

CARRYING A GOOD THING TOO FAR

by Walter P. Allen

All teachers worth their salt discover effective lessons and teaching devices. A class becomes electrified and the activity of the learning process can be gauged in the happy, interested faces. Among the examples of such phenomena appearing recently in the *TESL Reporter* are Alice Pack's "Pronoun Chart" (reprinted in Fall 1973, p. 13) and Ted Plaister's "Mother Goose and ESL" (the lead story in Winter 1974). Most of us have probably developed articles, at least in our minds if not on paper, describing our brilliant strokes of genius. (I speak from personal experience.)

Often the profession is the loser when these advances in teaching are not made available through the journals. However, there are also dangers when an idea is rushed to print too soon. The enthusiasm of the moment may be so dazzling that the innovator fails to pay attention to the warning signals. In the first flush of success there is the danger of imagining more power in the method than is justified. The new method may have filled an immediate need so beautifully that it is deemed adequate for other situations, which may be quite different. Also it may have been the enthusiasm of the teacher with a new gimmick, rather than any value in the method, which caused the increased learning. Again, striking success in the first use of the novel lesson plan may lead to the danger of ignoring difficulties which are inherent in the method. As long as the students are swimming so well, the teacher fails to note the rough water ahead. Most important, the success of a plan may lead the teacher into the danger of failure to teach essentials of the language which are not involved in the bright new method. Language is very complex, with many aspects, and mastery is only achieved by gaining control of all aspects, not of just one. Vocabulary, for example, must be supported by syntax, semantics, rhetoric, and all the other aspects of language.

A case in point is the two articles by Kelly Harris, Jr. which recently appeared in

the *TESL Reporter*: "Using Crossword Puzzles in TESL" (Fall 1973) and "A Lesson on Synonyms, Antonyms, and Homonyms for ESL Students" (Winter 1974). The Winter article begins with a fundamental misconception of language: "Sounds and meanings of words are most important in English" (p. 11). Although there is no *the* before *most*, the implication is clear that other aspects of English are *less* important. This is indeed very cavalier treatment of morphology, syntax, and other aspects of language. In fact, limiting vocabulary study to synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms will hardly provide complete coverage even for phonology and semantics. Fortunately the same issue of *TESL Reporter* also carries articles by Yao Shen on tense carriers and by Alice C. Pack on functions of HAVE.

Anyone who has taught ESL knows that students usually believe that a lack in vocabulary is their only obstacle to fluency. At the same time the teacher is aware that more control of word order, form classes (parts of speech), agreement, inflectional and derivational affixes, and prepositions is basic to improving communication in the new language. Obviously no lesson can teach everything, but conversely, no lesson can claim to be everything, or even the most important thing.

My wife once compiled a list of more than 250 pairs and triplets of homonyms in playing a game with her eight year old niece, so I consider her somewhat of an expert on the subject. But when I tried "I see him every day" and I sing a sea hymn every day," I drew a blank. At least in our dialect, sea hymns are not likely to cause confusion with see him, because sea hymns don't occur.

Some homonyms are real trouble-makers for people learning English, such as: there - their - they're, to - too - two, your - you're, and even words like bare - bear. These sets give our student enough problems. We don't have to invent others just to extend a pet

system.

Some TESL methods, notably Basic English, strive for efficient teaching by avoiding synonyms. The beginning lessons of the Michigan materials used to speak only of *pocketbooks*, never of *purses*, *wallets*, or *handbags*. Even these controlled vocabulary methods must eventually face the problem of introducing synonyms. ESL students are especially aware of the problem of synonyms because their bilingual dictionaries give a string of English words for every word of their own language. Since the students know the differences between synonyms in their own language, they are likely not to recognize them as such and think that it is only English which has "so many words with the same meaning."

The two problems with teaching synonyms are 1) showing the shade of difference between synonyms and 2) the suitability of different words in various contexts. An example of two words not really having the same meaning is Harris' use of *join* as a clue for *mate*. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (just like five American dictionaries I consulted) gives "join in marriage" as a definition of *mate*, v.t. 7 i. In the Fall 1973 crossword clue, (*in animals*) is added to *join*, but *The Concise Oxford* only tells of birds mating. Unless the class has read a story in which animals mate, the lesson on synonyms and the crossword clue are misleading.

Similarly, *slipper* - *shoe* - *sandal* may all mean *footwear*, but they are certainly not interchangeable. In fact, they are as different as *Cougar* and *Jaguar* are to an auto mechanic.

Earthly and *terrestrial* are examples of synonyms which are appropriate in different contexts. The Latinate *terrestrial* is most likely to fit in formal, scientific, or theological settings. At the other extreme, *earthly* can be used as an expletive (which does not have to be deleted): no earthly chance (*Concise Oxford*).

The makers of Alka-Seltzer used to advertise that their product contained *acetylsalicylic acid*, which is a scientific name for *aspirin*. The advertisement successfully used the unfamiliar term to deceive the public, for the term belongs in a chemistry class or a pharmacopeia. Perhaps another company will try $C_9H_8O_4$.

Antonyms are defined as words of opposite meanings, but it appears that some

antonyms are more opposite than others. True antonyms are found in *hot* - *cold* and *up* - *down* (at least in the common use of these terms, though physicists or astronauts might disagree). But to say that the opposite of *man* is *woman* is to perpetuate a sexist stereotype. Why not give *boy*, or *dinosaur*, or *rock*? Obviously students will have to be trained in the type of partial

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opposition shown by pairs such as *man* - *woman*. Harris' example of *holy* - *unholy* opens a whole new bag of cats. *Possible* - *impossible*, *correct* - *incorrect*, and *happy* - *unhappy* immediately come to mind. Clearly a whole new lesson can be developed on negating words, training students to build their own antonyms. From there the study could proceed to the role of prefixes in English.

The usefulness of the words is another point which Harris has not weighed sufficiently in his search for synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms. One way of determining the usefulness of a word, and so whether it should be taught earlier or later, is to find how often it is used by people who speak English. A considerable body of factual evidence on this point is available to a lesson planner in any of several frequency counts. Although frequency counts do not prescribe an absolute order for learning words, yet they do give some idea of what words should be learned first and which can be put off till later.

The puzzle on page 11 of the Fall 1973 *TESL Reporter* has many words in both the clues and the answers which were found to be used most frequently in the 18 million words counted for the Thorndike and Lorge study published as *The Teacher's Word Book of 30,000 Words* (New York, 1944). (I refer to this book because it is within reach.) Less frequently used words include the following:

from the second thousand: unite, cease, holy, beast, journey;

from the third thousand: mate, sacred, preach, climate;

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from the fourth thousand: mist;
 from the fifth thousand: earthly, devour;
 from the sixth thousand: petty;
 and from the eleventh thousand: terrestrial.
 Considered from this light, the last word
 above hardly seems suitable for a high school
 class. To add to the difficulty of the lesson,
 one of the least frequently used words,
devour, has a clue definition which I could
 not find in any dictionary.

A reminder that one cannot always rely
 on these word counts of printed material for
 TESL purposes is in the words *nought* and
zero, which are listed in the seventh and
 sixth thousandths, respectively, in the
 Thorndike and Lorge count. Of course
nought is British and would not be used
 frequently by Americans, and *zero* is rarely
 spelled out in print. This instance demon-
 strates that caution and common sense must

be used in applying information from any
 frequency count.

After considering the dangers to be avoid-
 ed in promoting a new teaching device, I
 would like to close with some positive
 advice: When you work up a lesson which
 really clicks, use it to the full advantage of
 your students. Then count to ten slowly
 and do your homework. Before you use it
 again, or suggest it to someone else, first
 check its fundamental philosophy and then
 make sure you have not been carried away
 by the method and so introduced new
 problems. Above all, determine the area in
 language teaching where your device does
 the most good and remember that you don't
 have a cure-all for the whole field of ESL.
 When your new idea passes these tests, you
 can join the ranks of those who have
 contributed to TESL.