented below leads into a prose passage and then a cloze passage which continue the discussion of the illegality of littering and the fire hazard of cigarettes.

Literacy instruction doesn't interfere with or lessen the importance of teaching pronunciation. Arab students with a three vowel system spell *yes* as **yās* for obvious reasons. And Hatch (1973) has a good deal of sophisticated evidence that as we have more day-to-day experiential evidence phonetic interference does hinder reading. The dialogue gives us a much more practical way to get at pronunciation than working on a prose passage or individual words. Some dialogues can be constructed with this in mind in early lessons. For example:

1: What's your name?

2: Jack.

1: Hack?

2: No. Jack.

1: Chack?

2: No. Jack.

1: Spell it.

2: J—A—C—K.

1: Oh, Jack.

2: Right.

Many students tend to read everything in a monotone or with citation intonation. Dialogues give us a chance to work on minimal tone differences. For example:

1. *Literacy Discussion*. 1971. 2:4 (Autumn).

This issue is devoted to the problem of learning a second language in industrialized countries. Most of the articles deal with European countries, but Canada and the U.S. are treated as well. The situation in 1971 was dismal indeed for second language literacy.

- 1: I went downtown.
- 2: Where? (rising tone for repetition)
- 1: Downtown.
- 2: Where? (falling tone for new information)
- 1: To Macy's.
- 2: I see.

- 1: Why?
- 2: I'm full.
- 1: How about dessert?
- 2: I'm hungry again.

Another task in the lesson is a note. Beginning students copy an example. Eight or so weeks later they expand one. And finally they write one of their own. The dialogue provides sentences which some students can simply copy in the middle stage to expand a note. For example consider this note accompanying a sample dialogue below:

6/15/76

Dear Jack,
 In California don't throw your cigarette out the window because

Regards,

Students can refer to the dialogue and simply copy "that's illegal." More advanced students might write something original.

Dialogues for a literacy class are somewhat different from those for a/o classes. Starting with the set of guidelines in Emilio Cortez's article in the *TESL Reporter* last year and the examples which he included, we can expand the guidelines for ESL literacy to include the following:

(1) *Stress brevity and simplicity.* Taking Cortez's first example, keeping in mind that he wrote it for children, we can illustrate the changes we suggest for ESL literacy.

- | <i>CORTEZ</i> | <i>ESL LITERACY</i> |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1: Be sure you finish eating. | 1: Finish eating. |
| 2: I can't. I'm full. | 2: I can't. |
| 1: I guess you're too full for dessert. | 1: Why? |
| 2: I just got hungry again. | 2: I'm full. |
| | 1: Are you too full for dessert? |
| | 2: No. |
| | 1: You just got hungry again. |
| | 2: Right. |
| | or |

Or take this ESL dialogue from one we developed from the *California Drivers Manual*:

- | <i>ESL</i> | <i>ESL LITERACY</i> |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1: Where can I put this cigarette butt? | 1: Where can I put this? |
| 2: The ash tray is full. Throw it out the window. | 2: Your cigarette? |
| 1: That's illegal. | 1: Right. |
| 2: Really? | 2: In the ash tray. |
| 1: Sure. It's a fire hazard, and it's littering. | 1: It's full. |
| | 2: Out the window. |
| | 1: That's illegal. |
| | 2: Eat it. |
| | 1: Very funny. |

(2) *Give one person in the dialogue an extremely easy task.* Literacy classes show greater individual differences than ordinary ESL classes. Literacy classes are non-graded. That is, we enroll students who have learned some English in the community and come to school only for literacy and students who have lived in the community for many years and now, either due to retirement or because their families are old enough to be independent, have returned to school to learn to read and write. And we get monolingual students right off the plane. The rate of achievement also varies. But we want to keep all these disparities working together and it's possible by making the reading task different for the two readers.

REFERENCES

Hatch, Evelyn. 1971. "Research on Reading a Second Language," *Workpapers in Teaching English as a Second Language*, UCLA, 7 (June).

Wigfield, Jack. 1974. "Conversations and Dialogues," *TESL Reporter*, 8-1 (Fall).

Wigfield, Jack 1974. "ESL Adult Literacy," Paper presented at the National TESOL Convention, New York, To be published in the *CATESOL Occasional Papers*, (Fall/Winter) 1976-7.