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In this issue:

## Conference Supplement

**Scott Thornbury**

Dogme: Dancing in the dark?

**Hitomi Masuhara**

Helping Learners to Achieve Multi-Dimensional Mental Representation in L2 Reading

**James Thomas**

Nicenet: an internet classroom assistant

**Leonora Fröhlich-Ward**

Practice makes perfect: English in Primary school How to help the children to remember and retain what they have learnt?

**Gill Woodman**

Designing online training materials for German-British intercultural encounters

**Carlos Rico Troncoso**

The Matter of Selecting and Evaluating Materials

**Alexander Sokol**

Creatively proGRAMMARed

# Contents

*Editorial, Carlos Islam* ..... 2

## CONFERENCE PERSPECTIVES

**Dogme: Dancing in the dark?** ..... 3  
*Scott Thornbury, freelance teacher trainer and writer, Spain*

**Helping Learners to Achieve Multi-Dimensional Mental Representation in L2 Reading** .... 6  
*Hitomi Masuhara, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

**Nicenet: an internet classroom assistant** ..... 10  
*James Thomas, Masaryk University, Czech Republic*

**Practice makes perfect: English in Primary school How to help the children to remember and retain what they have learnt?** ..... 13  
*Leonora Fröhlich-Ward, Munich*

**Designing online training materials for German-British intercultural encounters**..... 17  
*Gill Woodman, Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich*

**The Matter of Selecting and Evaluating Materials**..... 23  
*Carlos Rico Troncoso*

**Creatively proGRAMMARed**..... 27  
*Alexander Sokol, University of Latvia, Latvia*

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# Editor's Message

*Carlos Islam, United Nations, USA*

**W**elcome to a special bumper edition of Folio. Hopefully, it will keep you occupied until the Spring 2005 issue due out in April.

You will notice that this issue introduces another regular column, Computer Perspectives. I would like to extend my appreciation to Barry Barkin for agreeing to write this column relating computer technology to materials development issues.

In September 2003 the Dillingen Academy with the cooperation of the British Council and MATSDA hosted a conference, New Approaches in ELT Materials Design and Development, in Bavaria, Germany. The event drew a lot of interest and produced thought provoking ideas, some of which have been written up for this bumper edition of Folio. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this section and to all our regular columnists.

We're aiming to publish Folio 10/1 in April 2005 and the deadline for contributions is 14th February 2005 as I like to receive mail on Valentines Day.

Please send your articles and correspondence to me at [islamc@un.org](mailto:islamc@un.org) or in the mail to Carlos Islam, English Language Coordinator, U.N. Language and Communications Programme, S-606, Secretariat Building, UN Headquarters, 405 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017. You can also call me at + 1 (212) 963 2985.

*Wishing you a successful and happy 2005.*

*Cheers,*

*Carlos*

# Dogme: Dancing in the dark?

Scott Thornbury, freelance teacher trainer and writer, Spain

In 1995, over a bottle of red wine, the Danish film-maker Lars von Trier and three cronies drafted the manifesto of the Dogme 95 film-makers collective. They were driven by a commitment to rescue cinema from big-budget, hi-tech, Hollywood-style production values and to recover what von Trier referred to as “our joyful film-making”. In order to make films that would be true to the “inner story” of the characters, the group pledged allegiance to a set of “vows”, the first of which was:

*Shooting should be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found)<sup>1</sup>*

By analogy, four years ago I wrote a short, uncharacteristically provocative, article (Thornbury, 2000) suggesting the need for a similar “rescue action” in ELT, which – at least in the contexts I was familiar with – seemed to be drowning in an embarrassment of resources. An over-dependency on manufactured materials (I argued) ran counter to the often expressed desire of both teachers and learners to create more opportunities for “real language use” in their classrooms. This was partly due to the single-minded fixation of these materials, as *coursebooks*, on teaching the system (mainly grammar), and due also to their textual density, not to mention cultural blandness and lack of relevance, as *textbooks*.

The article provoked some sympathetic mutterings, and these mutterings evolved into the Dogme on-line discussion list ([www.groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme)). At last count this has over 300 members and has triggered nearly 7000 postings. Out of this “long conversation” a number of principles have emerged that “dogmetists” seem to hold in common, irrespective of the contexts they are teaching in. These might be summarised as being:

- Materials-mediated teaching is the “scenic” route to learning, but the direct route is located in the *interactivity* between teachers and learners, and between the learners themselves.
- The content most likely to *engage* learners and to trigger learning processes is that which is already there, supplied by the “people in the room.”
- Learning is a social and *dialogic* process, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than “transmitted”

or “imported” from teacher/coursebook to learner.

- Learning can be mediated through *talk*, especially talk that is shaped and supported (i.e. *scaffolded*) by the teacher.
- Rather than being acquired, language (including grammar) *emerges*: it is an organic process that occurs given the right conditions.
- The teacher’s primary function, apart from promoting the kind of classroom *dynamic* which is conducive to a dialogic and emergent pedagogy, is to optimise language learning *affordances*, by, for example, directing attention to features of the emergent language.
- Providing space for the learner’s *voice* means accepting that the learner’s beliefs, knowledge, experiences, concerns and desires are valid content in the language classroom.
- Freeing the classroom from third-party, imported materials *empowers* both teachers and learners.
- Texts, when used, should have *relevance* for the learner, in both their learning and using contexts.
- Teachers and learners need to unpack the ideological baggage associated with EFL materials – to become *critical* users of such texts.

As you can see, there is a lot here that echoes the precepts of other “transformative” pedagogies, such as humanistic education, critical pedagogy, pedagogy of possibility, border pedagogy, and so on. Indeed, one of the pleasures of the dogme discussion has been in having these connections pointed out. In short, there is nothing very original in dogme.

Nevertheless, it is curious how it continues to be a source of irritation, not only for publishers (who, I have to admit, have been on the whole pretty indifferent) but for many teachers. This may be due to a healthy scepticism on their part about bandwagons, false prophets, and hokum; or it may hint at a more profound insecurity with regard to some teachers’ perceptions of their role, and the expertise associated with it. Dogme may threaten the traditional “authority” of teachers, suggesting as it does that teachers are just another “person in the room”. “Winging it, elevated to an art form,” was how one teacher dismissed dogme-style teaching.

1. All quotes from Dogme 95 Vow of Chastity come from the official Dogme website: [www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)

Tilting at windmills, too, perhaps. The publishers' indifference to dogme may simply be due to their unshakeable confidence in the culture of the coursebook. Nothing written on the dogme list, or anywhere else for that matter, is going to dislodge the coursebook from its role as keystone in the monumental edifice of globalised ELT. Dogmetists are merely ELT Luddites, whistling in the wind.

Or dancing in the dark. Significantly, in 2000 Lars von Trier seemed to have turned his back on dogme values when he made the all-dancing, all-singing, movie musical "Dancer in the Dark" starring Björk. Wasn't this a betrayal of the spirit of 1995? Von Trier argued that he was simply moving on. The dogme vows were not carved in stone. They had served to raise awareness of what could be achieved with minimal means, of the potential of a "poor" cinema. But, as with any prescriptive rules, there was the danger of reductionism and a kind of cinematic fundamentalism which, far from being liberating, might become asphyxiating. Besides, the values that inspired dogme in the first place – such as narrative and psychological authenticity – had not been betrayed in "Dancer in the Dark", nor in his subsequent film, "Dogville", even if the cinematic means of realising these values had become more sophisticated. And, finally, von Trier may well have been motivated by his own political activism, and the need to broadcast his radical agenda as widely as possible. While dogme films remained mere art-house curiosities, there was little chance of this agenda reaching a wide audience.

Is dogme ELT at a similar crossroads? Has the point been made? Is it time for dogmetists to return to the fold? (Sadder and wiser perhaps, but "better" teachers now, for having been out in the materials wilderness). More to the point, is coursebook use compatible with dogme principles? Or, if *current* coursebooks won't do, could there be such a thing as a dogme coursebook? A coursebook that, by promoting dogme values, both subverts the prevailing paradigm, and sets a new industry standard? Is it time, in short, for *Dogway*?

Motivated partly by these questions, but also by a somewhat resigned acceptance of the ubiquitous culture of the coursebook, I have drawn up a checklist of features that a coursebook would need to display in order to gain a dogme seal of approval.

*Dogway* would need to be....

1. *high on interactivity*: interactive speaking and writing activities should be the most conspicuous feature of the book.
2. *low on text*: the main purpose of texts should be as a) stimuli for production; b) data for contextualised language focus. But there should be no pretence that texts are there to develop reading skills (which learners can, and do, easily transfer from their L1,

and which, anyway, are best practised on texts of their choice outside the classroom). For this reason, texts should be short and generically diverse, but the exploitation of them should be exhaustive. Nor should there be any recorded listenings, since these serve no useful classroom purpose. Listening activity should be live and interactive, and integrated into speaking activity, apart from the generous use of dictation. Guidance for composing short texts for dictation and dictogloss purposes based on local and relevant issues can be provided in the teacher's book – again, these should be exploited thoroughly, in the manner of the printed texts. Words, phrases, and isolated sentences, even some scripted dialogues, could be recorded, as guides to features of pronunciation. But no extended, inaudible, disembodied listenings about the Brazilian rain forests!

3. *emergent*: the language focus should emerge from, and not determine, the communicative needs of the learners; guidance for teachers as to how this might be achieved will be provided in the teacher's book.
4. *facilitative*: that is, the linguistic (grammatical, lexical, discoursal) means for taking part in speaking and writing activities should be flagged, where these can be predicted, not as "input" to be taught, but as tools to be picked up and put down again until such time as the learner "owns" them; a lot of these tools will be lexical, especially in the form of short, memorizable chunks.
5. *reflective*: built in to the activity flow should be frequent opportunities to review, take stock, self- and peer-test, repeat activities, set new goals, raise the bar, move the goalpost. Plenty of white space should be available in the book, for learners' notes, comments, reflections, graffiti... Learners would regularly submit portfolios of work, including their own vocabulary notebooks and journals, for assessment.
6. *"grammar-lite"*: that is, the grammar syllabus would be unobtrusive and sparing, and not the tail that wags the (communicative) dog; there would be an emphasis on high frequency tenses (present and past), and on modality, and less on low frequency, low utility forms (e.g. continuous), especially at lower levels. A clear distinction would be made, on the one hand, between recognition grammar ("full fat") and production grammar ("low fat"), and on the other hand, between grammar for writing and grammar for speaking. Grammar would also be treated as an extension of lexis, that is, high frequency words – such as if, would, that, but, then. These and their associated patterns would be displayed as chains, rather than presented as "grammar mc nuggets" (second conditional, reported speech, etc)

7. *problematizing*: at least some of the language-focused tasks should aim to raise awareness and prime noticing capabilities through posing problems, without necessarily providing readymade answers. Learners would be invited to find and search their own data, to become “language sleuths”. (This is not the same as an inductive approach, incidentally – more like a “slow release” approach).
8. *non-incremental*: the design and layout of the book should encourage teachers and learners to feel free to start anywhere, to move back and forth, to pick and choose.
9. *self-sufficient*: the only extra component should be a (non-linear) homework book, focusing on accurate manipulation of key grammar, vocabulary, and text-types. There will be no wasteful photocopiable resource pack, student cassette, CD-ROM and so on. Teachers will be urged to encourage learners to read extensively outside class, according to their own interests and needs; learners should also be advised as to which dictionary and reference grammar will serve their long-term needs (no need, therefore, to clutter the book with grammar reference sections or “mini-dictionaries”).

10. *cheap*: the book and workbook should be produced to ensure the lowest possible cost to the consumer. After all, if none of the previous nine features were considered marketable in the current climate of over-resourced, over-designed, and over-priced ELT publishing, at least a highly competitive price might just be sufficient incentive to tempt some foolhardy but well-intentioned publisher into taking the risk.

*Any takers?*

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- Thornbury, S. 2000. A Dogma for EFL. *IATEFL Issues*, 153, 2
- Scott Thornbury is a freelance teacher trainer and writer, based in Spain. His previous experience includes teaching and training in Egypt, UK, and in his native New Zealand. He has an MA (TEFL) from the University of Reading. He has written numerous articles and books, the latest of which is Natural Grammar (Oxford, 2004).*

# Helping Learners to Achieve Multi-Dimensional Mental Representation in L2 Reading

*Hitomi Masuhara (Dr.) Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

## What is 'Mental Representation'?

Please spend two minutes looking at the picture below.



## What have you experienced?

Did you glance at it and decide that it is insignificant? You saw a furry kitten and even heard it mewling for milk? Did you hear the word 'cat' or 'kitten' in your mind? Your past experience flashed of having a cat as a pet? Remembered how it purrs when it's stroked gently or how rough its pink tongue feels when it licks your hand? Or did you feel aversion because you can't stand cats?

What you have just experienced is the result of your brain creating a 'Mental Representation' of a picture of a cat. According to neuroscientists, 'The world we see is reality manufactured in the brain: an integration of all the internal and external information gathered through sensory systems' (Llinàs, 1990). Neuroscientists can prove to us that we sense discrete pieces of external sensory information through different channels.

It is important to note that we integrate internal information as well as external information in creating mental representation. For example, a mental representation of the picture of a cat is likely to be influenced by our past memories. These memories derive from our numerous encounters with cats. Many of us may have had direct experience of seeing, touching, smelling cats and playing with them. Our memories of cats might also include indirect experience of seeing them on T.V. or reading about them in books. Those who especially like or dislike cats would have strong emotive associations with cats. The external stimuli of a picture of a cat could spark off such emotive responses in you. Indeed our mental representation of a picture is multi-dimensional in a sense that is sensory, motor, cognitive and emotive at the same time.

So what neuroscientists are telling us is that we are not like cameras projecting what we see in our brains! To

prove this, just imagine the kitten in the picture turning around to show its face. Wouldn't you be shocked if it didn't have a face at all?! You had half-expected what it might look like in your mental representation of the picture. If you had been asked to draw its face you might have done so. And interestingly, your pictures would have shared common features but also showed individualities. This shows that, depending on our personal experience, our liking, and knowledge about cats, each of us creates an individual, dynamic and variable mental representation of a picture of a cat.

## Mental representation during reading

Imagine that you've found a poem in a book below. Please read it.

### Refugee Mother and Child

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon will have to forget.*

*The air was heavy with odours  
of diarrhoea of unwashed children  
with washed-out ribs and dried-up  
bottoms struggling in laboured  
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most  
mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one; she held  
a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's  
pride as she combed the rust-coloured  
hair left on his skull and then -  
singing in her eyes - began carefully  
to part it ... In another life this  
would have been a little daily  
act of no consequence before his  
breakfast and school; now she  
did it like putting flowers  
on a tiny grave.*

*Chinua Achebe*

In reading this poem, readers might:

- experience some sort of emotions
- experience images, heat, thirst, smell and possibly even a sense of movement
- remember some personal matters directly and indirectly related to the text

- make use of cognition, trying to work out what is happening in the poem
- evaluate the poem

So when you read this poem as a proficient user of English, you are creating mental representation of the poem in your brain. Reading a text is in fact an extension of our mental ability to create multi-dimensional mental representations in actual experience (Masuhara, 2000; Masuhara, 2003). Interestingly, of all the reactions in responding to a literary text, emotion seems to be the most pervasive of all in adding values, interest and meaning to the text and in giving readers motivation to read on. Furthermore, the emotive impact created by the text seems to leave a strong impression and to form a durable memory to aid recall. Note here that your mental representation may be variable in a sense that you may have slightly different representations each time you read it depending on your physical conditions or state of mind. Note also that your mental representation is dynamic in a sense that your interpretations change as you read on. I would argue that this variable, dynamic and individualistic interpretation of the text is what is called 'comprehension'.

Now comes a big question: 'Do you think your L2 learners would manage a multi-dimensional representation of the poem as vividly as you did? If so, why? If not, why not?'

### **What sort of mental representation do L2 learners have in reading texts?**

Masuhara (2000) conducted an experiment comparing how proficient L1 readers read and how advanced L2 learners read the same text. Almost all the L1 proficient readers reported experiencing multi-dimensional mental representations of the text. Many of them also reported emotional reactions to what they read and some commented on the textual constructions. They also reported remembering personal past memories during reading. The L2 advanced learners, however, predominantly reported frustrations or anxiety over not understanding words. They had text-induced images but were often confused by conflicting images that could not be integrated into a coherent whole. They were decoding or studying the text rather than creating a multi-dimensional mental representation of it. In other words, their reading style is very much uni-dimensional (i.e. linguistic) without really involving sensory and other personal memory resources in their brain. The emotions that L2 learners reported were anxiety, frustration, anger directed to themselves: no place for the joy of interacting emotionally and cognitively with the text – i.e. the whole point of reading.

### **How can we help L2 learners read in a multi-dimensional way?**

The difficulty for L2 learners, for example, in processing

authentic texts is that it requires the learners' ability to connect the linguistic codes with the non-verbal multi-dimensional memories in the brain. In real life experience, the incoming input is multi-sensory processing: we see, hear, feel, etc. In reading a text, however, the initial channel for incoming information is uni-dimensional: linguistic processing of codes. It is then left to the readers or listeners to actively involve multi-dimensional memories in their brains. In order to achieve vivid multi-dimensional mental representations like those of proficient L1 readers, L2 learners need robust and extensive neural network connections between the linguistic codes and the multi-dimensional memories in their brains.

What tends to happen in classrooms is that, in order to 'help the learners', teachers pre-teach vocabulary or tell learners to look at glossaries (both are linguistic solutions!). But learners are not receiving the help that they really need. What is lacking is not the linguistic explanation or linguistic drill (i.e. uni-dimensional approach) but is the ability to connect the linguistic codes with the relevant multi-dimensional memories, which are indispensable in creating the multi-dimensional mental representation of the text. This is the very reason why even at advanced levels, L2 learners seem to be using language in a uni-dimensional way even though they are fully capable of using it in multi-dimensional way in their L1.

### **Multi-Dimensional Approaches**

In Multi-Dimensional Approaches (Masuhara, 2000; Tomlinson, 2000), experiencing rather than studying learning materials (e.g. tasks, literary texts) is likely to provide learners with opportunities to:

- cognitively and affectively engage with the meaning
- activate sensory, motor, emotional, cognitive areas of their brain during the process of reading
- self-project and self-invest in the activities which lead to deeper processing and to fuller engagement
- be exposed to comprehensible input of language repeatedly for a significant number of times
- be exposed to comprehensible input of language repeatedly for a significant duration of time
- have time to make errors and adjustments in connecting verbal codes with non-verbal mental representations

Have you noticed that many of the conditions listed above accord with what have been suggested as the characteristics of the optimal learning environment in Second Acquisition Theories (Ellis, 1997; Tomlinson, 1998)?

Let me now show you an example of a Multi-Dimensional way of approaching reading. Note how the principles identified in the article may lie behind each activity.

## An example of reading procedures using a Multi-Dimensional Approach

### 'Little Johnny's Final Letter'

Level	Lower intermediate – High Intermediate
Age	12 onwards
Time	60 minutes
Preparation	A poem 'Little Johnny's Final Letter' by Brian Patten 1995. Grinning Jack – Selected Poems. Flamingo. ISBN 0 00 65 4846 6.

#### Procedure

1. Tell your students that they are going to listen to a poem. Ask them what they think the poem is about by writing parts of the title on the board. Start with 'Letter' then add 'Final Letter', 'Johnny's Final Letter' and finally 'Little Johnny's Final Letter'.
2. Tell your students to write answers in groups to the following questions:
  - i. How old do you think Johnny is?
  - ii. Where do you think Johnny is?
  - iii. Who do you think Johnny addressed this letter to?
  - iv. Why do you think Johnny wrote the letter?

3. Listen to these extracts from the poem:

*I won't be home this evening, so  
Don't worry*

*Simply gone to get myself classified*

*I have taken off my short-trousers  
and put on long ones*

*Heard your plea on the radio this morning,  
you sounded sad and strangely old ...*

4. Tell your students to go back to their answers in 2 above if they want to.
5. Tell your students to listen to the whole poem. Tell them to see pictures in their mind of what the poem describes.

*Little Johnny's Final Letter*

*Mother,*

*I won't be home this evening, so  
Don't worry; don't hurry to report me missing*

*Don't drain the canals to find me,  
I've decided to stay alive, don't  
search the wood, I'm not hiding,  
Simply gone to get myself classified.*

*Don't leave my Shreddies out,  
I've done with security;*

*Don't circulate my photograph to society  
I have disguised myself as a man  
and am giving priority to obscurity,  
It suits me fine;*

*I have taken off my short-trousers*

*and put on long ones, and  
now am going out into the city, so  
Don't worry; don't hurry to report me missing.*

*I've rented a room without any curtains  
And sit behind the windows growing cold  
Heard your plea on the radio this morning  
You sounded sad and strangely old ...*

6. Tell your students to go back to their answers in 2 above if they want to.
7. Tell your students to draw in groups one of the following scenes:
  - i. Johnny on the day before he wrote the letter to his mother
  - ii. Johnny in his rented room
  - iii. Johnny's mother in the radio studio appealing to Johnny.
8. Read the poem aloud again.
9. Tell your students to add some details to the group picture they produced in 6 above.
10. Distribute the poem and tell your students to read the poem and in groups to add some more details to the picture they produced in 6 above.
11. Tell your students to answer the following questions in groups:
  - i. Why do you think Johnny has left home?
  - ii. What do you think Shreddies are?
  - iii. Why do you think Johnny's mother usually leaves Shreddies out?
  - iv. What does Johnny mean when he talks about taking off his short-trousers and putting on long ones?
12. Explain to your students that in his letter home, Johnny asks his mother not to do things and gives reasons why she shouldn't. Tell your students to list, in groups, things Johnny doesn't want his mother to do and the reasons he gives under the headings below.

**Things Johnny discourages/the reasons Johnny gives**
13. Explain to your students that this poem is written by one of the Liverpool poets, Brian Patten. Tell your groups to answer the following questions concerning the poet's intentions.
  - i. Johnny also uses big words and strange expressions. Try to rephrase the following expressions in the poem in a simpler, more straightforward way.

*Simply gone to get myself classified.*  
*I've done with security;*  
*Don't circulate my photograph to society*  
*And am giving priority to obscurity,*
  - ii. Note down possible reasons why the poet used such expressions in Johnny's letter.

14. Tell your students to do one of the activities below. It is important that the students know that they can do the task by themselves, with a partner, or in small groups.
- Learn to recite a poem as if you are Johnny
  - Paint a picture to illustrate the poem
  - Write down what you think Johnny's mother said on the radio. When you have finished, practise reading it in the voice of a mother who sounds, 'sad and strangely old'.
  - Write a dialogue in which Johnny and his mother are talking on the day before he left home.
  - Imagine that Johnny's mother found him sitting in his rented room. Write a dialogue between Johnny and his mother in his room.
  - Write either a poem or a short story about a teenager leaving home for the first time.

## Comments

Do note that:

- The initial activities all try to stimulate guessing and create mental representation gradually based on their own past experience
- Students are given repeated opportunities to adjust their answers and drawings. Individual mental representations are gradually modified to get closer to the poet's mental representation reflected in words. This is also a good chance for learners to connect language with non-verbal mental representation. It is also reassuring to students that they are not being tested.
- From 3 to 8, there are a lot of listening activities before the learners are asked to read. Based on many strands of evidence from neuroscience and cognitive psychology, it seems valid to claim that reading is sound-based. If the learners lack exposure to natural phonological input, it is difficult to develop the ability to group the words into the meaningful chunks which are vital to reading. Reading requires the readers' ability to segregate phrasal and clausal units and infer the pragmatic meaning often expressed by the prosodic features (e.g. stress, intonation). A teacher reading the text aloud works like a mother reading a story to a child. Furthermore, L2 learners tend to freeze when they encounter unknown words – listening to the text first relieves the learners from such a worry and helps them to focus on trying to get the overall meaning.
- Activities and questions up till Activity 10 are meaning-focused. Then gradually students' attention is guided to focus on some cultural words (e.g. Shreddies, the significance of long trousers) in relation to the overall meaning. Interesting cultural awareness activities may be employed here.
- Activities 12-13 focus on language but they are

there to help deepen the interpretation of the poem.

- Activity 13 also explores the poet's intentions in writing a poem. A good opportunity for students to learn about techniques and the effect of literature.
- Activity 14 can be homework but there has to be some provision for your students to have an exhibition of display of their hard work.

## Conclusion

In reading pedagogy in the last two decades, the learners have received bottom-up language instructions emphasising instant word recognition, skills/strategies lessons, learned the importance of activating the schema and have been tested with comprehension questions. Learners do have language problems but it is not so much uni-dimensional extensive knowledge of the vocabulary or syntax that they need, what they lack is the fun and involving experience of connecting the language with multi-dimensional mental representation that will ultimately lead to enhancement of the learners' own individual lives.

By redefining 'comprehension' as 'mental representation', Multi-Dimensional Approaches aim to create an optimal learning environment in line with the findings of neuroscience and cognitive psychology on how we learn.

Creating mental representations is a means to achieve an end i.e. to guide the being to a better state. We do not read to analyse the text for reproduction sake (as is expected in 'comprehension questions' or 'gap fill'). We read because there is an incentive for doing so: because we gain pleasure, learn about ourselves and about our environment, possibly because reading tends to promise some instrumental advantages in society, etc. The goal of Multi-Dimensional Approaches, ultimately, is to ensure that learners appreciate the learning experience and want to go on learning more for life.

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# Nicenet: an internet classroom assistant

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## The need for online learning

At the workshop conducted at Dillingen, the Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) Nicenet was introduced. Nicenet, offers an ICT approach to communication among class groups or for subjects and topics. It works entirely via the internet browser without making any further software demands on teachers or students. Nicenet is free to use and free of advertisements. As a web site, it is cweyreliable. Teachers can provide their students with reading materials and information, links to selected and categorised websites, information about scheduled events such as assignments and excursions. Students can also enter documents, submit homework, and add URL links. Everyone enrolled can participate in discussion forums. The physical proximity of the students is not an issue. They can be in the same room performing tasks in real time, or working at computers in a geographical region and coming together regularly as a physical class, or perhaps they will never meet because the participants don't live in the same city or even country.

This article will be best read at a computer with the internet accessed.

## Nicenet and Moodle

Nicenet is one of many web-based facilities through which teachers can work with students, whether in distance mode or as a supplement to face-to-face teaching. Whenever I start teaching a course, whether a short intensive, a semester course or an open-ended course, *I Create a new class* in Nicenet, unless the course is held at Masaryk University where I work, in which case I use another ICA, *Moodle*. Whereas Moodle has a much richer palette of facilities than Nicenet, it needs to be installed on a local server and requires considerable maintenance. On the other hand, anyone online anywhere can type *www.nicenet.org* into their browser and get started with Nicenet. At the top left of the screen, you are invited to *Join a Class*. The *Class Key* for my Using Nicenet demonstration site is G54586T79. A Class Key is the first thing students need in order to enter Nicenet and it is usually given to students directly: publishing it requires monitoring the site for uninvited participants, as I will have to do. These can be deleted in Class Administration.

Once registered, the student is taken to the course homepage, which is admirable for the simple clarity of its layout and its professional look. Its lack of bold colours, confrontational fonts and dancing icons bestows integrity on the courses. There are even very few buttons – most navigation requires clicking on plain text. This compares very favourably with YahooGroups, for example, another web-based facility, which is used for similar purposes.

## Using Nicenet to share links

Regardless of the course you are teaching, there are abundant relevant sites on the internet. Links to these sites can be easily inserted into your Nicenet class under *topics* you determine. For example, you might have a set of links to dictionaries and thesauri, another heading for links to your institution, and an array of headings representing your subject, as can be seen in the *Using Nicenet* class. There are literally thousands of interactive grammar and vocabulary exercises on the web that can be linked.

Students can add links if you grant them this right: this and other controls are set in *Class Administration*. Granting students this option is, in the words of Dr. Elaine Kleiner [[http://old.ihets.org/learntech/distance\\_ed/fdpapers/1998/13.html](http://old.ihets.org/learntech/distance_ed/fdpapers/1998/13.html)], “akin to giving every student in a class thousands of dollars to buy supplementary textbooks for a course”. Providing the students with some training in assessing the quality of webpages before handing over those dollars can obviate certain problems. And it may even happen that students add links with no relevance to the course at all! While students cannot see the name of the person who added a link, course administrators can – they can also delete offending links, and students if necessary.

Your *Link Topics* appear in alphabetical order and unfortunately cannot be annotated. Each link, however, can be annotated and this is where students can justify their choice of the site they are linking. Links appear under each *Link Topic* in the order that they are added and cannot be sorted.

Although I was using Moodle with my ICT4ELT course at Masaryk University, I introduced them to Nicenet for their own use outside the university. During the semester, they created a variety of exercises, activities,

worksheets and presentations and uploaded them to free webspace. Their final assignment was to create a Nicenet class themselves and provide structured links to their uploaded creations, as well as to other things pertaining to the course they were devising.

## Adding Documents

Course administrators and students can add documents into Nicenet, an option which cannot be turned off, although if necessary, the administrator can delete or edit any document that is uploaded. The documents appear in the reverse order in which they were uploaded and cannot be sorted. Since even a small number of students in a short course can produce many documents, it is best if they appear in logical sets. In **Class Schedule** the teacher can create **Assignment topics** under which documents can be added.

The Documents facility can be used in a number of ways. Teachers can post reading material for the students to read and then ask them to comment on it in an asynchronous discussion, which is discussed below. Students might also be asked to summarise or translate it.

Students and teachers can read any posted document and send a message to the author. Using this facility, students can react to each other's work and provide additional information that the author might consider incorporating in another version. Unlike a live seminar discussion, there is no demand for an immediate response, which means that the contributions can be well-considered and information sources can be consulted. Students who might be inhibited to contribute in a class discussion contribute freely in writing. The teacher also becomes a participant in these discussions, and ultimately has a written record of all the discussions. These are the major features of this mode of class communication.

One aspect of this writing that alarms some teachers is the amount of reading required of them, let alone the time spent responding. On one hand, it is not necessary to respond to everything especially when students are responding to each other. On the other hand, while this might be the price we pay for being members of such a communicating community, it does allow us to give individual attention where needed. It may be more efficient for the teacher to write one single document summarising the class' strengths and weaknesses in a particular task. And furthermore, Nicenet allows teacher's assistants who can be granted different privileges: this can be set in Class Administration.

A disadvantage that some Nicenet users complain of is the lack of formatting possibilities in uploaded documents. This is not strictly true as can be seen in the "Young Adam" document that can be viewed by opening the Using Nicenet site, and going to Film

Reviews in Documents. Here you will see that:

- some text is bold and in italics, and the *HTML in Nicenet* link is right aligned.
- the names which are underlined are hyperlinks: click on them to open selected webpages about that person.
- this page has pictures linked from their original source on the web.
- you can click on the pictures to open the source document from which they come.
- the pictures have text beside them.

There is another Document called *Three Columns* which has text in three columns. Furthermore, HTML is not restricted to documents. In **Class Schedule**, the three films mentioned are in bold. When in *edit mode*, it looks like this:

After reading the review of **Young Adam**, write your own review of **Young Frankenstein** or on **Young Einstein**.

As can be seen, making text bold involves writing it between these codes: **<B> </B>**.

In Link Sharing, there are several sites which are recommended as entry points into HTML. I recently taught a face-to-face short intensive course, mediated via Nicenet. The young students knew no HTML and were producing richly formatted documents in Nicenet in their first HTML lesson. They then went on to create full webpages using HTML.

## Conferencing

This facility allows threaded discussions. The teacher creates a topic setting the task. Setting a good task with clear instructions is obviously tantamount. Moodle actually provides advice on such things.

The *Spidla navrhuje* topic in Conferencing illustrates how a series of teacher-student interactions appear – they are discussing a translation. At first it is the student and teacher, and later another student joins in. In order for everyone to be able to read the exchange, a little caution must be exercised: it is important to click on Reply, not Send a Personal Message to the author.

From a language teaching point of view, Conferencing can be used for a variety of activities. For example, a group of students resolve a quandary set by the teacher – the groups have to "talk" it through. Conferencing can also be used for brainstorming, which can serve as a preparatory activity for a piece of writing. And a third task consists of online interviews in which a number of students can ask one person multiple questions. This could be in the form of role play.

These interactive exchanges through which students develop, sometimes with each other's help, exemplify the value of the process in learning. Arriving at a product is the learning experience, not the product itself.

## Class Schedule

This is a chronological listing of class events. You might post here details of excursions, reminders about upcoming events and administrative matters. It is also the part of Nicenet where you set assignments. Assignments are given a name and dates due, and details about the requirements. There are then the options to create an associated Conferencing topic, to send everyone a reminder some days before it is due. Finally, there are options for the students to submit it through Nicenet, to be allowed to edit it after submission, and to be allowed to access each other's assignment.

## Messages

This facility is simple and effective. Anyone can send a message to a whole class or selected individuals. And when you have more than one class, all students can be messaged. For administrative purposes, this is very useful. For academic work, it is better to use the Conferencing threads where possible, partly to keep administrative and academic aspects of a class separate, partly to keep records of the written work intact.

Although it is possible to delete a class, all of its work and its students, I have found that in never doing so, past students keep in touch, sometimes for advice, sometimes to contribute something to an issue previously discussed.

## A shortcoming

Before I conclude, there is one shortcoming worth mentioning. Each time I Create a New Class, I have to enter all the links that I like my students to use – there is no way to clone a course. This problem also appears when teaching two or more classes the same course at the same time.

I know of two workarounds. One is to create Nicenet courses that are content or topic based in which any student can enrol. A team of teachers can create these courses. In this scenario, the students enrol in their class course as well as in the topic based one(s). When someone is in more than one course, Nicenet provides a button to move smoothly from one to another.

The second workaround, which I now use, is to create a webpage of topic-based links and link the Nicenet class to it, as can be seen in the links section of Using Nicenet called **Language Resources**.

## Conclusion

I have described and demonstrated the major features of Nicenet and some of their pedagogical and practical applications. A little investigation and experimentation will reveal even more of what Nicenet has to offer, as it has for thousands of people in its five years of existence. According to Nicenet's homepage, Since January, 1998 a total of 622,410 users have used the ICA.

In closing, I would like to thank past students who remain enrolled in my Nicenet mediated courses for their continued interaction, and to those who responded to my Message requesting information about how they use Nicenet. Special thanks go to Jurate Zdanyte (Lithuania) who first introduced me to Nicenet, and to Maite San Roman (Spain) and Jarmila Fictumova (Czech Republic) for their contributions. Some of their ideas are incorporated above.

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# Practice makes perfect: English in Primary school

## How to help the children to remember and retain what they have learnt?

*Leonora Fröhlich-Ward, Munich, Germany*

All primary school children in Germany are now being taught a foreign language from grade 3, the majority learning English. 7 and 8-year-olds are still able to hear and reproduce accurately many sounds of English, including some which do not exist in German, because their hearing and speech functions are still developing. They are not yet too self-conscious or inhibited and quickly learn to understand and speak English when taught in an age-adequate way. Through listening, and if the teacher accompanies her utterances with mime and rich bodily gesture, practically all children will be able to understand most things. Unfortunately they also forget quickly. That is why repetition and revision are essential aspects of early foreign language teaching and learning.

The workshop will demonstrate how easily teachers can sabotage their own efforts by failing to understand how young children learn foreign languages, thereby missing the opportunity of repetition and revision which will enable the children to use the language fluently. The ways children learn are more varied than the ways adults learn. Adults tend to learn cognitively and more through the written word than through aural and oral activities whereas children learn using all their senses: listening, understanding, singing, moving, feeling and speaking.

The principle of using the target language alone – in this case English – when teaching a full primary school class in grades 3 and 4 falls or stands on the way the teaching is planned. I will show how the controlled introduction of topic-based language blocks can lead to communicative language production. Here we are concentrating on the 8 – 10 year-olds although many of the comments apply to younger children as well.

Teachers are strongly encouraged to use the target language as far as possible, but the use of the first language (German) is not directly forbidden ‘if the children can’t understand what you are saying ...’ A teacher who finds this happening regularly – i.e. someone who uses a lot of German in the English lesson, or who even translates every utterance – should have a good look at the content and the material of the linguistic items she is trying to teach. But, even more

importantly, she should review the methodology of her teaching programme. Such teachers often comment: ‘But they don’t understand what I am saying, so it is much better to translate it and then we progress more quickly.’ Frequently the teacher doesn’t ask herself why they cannot understand. It is quite likely that neither the content of the lesson, nor the theme she has chosen is at fault. Most commonly it is because the steps taken to reach the goal of the lesson are not sufficiently clear for the children to follow.

### Lesson observed: Topic – The Weather.

#### Step 1

Teacher brings 6 cards depicting types of weather, holds them up and names them.

T: *It’s raining, it’s snowing, it’s windy, it’s cloudy, it’s foggy, it’s sunny.*

She gets the pupils to repeat each phrase in choir after her.

#### Step 2

Then she holds up each card separately and gets one or two pupils to name it – with her help, when necessary:

T: *How’s the weather here?*

Child: *It’s snowing.*

She continues the activity until each child has had the chance to say at least one type of weather alone and all have heard the phrases several times.

#### Step 3

T: (holds up one card – it’s raining-): *I like rainy weather. What do you like?*

Children: (look puzzled, don’t answer.)

T: (repeats) *I like rainy weather. What do you like?*

Children: (still looking puzzled, one answers) *It’s raining.*

(After the lesson it turned out that the teacher had not used I like ... in any communicative situation with the children before. And they were not yet familiar with the word weather. She just thought they would

understand it through her mimicry.)

T: (repeats the same phrase again, trying to show with her facial expression what she means) *I like rainy weather. What weather do you like? Do you like rain, or sun...? or..*

Child: *It's sunny.*

Teacher realises that they haven't understood what she is saying, so she tells them in German

T: (holding up the card) *Ich mag Regen. I like rainy weather. Was für ein Wetter magst du? What weather do you like? .rainy or sunny, or . foggy weather? I like....* (She looks at one child and encourages him with a prompt to start the answer with I like...)

Child: *I like ... it's sunny!*

T: *Good, I like sunny weather. Ich mag die Sonne. Now you say it: I like the sun.*

Child: *I like sunny weather.*

After this translation, which was commented by some of the children explaining to others that Sie will wissen, was für ein Wetter du magst the lesson continued with the pupils trying to use I like... but getting very confused between what they had just practised: it's snowing, it's windy, it's cloudy, it's foggy, and the answer which the teacher now wanted them to give – snowy, sunny, windy, foggy ... weather – and which they had not specifically practised.

The teacher realised something had gone wrong with her plan, but continued this passage until most children had said something with her help and then continued.

#### Step 4

She finished the lesson with a worksheet which the children had to complete after looking at and reading the text describing pictures showing the different types of weather. Here the phrases she had tried to use in Step 2 were used again.

T: *Look at the pictures. Look at Kooky. How is the weather here? - It's snowy. Now look at the next picture,...*

After the children had completed the sheet they were able to answer her question

T: *How is the weather in number one?*

Child; *Number one, it's snowy.*

On the second part of the Worksheet the children could read what she had wanted to ask them: *What weather do you like?* And the answer: *I like rainy weather.*

If the teacher had had time to reflect on this lesson she would have seen that she should have introduced the phrase *I like* in a more communicative activity, e.g. talking about types of food children like. It would also have been easier for the children if she had confined herself to introducing the phrases about the weather in one lesson, and repeating them in a card game or, better, using them frequently whenever the type of *weather* actually occurred. Later on it would have

been easy to practice the activity about they type of weather they liked.

Describing this lesson demonstrates a fairly common situation in the classroom. It seems to show that the use of German could easily have been avoided if the teacher had had a better understanding of how children learn the foreign language. She would then have planned her lesson differently and the children would have been able to concentrate and practice one communicative phrase about the weather without getting confused. In the above lesson, there was no way that the children could have expected the teacher to ask them about their preference for a type of weather. There will be no connection in their minds as to why they had to say *I like rainy weather*. And since they hadn't learnt the expression *I like ...* they couldn't possibly have had a clue about what she was asking them to say.

This very lengthy example underlines the problem of *helping the children to remember and retain what they have learnt*. Children need a lot of input of the foreign language before they will begin to speak and use it spontaneously. If the input is introduced and used in communicative situations, they will understand it, be interested and motivated to use it and will then remember it. If, as in the above lesson, there are various types of input, which change in the course of the lesson, there will be no connection in their minds as to why these utterances were introduced. Moreover, since the teacher moved on to another aspect, the phrases were not repeated very frequently, meaning that they were forgotten very quickly. It was not surprising that the children were not able to use them spontaneously, and even with a lot of help they didn't answer happily, because they did not understand why the question had been asked.

#### Why had the question been asked?

Is it really essential for a child to tell his friends what type of weather he prefers? Is there any communicative goal achieved by this exercise? – No, obviously, the teacher just wanted to teach these phrases describing the weather *it's raining*, or the phrase to express a preference *I like rainy weather*, perhaps only because this question was on the worksheet she had planned to use – and she put them together in one lesson without reflecting on the way pupils' minds work. Such a well-meant lesson must unfortunately be compared to the types of drilling exercises one used to write in secondary classes – exercises which had little connection to anything the pupils actually wanted to express in a given situation and which were not very helpful for foreign language competence!

But since constructive criticism was what the teacher needed, a suggestion was made about how the same teaching goal could have been approached in a more effective way.

#### Suggestion: Controlled use of topic-based blocks

What theme is to be introduced?

*The weather and how to describe it.*

How can it be introduced in context? *Whenever there is a definite type of weather.*

When do we need to talk about the weather?  
*When we go on our class outing.*

When the time for a class outing arrives, the weather theme can be used once more in the following situation which is natural and motivating. Two main **Teaching Blocks** - not lessons - outline one possible way of doing it.

### Block one

Introduce the types of weather with the cards, as in **Step 1** above, at any suitable time in the year, keeping to the phrases: *It's raining, it's snowing, it's windy, it's cloudy, it's foggy, it's sunny*, and practise these phrases, as in **Step 2** above.

Singing a song about the weather whenever appropriate would also support retention of the language items used. (e.g. *Look Outside*) Thus the theme *Weather* will have been introduced and will have become a 'building block' of language which can be used whenever the teacher wishes and the situation is appropriate. It is a standard block of language which can frequently be used in a communicative way.

### Block two

In this model it was suggested that the teacher would discuss the outing with the pupils in German and when they came to decide where they would go she could switch over to English and make use of several topic blocks, which had been taught before, such as:

*how to get to places in our town;*  
*means of transport;*  
*time;*  
*food and drink;*  
*weather.*

In such topic-based teaching the teacher would revise and repeat vocabulary and phrases already taught in these language blocks.

#### Places in our town:

revise and use: *Where can we go on our outing?* - *We can go to cinema, swimming pool, museum, zoo, park, station, sport stadium, church, school, shops, McDonalds, Burger King,...*

#### Means of transport:

revise and use: *How can we go (on our outing)?* - *We can go by ... car, bike, bus, taxi, train, plane, boat, rocket,*

#### Time and day:

revise and use: *When can / shall we go?* - *We can go at 8 o'clock, on Tuesday... days of the week, times of the day ...*

#### Food and drink:

revise and use: *What can we take to eat, drink?* - *I want a banana ... apple, banana, cheese, cake, orange*

*juice, tea, tomato, salad ...*

In connection with food and drink the useful expressions *I like ... I don't like ...* could be introduced and then used very appropriately.

Having prepared the linguistic ground for planning the outing, the teacher would move on to the important theme of weather and ask:

### What about the weather?

The decision about the outing will of course be affected by the weather. Now she can revise and use all the phrases about the weather because in this context it is relevant:

*Where shall we go if it's raining? If it's sunny? - to the cinema, zoo, swimming pool...*

By using the linguistic Blocks in such a way the teacher would give the children the opportunity of practising a lot of known language and generating new connections between the various topics which had up to now merely been 'taught' within a teaching Unit. It would enable the teacher and children to plan a real outing and communicate about it in English, thereby making their English teaching come alive.

Looking at these ways - one negative, one positive - of introducing and repeating language items in the young learners' classroom, several important aspects of teaching English in the Primary school came to light.

1. Learning will only be effective if the language is taught in context so that it 'makes sense' to children. Learning more or less only by drill: *What's this? - It's a ...* is an insult to children's intelligence.
2. If items of language have to be introduced in a more or less drill-like exercise (see above, **Step 1** and **Step 2**) - and these are perfectly acceptable steps for introducing new vocabulary - they will only be remembered by the pupils if they are then used in an intelligent and appropriate way in context.
3. The teacher must think up ways of combining language already taught with new items of communicative discourse so that the opportunities of practising the phrases learnt are greatly increased.
4. Teachers must set themselves achievable goals and not feel that they have to introduce new themes continually. It is more effective to 'recycle' the language known than to continually add new material. I think of the 'old dress' when we would cut up an old dress and make a new skirt out of it. The material was still recognisable and was still in good condition but it looked quite different and more interesting after being reshaped.

Combining several topic-based goals such as **places in our town; means of transport; time; food and drink; weather** in a normal school activity will support language learning and practice in the following ways:

- vocabulary and phrases initially taught in isolated sessions

or Units will be used again in an interesting context.

- the language taught will be repeated frequently if all the pupils are given the chance to make their own suggestions or comments.
- these language items will be remembered better since they have been used in connection with a real experience.
- when the outing takes place the children will be prepared and able to speak about it in English

This model of how to combine various themes in a context within everyday school life was intended to demonstrate ways in which topic-based language taught in isolated Units can be combined to make the language come alive. Topic-based language teaching provides the children with building blocks of language which can be used in real situations even in the classroom. In a situation such as the one described above, it would be most unlikely that any children would have the feeling that they didn't understand what the teacher was talking about. Naturally the teacher would have to be in control of the class in order to make sure that even the weakest children were given the chance of adding something to the project by naming e.g. a **place** which could be visited, or some **food, drink** they would like to take with them.

### **Putting these ideas into practice**

Primary school teachers who have to teach English in Grades 3 and 4 have not usually had the opportunity of practising the methodology of this teaching for many years but are relatively new to the subject. Their personal experience of foreign language learning will not have prepared them for this teaching at all. Experience shows that most primary school teachers set themselves high goals when starting to teach eight year-olds English and tend to 'overfeed' their pupils, frequently introducing new topics and the relevant vocabulary and phrases, thinking that a lot of change is the way to keep the children interested. They cover a lot of linguistic goals but do not recycle the language frequently enough.

Children are naturally interested at seeing new books, hearing new stories week after week. They often learn what the teacher teaches them in English very quickly, often repeat almost immediately what they have just been taught, but unless these items are revised and recycled over and over again they will soon be forgotten. Since the children will not remember most of what has been served up to them, they will not be able to use them in the spoken form. They will have a broad receptive understanding but not be able to speak.

### **Using only the target language**

Having examined good and better ways of introducing and practising language in the classroom the point about using only the target language throughout the English lesson can be put into a different context. As long as the teacher reflects beforehand on the language steps she is going to make with her class

she will normally find that they have no difficulty in following what she wants to them to understand. One useful maxim is to be prepared to change what you are doing and use a different approach when you realise that the children cannot follow without translation. It is a good idea to have a First Aid kit up your sleeve to deal with such situations. This could consist of alternative ways of introducing your topic, playing a different game to repeat what you have just taught, or changing the subject completely by singing a number of songs which the children enjoy singing and acting out. It is always useful to have a couple of good story books ready which you can read to the children and let them 'read' with you. If they are somehow connected to your topic, so much the better!

One teaching tool which hasn't yet been mentioned, because everybody knows how valuable it is, is the use of singing and chanting activities or choir speaking. Singing, getting the children to join in a song, is one very practical way of helping them to break down their barriers of apprehension with regard to speaking English. You should choose songs involving music and rhythm which you yourself enjoy singing. Usually your class will then also enjoy them. Repeating a song regularly and building up a repertoire of such songs can be a valuable help for young learners of English. Songs they learn in the primary school will stay with them all their lives.

### **Song texts, stories and translation**

Here a word about singing song texts which are too difficult for the children to understand easily: children do not have to understand every single word in a song or poem, or even in a story. Pick your singing and reading texts in such a way that the general meaning can be understood through the action and context of the language – it should be communicative, not abstract. Choose songs with a vocabulary which you have already introduced and then sing them with the help of pictures, movement and flash cards. Don't kill them by giving a word for word translation! Using good picture books for reading to the class follows the same principle. Do not underestimate children's ability to guess what things mean from the context.

### **Summary**

If you progress from logical step to logical step as described above you will train your pupils to be creative and to read between the lines so that they can combine what they know with what they can guess from the context as their competence grows. Try to recycle continually, in varied contexts and situations, linguistic items which you have already taught them. In this way you will give them confidence to use the language which has become familiar to them through frequent repetition and practice. Only through repetition will they become fluent and able to speak the language you are teaching them. The ancient proverb holds true, Practice makes perfect.

# Designing online training materials for German-British intercultural encounters

*Gill Woodman, Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, Germany*

**M**y aim here is to tell the 'story' of how a materials design concept emerged over the course of three years, 1996-1999. The story began in Munich in 1994 when the automobile company BMW had just acquired a British counterpart, Rover. BMW then launched a very intensive English language training offensive, one in which the potential pitfalls of intercultural communication were to play a particularly important role. In the ensuing two years, as one of BMW's English language trainers, I grappled with the language-culture interface, trying hard to work out exactly what was going on in the German-British interactions and how I could best equip my German learners of English to deal with knotty issues. Eventually, in 1996, I applied to the very forward-looking training department in Munich for a doctoral research grant which would allow me the space to dig deeper into the problem. What was to come out of it for them was the design concept for a computer-based training package.

In my language training up to this point I had taken a functional approach, focusing on the typical business communication skills of telephoning, meetings, presentations, socialising etc. Although I probably didn't even realise it myself at the time, the basic assumption guiding most of my pedagogical decisions was that I had to get the Germans to be 'more polite'. Largely this boiled down to teaching them lots of phrases which were not as direct as their first choice might have been. In time I became increasingly unhappy with this approach. Several of the learners felt very uncomfortable with the degree of indirectness I was advocating. They said they felt dishonest, even hypocritical. They questioned my right to tamper with their personality. And I often felt insecure in my role as the fountain of knowledge regarding the way 'The British' speak! My insecurity worsened when I started getting reports back from learners that their colleagues in England were sometimes extremely direct and that they had received some very strange looks in their attempts to talk about the weather! My first challenge in the design process then was to establish exactly what were the differences in the way the Germans and British communicate with a view to identifying the content structure of the training programme.

It became clear very soon that my attempts to bring the enlightenment of British politeness to the Germans had been terribly misplaced. Politeness disappears between your fingers when you try to grab it to take a proper look. No piece of language can be labelled 'inherently polite'. It is true that the natural ambiguity of language offers us a neat set of escape routes which we can exploit in order to find our way through life's communication minefield. But in order to interpret what our partners in conversation 'mean' by their particular choice of words we have to apply a set of assumptions about what constitutes 'marked' and 'unmarked' forms of language. These assumptions are learnt, largely subconsciously, in the course of our socialisation. It is like learning, through experience, how to plot the lines in music so as to distinguish one note from the other. The concept of politeness had transformed itself before my very eyes into the concept of interactional appropriacy.

The quest was then to see if there was any observable pattern of difference between what was considered interactionally appropriate in German and British communication. Here it was the work of Professor Juliane House (1996) in Hamburg which proved quite invaluable. Out of her vast body of research House crystallises five dimensions of difference which can lead to misunderstandings between the Germans and British. In a nutshell, German subjects tended to interact in ways that were more direct, more explicit and verbose, more self-referenced and more content oriented. German speakers were also found to be less prone to the use of verbal routines than English speakers (House 1996: 347).

Significantly, House points to an underlying principle which could be said to apply to all five dimensions, that is the apparent German preference for clarity in communication and the apparent British preference for tact. Unfortunately these two preferences are diametrically opposed (Lakoff 1973), increased clarity often bringing with it a decrease in tact and vice versa. In terms of interactional appropriacy this means that the stage is set for the British to interpret unmarked German language choices as 'too direct', with all the emotive connotation that this implies:

*Remember these are people and not just tasks.*

*Our impression is that work targets come before people involvement.*

*The English expect you to think how it feels for the other person.*

Quotes from British (Rover) associates. Woodman 2003:50 ff

Similarly, the Germans could interpret unmarked British forms as falsely friendly or overly positive and they found it hard to understand why the British took some of their comments so personally:

*You need about twice as long for communication here (in England) than you do in Munich*

*The English don't always stick to promises or agreements.*

*The English are nice people. They smile a lot. But they don't dare to speak up and make their points clear. So it's hard to know what they really want.*

*In the beginning I underestimated the hierarchy and the verbal friendliness and I had the illusion that everything was peaceful and harmonious.*

*Things are presented in too positive a way. Problems are not addressed.*

*You don't talk about things directly. British take things personally very easily.*

Quotes from German (BMW) associates. Woodman 2003:50 ff

For my materials design, the research of Juliane House had furnished me with a set of very useful dimensions of difference illustrated by a wide range of telling examples. In addition to that, House herself pointed in the direction of research from the discipline of Intercultural Communication for even more insights. She hypothesized that one of the cultural value dimensions put forward by Geert Hofstede (1982) could explain the respective preferences for clarity and tact. This was the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance.

Hofstede's investigations at IBM had come up with various value dimensions which differed across cultures. And as shared values provide decision-making frameworks against which collective decisions, including language choice decisions, can be made, this seemed like a very promising avenue to follow. His findings suggested that German society has a greater need to protect itself from uncertain or unknown situations (Hofstede 1991:118) than British society. This protection may be in the form of technology, rules or rituals according to Hofstede (1982: 139). For House, it may also be in the form of a greater preference for clarity in one's linguistic choices. In a society where uncertainty avoidance has a higher priority (in this case Germany) it would make sense if the language should tend towards structures and formulations which favour clarity. In such a context relatively direct criticism can be viewed as helpful, not as rude or

aggressive. By establishing clearly what the problem is, a speaker is behaving much more cooperatively than if s/he were to downtone and hedge to a great extent because s/he is making a constructive contribution to the reduction of open-endedness. This is a crucially important point because what we are facing is the need to reinterpret what linguistically cooperative behaviour and interactional appropriacy can involve.

These findings made it much easier for me to understand my students' reluctance to adopt more indirect forms and indeed to understand my own feelings of having been linguistically punched in the stomach in my early days in Germany. The next big question was how to incorporate these findings into a coherent training package.

At this stage it was still not quite clear in my mind what the basic aim of the training programme should be. Clearly, teaching the Germans polite phrases was out. But what should take its place? The answer was to lie in the work of intercultural educationalist Michael Byram; it was the aim of 'decentring'. By this, Byram (1997) meant getting outside of oneself and taking up the other person's perspective on your culture. So here, for example, it would mean getting the BMW learners to the stage where they can understand how some British colleagues must feel when interacting with their German counterparts. In Byram's model this can be best achieved through a process of constant comparison. The target language and culture become a vessel by which the learners, through reflection on reasons for difference, can glean insights into the nature of their own cultural template. The assumption here is that by anticipating possible dysfunctions in communication the learner should be in a position to resolve many of them. It was around this point, about half way through my given time, that it occurred to me that it would make sense if the British Rover colleagues could also 'decentre'. Once this door had opened in my mind, I was ashamed to see how long it had been closed. So what approach should I take in my materials design which would be consistent both with the nature of intercultural communication and with the computer as a medium of instruction?

It was extremely important for me to find a high degree of 'fit' between the approach and the content in my material design. Nowadays there is considerable talk of the need for congruence in teachers if they are to be convincing to their learners. Perhaps it was because these materials were to be for self-study that I felt that the need for them to have the same quality. In any case, it seemed to make little sense to coach learners in such a complex topic as intercultural communication using an approach which was not equally differentiated and circumspect. Fortunately, this was the period when the constructivist approach was finding its feet in the world of English as a Foreign Language (Williams and Burden 1997) and it provided the perfect platform

on which to develop a set of cohesive and coherent principles for material design. Even better was the fact that the rise of the constructivist approach was very much connected to the growing significance of computer-assisted learning (CALL).

Constructivism purports that each individual constructs their own reality in the process of their interactions with their environment. Of course there are large areas of overlap by virtue of the sharedness of our everyday lives. One of those areas of overlap may be the collective patterns known as culture. But the most important feature of constructivism for my purposes was its conception of learning. Motivated by the urge to survive, individual organisms develop and adapt by trying to maintain a state of internal equilibrium. This means that they constantly compare salient new stimuli in their environment with their current system and, as a result of this interaction, restructure themselves in such a way that the whole system makes sense. They are in a state of permanent flux. The fact that this philosophy blossomed in EFL just as CALL was entering its boom phase had a lot to do with the new possibilities offered by the internet. Before that CALL had been associated first with behaviourist drills and then with a cognitive mapping of input onto output which would have left little room for the fuzziness of intercultural communication. So my discovery of constructivism was a very exciting step forward and it brought with it a package of tenets which were to prove central to the development of the training package.

In the constructivist approach the construction of knowledge needs to have certain characteristics if it is to promote intrinsic motivation and long-lasting learning (Siebert 1999). New stimuli will only be allowed into the system for processing if they:

- are **compatible**: not only with previous knowledge and experience but also with the cognitive and emotional structures on which the learner will draw (e.g. preferred learning styles which may, of course, be culturally induced)
- are **viable**: that is, acceptable in the learner's current life situation and helpful in that situation
- are **situated**: that is, clearly embedded in contexts which are significant to the learner
- are **relevant**: that means the stimuli need to involve the learner in trying to answer questions which they themselves perceive as being meaningful
- **arouse curiosity**: that means the stimuli should not merely confirm and reinforce previous knowledge but should perturb, surprise and stimulate.
- are **fun!**

At this stage I was highly aroused, perturbed and

stimulated myself. The resultant construction of reality for me was the following list of design principles which I felt my materials needed to incorporate in order to be successful.

## Involvement and matching

Somehow the materials needed to surprise the learners at an emotional level which was clearly very relevant to their lives. They needed to feel involved and somehow brought out of equilibrium in some way in order for them to integrate new knowledge at the deepest possible level. At the same time, however, the materials would have to be sufficiently compatible with the users' current set of beliefs for them to be willing to engage with the content at a deeper level in the first place. Finding a way to 'shock' without 'frightening off' was an extremely fine line to walk, especially in view of the variety of learners included in the target group. Normally such fine-tuning would lie in the hands of the mediator, the teacher. But these were self-study materials and so these crucial aspects somehow needed to be built in to the fabric of the design concept.

## Access to 'self' through other

It would seem that such an emotional and cognitive 'shock' is only possible where there is a strong focus on 'self'. This introspection should be induced as the result of confrontation with otherness (decentring) as it seems that is largely in contrast with other cultures that our own cultural conditioning can be raised to a level of consciousness where it can be perceived. A way had to be found to encourage users to engage in honest and structured reflection on personal values and beliefs. While the privacy of a computer may have some advantages here, it was hard to imagine how the open-endedness involved could be dealt with by such a closed system, especially if the programme was to function as a stand-alone unit with no external tutoring envisaged. Nevertheless, constructivist principles told me that this is what constitutes 'good practice'.

## A query-driven approach

It seemed essential to find a query-driven way to explore the boundaries between the German and British cultures from the point of view of communication. Emphasis needed to be firmly on exploration and discovery rather than on explanation and disclosure. Here the computer does seem to lend itself rather well as a medium because of its ability to provide more research/discovery-oriented tasks. A way needed to be found to exploit that advantage in the programme, especially the capacity for the computer to collate research results and present them graphically in a highly accessible form. The program needed to force

the users to compare their own interpretations with those of others in some way. Authenticity of task would then be assured and it was hoped that the learners would be able to 'sniff' the relevance involved here, aiding motivation which is particularly important in a self-access situation like this. If arousal was to be maintained, then clearly the communication involved also needs to be situated, that is, embedded in a context which was immediately perceived as relevant by the users. In this case, it needed to involve the type of communicative situations which the BMW/Rover employees really encountered in their daily working lives.

## Multiple perspectives

Another major concept emerging from constructivist principles was that of multiple perspectives. First of all, one of the main priorities of the program needed to be to make clear to the learner that our interpersonal lives appear to be made up of little else than an infinite variety of different perspectives. The problem was how to make the user feel comfortable and not intimidated by this degree of complexity. The aim was to induce in the user cognitive flexibility. This is a degree of cognitive and emotional sophistication acquired by exposure to multiple perspectives in a range of different situations. It consists of a network of possible strategies which can be activated in subtly different combinations as required. This results from different combinations of insights gleaned independently but fused and accessed randomly to meet the needs of a complex and dynamic intercultural context. The aim of the program needed to be to increase the number of potential combinations as well as to coach the user into a more mindful state so that they were aware of the various combinations and willing to try them out.

## Open-endedness

We have seen that a constructivist path requires choice and we also need a degree of open-endedness in the content as we are clearly not in the business here of delivering pre-packaged remedies. In tool mode, open-endedness on the computer is clearly possible, indeed inevitable; but in tutorial mode, which a self-access module seems to have to adopt to a certain extent, fuzziness is harder to incorporate. Computers, growing out of the behaviourist era, paid homage to analogy and habit formation in their formative years in the form of drills.

## Interaction/mediation

A seemingly insurmountable problem (for a computer program) in the quest for full intercultural competence was the need for interaction with the target culture. The possibilities of chat groups and e-mail projects were obviously considerable; they would need to be

supplementary to my stand-alone module however as, in the end, the technical requirement was that this was to be a closed system, useable on a self-access basis. Clearly the module which we were in the process of designing would not be able to provide practice in the skill of interaction but it should be able to provide vital insights with which to significantly improve the quality of the intercultural interactions. Constructivism raises considerably the value placed on awareness and insight. It is not only interaction with the target culture which is recommended by the constructivist view, but also interaction with a teacher or mediator. So here we had yet another argument in favour of making sure that the computer program was compatible with and supplemented by face-to-face training, be it language training, intercultural communication training or both.

The computer program was given the name 'in coMMon' (intercultural communication online with the capitalisation of the Ms denoting a common central core). Its key task type which developed out of the deliberations outlined above was given the name 'give and take' and is described below.

## 'Give and Take'

The choice of name was derived from the fact that this task-type was originally conceived for use in a web-based environment where both BMW and Rover employees had access to the companies' common intranet. The basic principle involves users 'giving' in the sense that they are requested to make transparent their reactions to certain communicative events provided by the program. On condition that they have bared their souls to this extent, they are then able to benefit by comparing their own reactions with those of other colleagues from Germany and Britain. In the course of comparing self with other, it is expected that perturbation will take place and in this way learners will develop and learn. In other words, they will 'take'. How exactly does a 'Give and Take' task look in practice?

### Step 1

As the basic aim of a 'Give and Take' task is to access the mismatch of attributions which can occur due to differences in intercultural values, all these tasks involve the user making some kind of decision and comparing their decision with those of others. Let us imagine 'User X', a BMW employee, going through a specific task.

As User X clicks on a 'Give and Take' task, they are immediately confronted with some decisions they have to make. The example given here is from a unit on giving feedback. It begins with two video clips from filmed structured role-plays made at Rover. In the first

clip, an English manager is reprimanding a German team member for not having stuck to her brief and having followed an overly 'financial approach' in her work.

After watching the clips, User X is then given the following decisions to make for each manager:

*How serious does the boss think the problem is?*

*How much does the boss like the associate?*

*How much does the associate like the boss?*

*How personal is the attack?*

*How honest is the boss?*

*How motivating is the feedback?*

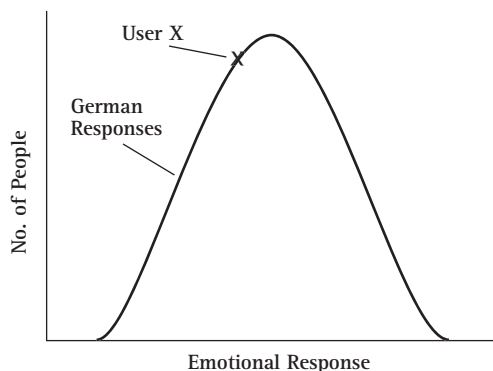
*How useful is the feedback?*

The decision is in the form of a gradation on a seven-point Likert scale, as below:

Not at all > > > > > > > > > > Very (much)  
 1        2        3        4        5        6        7

### Step 2

The responses which are entered by User X are saved by the computer program and become part of a database. This database has recorded the responses of all previous users and is able to collate the new data from User X and include it in a graphical representation for them. Thus, with one click on the 'compare' button, User X can compare their reactions with the reactions of others from their own cultural group. That is, in this case, User X can see to what extent other employees of BMW reacted to the video interaction as they did (see below)

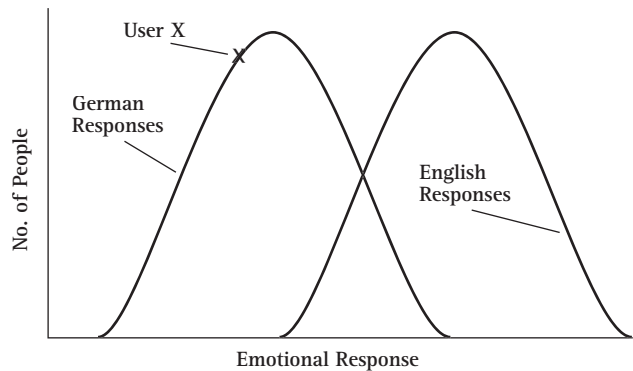


Normal distribution curve for German responses showing position of User X within own culture.

### Step 3

Having established the range of responses within their own cultural group and their own position in it, User

X can gain access to the range of responses from the English-speaking group of users and now compare their own reaction with the reactions of the Rover associates. They can also see how the German range of responses compared with the British range of responses.



Normal distribution curves for German and English responses showing position of User X within own culture and the position relative to the English responses.

The basic principle of 'Give and Take', then, is that users first have to commit themselves to an emotional reaction or interpretation in response to a piece of interaction shown on the computer screen and only after that are they able to benefit from the insights that comparison with responses produced by others can bring. Clearly the computer is very well-suited to collating responses given in numerical format and while this lack of open-endedness seems inappropriate to our constructivist cause, the Likert technique which uses a five- or seven-point scale to record reactions to any given stimulus, is regularly used to address questions of attitude and emotion.

From the example above, one desired outcome would be that User X would be surprised at the range of responses within their own (German) culture and maybe even more surprised at differences between the German and British responses. Let us imagine that the overlapping normal curves of distribution above apply to the question as to how serious the German manager considers his employee's digressions to be. The Likert scale on the horizontal axis would represent 1 = not serious, 7 = extremely serious. What the overlapping curves then illustrate is that while User X displayed relatively 'normal' reactions within the German context, his response represents an extreme reaction on the English distribution curve. Apart from seeing very clearly how his/her personal reaction rated on an English 'normality scale', User X can also note that the vast mass of English respondents felt that the problem was more serious than the Germans did on the basis of watching exactly the same interaction. The surprise involved in suddenly becoming aware of such a wide range of different responses should activate a search

for answers in the learner. These answers are provided in the form of relevant quotes from colleagues and in the form of so-called WHY sections: short explanations of the phenomenon in question written by me. In other words, the function of the 'Give and Take' task is to provide users with systematic emotional shocks in order to initiate a search for answers. This search should involve the development of hypotheses on the part of the learner which are then validated (or not) by the back-up information from significant others. Effectively, the 'Give and Take' task is knocking the user out of equilibrium and, in the process, is moving the him/her to a level of 'fine-grained' perception or mindfulness which should be more conducive to development. It aims to coach the user into having a more decentred approach to otherness.

In theory, if users were required to give information about their sex, age, department or amount of contact with the other culture when they logged in to the program, then profiles could easily be compiled showing how various different 'sub-cultures' compared in their reactions to the stimuli provided. Thus, the program would not be restricted to comparisons of national culture. In essence, the 'Give and Take' tasks form a research framework which both provides the stimulus and collates and displays the results of the data. The users are part of a 'living' research project in which they are both respondents and researchers: givers and takers. The appeal of this task-type was enormous in terms of the theoretical principles which had emerged.

One of the most important aspects from my point of view was that I, the underware creator, was freed of the shackles of the paradox of the observer. In the 'Give and Take' tasks I was not imposing my projections of what the English or Germans may think in any given situation. Instead, by giving their own 'authentic' reactions, the users would contribute to a database from which they will also potentially receive a 'shock'. In theory at least, this shock should disturb their equilibrium and in their automatic attempt to restore balance they would look for explanations as to why the new information did not fit with previous beliefs. In their search for explanations an openness should develop towards any sources of insight on this topic. This is the point where, with the click of a mouse, users can draw on the intercultural experience of their colleagues (i.e. on relevant quotations from the BMW interview research) or on the insights from theoretical research, made relevant and digestible by me.

The fact that it was a computer which was receiving the users' individual responses was also an advantage. It is very rare that one has the privacy to be honest with oneself and at the same time have access to the feelings of a large number of colleagues in such a transparent and comparable format. In that sense, the computer's strengths of providing privacy and collating information were being used to the full.

An early concern from reading on the pragmatic perspective was that learners' personalities were being addressed in the training of intercultural competence; the non-judgmental nature of a computer as a training partner can be an asset here. A further advantage of the computer is the speed with which it can process input data and show the user how their responses compare with others. In terms of perturbation, it is particularly important that the learner can see how others feel almost immediately after they have made the decision for themselves.

In the way that the task collects responses from a wide variety of different people and makes them available for comparison, it meets the constructivist demand for multiple perspectives. Very often a problem of intercultural communication training is that it presents the viewpoint of one, usually dominant, part of each culture. In the 'Give and Take' task, hopefully, a wide range of users would contribute to the databases and furthermore, a differentiated log-in system would even allow any patterns inherent to 'group perspectives' to be made transparent.

It would be nice to think that by describing some of the steps on my way to designing this material I have 'perturbed' (in a constructive way) some of my colleagues in the field of language and intercultural communication training. This would be particularly gratifying in view of the fact that the material described here has still not been developed into a final product following the sale of the Rover by BMW in March 2000.

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# The Matter of Selecting and Evaluating Materials

Carlos Rico, Troncoso

## Theoretical Issues

Unfortunately there are only a few specific books in the field of English language teaching which focus on materials selection and evaluation in detail. Even though there are some established principles which help to guide teachers in the selection and evaluation of materials, it is important to highlight that there is never an ideal textbook for teaching English, therefore the teacher should adapt the material to suit the particular learning situations.

*We should not be looking for the perfect course book which meets all our requirements, but rather for the best possible fit between what the course book offers and what we as teachers and students need.*

(Cunningsworth 1984:8)

Cunningsworth claims that the learning/teaching situations are quite different from one to another, since they are affected by social, cultural and psychological aspects such as age range, social status, cultural values, nationality, native language, geographical setting, learning styles, interests and the objectives of the possible learners. This is why no book can be designed to satisfy the needs of specific groups. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to select the course book that better fits the target population, and adapt the material in order to make it serve the purposes of the class.

Here we present some general principles which should be taken into account when selecting and evaluating materials.

- Relate the teaching materials to your aims and objectives.

Which means that the teacher should establish the aims of the teaching programme and then seek the most appropriate materials for these objectives. Before he starts looking for course books, the teacher should have a very clear idea of what he wants to achieve having in mind the particular target group. He, and not the course book should determine the objectives of the course.

- Be aware of what language is for and select teaching materials which will help equip your

students to use language effectively for their own purposes.

To do so, it is necessary to be conscious of the way the language is selected, graded, presented and practiced meets the purposes of the learner to use the language.

- Keep your students' learning needs in mind.

It is, take into consideration intellectual as well as emotional students' needs.

- Consider the relationship between language, the learning process and the learner.

*All three are vital aspects of language teaching and it is essential that teaching materials should keep all three constantly in view and never become so preoccupied with one that the others are lost sight of.*

(Cunningsworth 1984:6)

According to Cunningsworth, it is necessary to keep a healthy balance between the desired linguistic performance of the learner, a flexible teaching/learning method and the individual's desires and feelings. The course book should clearly address these three aspects presenting interesting, involving and useful activities, so the learner can assimilate new language items.

As was said before, the perfect textbook does not exist, but the best book and material available for you and for your students certainly does. In this respect, you have to reflect upon how material can be most profitably used in your classroom and how it can be adapted. Here, we provide you three basic ideas for selecting materials:

1. The materials should suit the needs, interests, and abilities of your students
2. The material should suit you: the best book in the world won't work in your classroom if you have good reasons for disliking it.
3. The materials must meet the needs of official public teaching syllabuses or examinations.

According to Grant (1990), when choosing and

evaluating any material/textbook, you usually have to ask three questions:

1. Does it fit?
2. If it fits, how well does it fit, and how does it compare with others that also fit?
3. Does it still fit? This question is relevant after you have had it for a time

The three questions mentioned above imply three stages of choosing and evaluating materials and textbooks:

- Initial evaluation
- Detailed evaluation
- In-use evaluation

The main objective of the *initial evaluation* is to filter out obviously unsuitable materials. Grant (1990) claims that 'we should try to avoid making judgements that are too hasty, particularly if the textbook appears to be rather unusual in its format. We should resist any perhaps natural tendencies to favour what seems familiar.'

One way of finding out whether the textbook or the material you used is good enough is to apply the CATALYST test. The eight letters in the word CATALYST represent the eight criteria by which we can decide whether a textbook/material is suitable for our classroom.

### The CATALYST Test

- C Communicative?
- A Aims?
- T Teachability?
- A Available Add-ons?
- L Level?
- Y Your impression?
- S Student interest?
- T Tried and tested?

The words in the mnemonic represent the key questions we should ask ourselves.

- **COMMUNICATIVE?** Is the textbook communicative? Will the students be able to use the language to communicate as a result of using the book?
- **AIMS?** Does it fit in with our aims and objectives? These may be laid down by authorities, or devised by ourselves.
- **TEACHABLE?** Does the course seem to be teachable? Does it seem reasonably easy to use, well organised, and easy to find your way around?
- **AVAILABLE ADD-ONS?** Are there any useful 'adds-

on'- additional materials such as teacher's books, tapes, workbooks, etc? If so, are they available?

- **LEVEL?** Does the level seem about right?
- **YOUR IMPRESSION?** What is your overall impression of the course?
- **STUDENT INTEREST?** Are your students likely to find the book interesting?
- **TRIED AND TESTED?** Has the course been tried and tested in real classrooms? Where? By whom? What were the results? How do you know?

*NOTE:* CATALYST's questions are the very minimum one should ask when looking at the material for the first time.

Once we have applied the CATALYST test, and have decided what the material/textbook will do, we then have to decide how well it will do, and whether it is more or less, suitable than other materials or textbooks are available. Many teachers do not pilot new materials, they just rely on their own judgement. At this moment a questionnaire can be of great assistance. This stage is named as *detailed evaluation*. Here you can find a three-part questionnaire designed to help you to decide what is the material/textbook you have to choose:

- Does the material or the course book suit your students?
- Does it suit the teacher?
- Does it suit the syllabus?

These are the questionnaires. (Source: GRANT, Neville. (1990). *Making the Most of your Textbook*. Longman Keys to Language Teaching. Longman.

Once you have adopted the material you need, it is necessary to re-evaluate it constantly. This stage is named as *in use-evaluation*. The question you have to consider at this moment is whether it works in the classroom.

Using this evaluation process one can be sure that the teacher is the master, and not the slave of the textbook.

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### CHOOSING A TEXTBOOK Questionnaire (part 1)

#### Does the book/material suit your students?

1. Is it attractive? Given the average age of your students, would they enjoy using it ?  
 Yes     Partly     No
2. Is it culturally acceptable?  
 Yes     Partly     No
3. Does it reflect what you know about your students' needs and interests?  
 Yes     Partly     No
4. Is it about the right level of difficulty?  
 Yes     Partly     No
5. Is it about the right length?  
 Yes     Partly     No
6. Are the course's physical characteristics appropriate?  
 Yes     Partly     No
7. Are there enough authentic materials, so that the students can see that the book is relevant to the real life?  
 Yes     Partly     No
8. Does it achieve an acceptable balance between knowledge about the language, and practice in using the language?  
 Yes     Partly     No
9. Does it achieve an acceptable balance between the relevant language skills, and integrate them so that work in one skill area helps the others?  
 Yes     Partly     No
10. Does the book contain enough communicative activities to enable the students to use the language independently?  
 Yes     Partly     No

#### Score

2 points for every YES answer.  
1 point for every PARTLY answer.  
0 for every NO answer

### CHOOSING A TEXTBOOK: Questionnaire (part 2)

#### Does the book/material suit the teacher?

1. Is your overall impression for the contents and layout of the course favourable?  
 Yes     Partly     No
2. Is there a good, clear teacher's guide with answers and help on methods and additional activities?  
 Yes     Partly     No
3. Can one use the book in the classroom without constantly having to turn to the teacher's guide?  
 Yes     Partly     No
4. Are the recommended methods and approaches suitable for you, your students and your classroom?  
 Yes     Partly     No
5. Are the approaches easily adaptable if necessary?  
 Yes     Partly     No
6. Does using the course require little or no time-consuming preparation?  
 Yes     Partly     No
7. Are useful ancillary materials such as tapes, workbooks, and visuals provided?  
 Yes     Partly     No
8. Is there sufficient provision made for tests and revision?  
 Yes     Partly     No
9. Does the book use a 'spiral' approach, so that the items are regularly revised and used again in different contexts?  
 Yes     Partly     No
10. Is the course appropriate for, and liked by, colleagues?  
 Yes     Partly     No

#### Score

2 points for every YES answer.  
1 point for every PARTLY answer.  
0 for every NO answer

**CHOOSING A TEXTBOOK:  
Questionnaire (part 3)**

**Does the book /material suit the syllabus  
and examination?**

1. Has the book/material been recommended or approved by the authorities?  
 Yes     Partly     No
2. Does the book/material follow the official syllabus in a creative manner?  
 Yes     Partly     No
3. Is the course well-graded, so that it gives well-structured and systematic coverage of the language?  
 Yes     Partly     No
4. If it does more than the syllabus requires, is the result an improvement?  
 Yes     Partly     No
5. Are the activities, contents and methods used in the course well-planned and executed?  
 Yes     Partly     No
6. Has it been prepared specifically for the target examination?  
 Yes     Partly     No
7. Do the course's methods help the students prepare for the exam?  
 Yes     Partly     No
8. Is there a good balance between what the examination requires, and what the students need?  
 Yes     Partly     No
9. Is there enough examination practice?  
 Yes     Partly     No
10. Does the course contain useful hints on examination technique?  
 Yes     Partly     No

**Score**

2 points for every YES answer.  
1 point for every PARTLY answer.  
0 for every NO answer

# Creatively proGRAMMARed

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This article outlines how Creative Grammar Technology, a new model developed for presenting grammar, enables students to discover language patterns and how they are used for communicative purposes. Sample materials appear in the appendix and more are available from the Thinking Approach Project website: [www.thinking-approach.org](http://www.thinking-approach.org)

The conversations below show how creative grammar exercises are normally treated in a Thinking Approach classroom. Students are 16-18 years old and their level is around intermediate.

## 1. Classroom conversations

### Episode 1

(students are working on the sorting out exercise – a full text of the exercise is presented in the appendix)

Key: T - Teacher, S1 - Student 1, S2 - Student 2, S3 - Student 3.

T Ok, any variants for the division?

S1 Some sentences are questions...

T Right, so the parameter used for division is...

S2: Type of sentence. But the task is to divide according to the form of the verb.

T Right.

S3 The time is different.

T What do you mean by 'time'? Are they about different time?

S3 No, I mean a time form.

T You probably mean a tense form. Any idea of the difference? Could someone explain the difference between time and tense?

(pause)

T Ok, let's put this question down as the one we have to clarify. In order to make it easier, I suggest that for the next class you think about possible examples of time and possible examples of tense. Or, in other words, possible values of the parameter 'time' and possible values of the parameter 'tense'. Is that clear?

S4 Yeah.

T Now, back to the exercise. Natasha's variant was that we have two different tense forms here. Could each of you try to put down the structure of each

in a general form?

(students are trying to extract the structure, the teachers is going round the class)

T (to S5): You have 14 and 16 in one group, why?

S5 Because they both have 'have'.

T True, but then what's the parameter for the division?

S5 Tense form as you said.

T No, I didn't say that. Natasha said that tense form COULD be a parameter. But then would 14 and 16 belong to the same group? Do they have the same tense form? How could we find it out? Or would they belong to the same group because of another reason? Which then?

### Episode 2

(students are working on the concept question exercise – a full text of the exercise is presented in the appendix)

T Ok, let's take sentence 4. If I say, 'I've already had coffee this morning', what time could be now?

S1 Morning.

T Can it be any other time?

S2 Yes, any time.

T What do you mean by 'any time'?

S2 Any time today. If we speak about today, we can use Present Perfect.

S3 & S4 Yeah, right.

T So, it's a quarter to 4 now. Can I say, 'I've already had coffee this morning'?

S4 Why not?

T Ok, one more question. Can I say, 'I already had coffee this morning'?

(pause)

T If both are correct, then what's the difference? You could think of some more sentences. For instance, if we talk about that maths test you mentioned, would you say 'we had a terrible test in maths in the morning' or 'we've had a terrible test in maths in the morning'? Or, if you speak about your German exam last month, would you say 'we've taken a DSD exam' or 'we took a DSD exam'?

S1 But isn't it the same as with that example with Shakespeare?

T What exactly is the same?

S1 I mean that we agreed that Time of Action is

the parameter we are discussing. Values can be different. Maybe finished and unfinished?

T Fine, we could accept it as a hypothesis. Do you understand Dima's idea? Let's try to check it. We have a number of sentences in this exercise and 16 sentences in the sorting out exercise. Can we explain the difference in tense form by these two different values of Time of Action?

### Episode 3

(students are working on the feature training exercise – a full text of the exercise is presented in the appendix)

T Well, any example of a sentence when I see Time of Action as Past and Unfinished and Vision of Action is Finished.

S1 I've been to many European countries.

S2 My granny has never tried Chinese food.

S3 Mary's sister married last month.

T Ok, we have three examples. Would you agree with all of them?

(pause)

T How many different tense forms do we have in these examples?

S4 Two. Present Perfect and Past Simple.

T Which means that if we accept all the examples, both Simple Past and Present Perfect express the meaning encoded in the task.

S1 The last sentence is wrong.

S5 I think the second is wrong.

T Let's check. I suggest that we take each sentence and see how it represents Time of Action. Let's start with the first one...

## 2. What's on offer?

### Product description

Lesson episodes above illustrate how teaching normally occurs when working upon the Creative Grammar Technology worked out within the Thinking Approach to language teaching. This technology comprises five types of trainings which underlie students' work on

any grammar theme. These trainings are presented in figure 1 below.

Exercises offered under each type of trainings may differ. What is important, however, is that each training performs one or several functions in the classroom. For example, well-known sorting out exercises may be used (a) to present a form, (b) to present a meaning, and (c) to shift stereotypes about a meaning (Sokol 2003). Concept questions, on the other hand, may draw students' attention to semantic features of the meaning and help them formulate their preliminary grammar model. Enhanced grammar practice exercises can then be offered to help students see if their models work and where they need to be improved.

Each training may look familiar to many teachers, however, it is not the same. All types of work have a carefully selected thinking focus. Moreover, they work as a system, each part of which contributes to the ultimate aim of the technology, i.e. to develop students' inventive thinking skills by teaching them to make productive models of the English grammar.

### Theoretical framework

Inventive thinking is necessary when dealing with problems to which a solution doesn't exist or it is simply unknown to the problem-solver. In the case of the English grammar, apparently, we have an example of subjective novelty. A student faces a problem of distinguishing between Past Simple and Present Perfect and doesn't know how to do it. A solution to the problem appears to be a kind of 'if... then...' algorithm which will provide students with a possibility to make the most appropriate choice in each specific situation. A crucial point is whether this algorithm is given to students or constructed by them. In the former case, irrespective of the type of exercises and forms of work in the classroom, we will speak of the traditional approach to grammar teaching as opposed to the creative approach advocated in this paper. Only the latter may enhance students' inventive thinking skills. Let us emphasize – the creative approach to grammar teaching is impossible until students are involved in construction of solutions to grammar problems. In

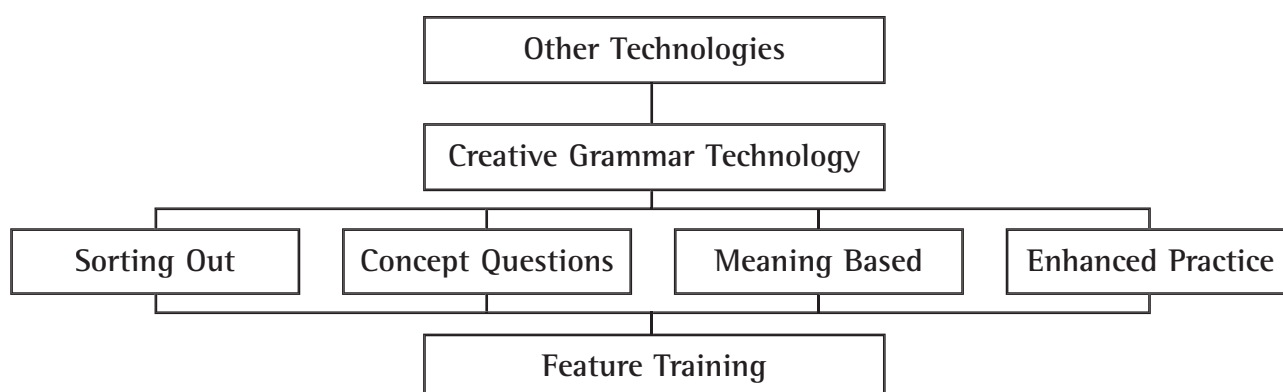


Figure 1. Types of Trainings in Creative Grammar Technology

other words, students are asked to do what they have not been taught yet.

But isn't English grammar just a set of things to be memorized? Do we really have to teach students to solve problems? First of all, problem-solving skills students master when working with grammar like this will be helpful in other contexts as well, both linguistic and non-linguistic ones. Secondly, according to M. Lewis (Lewis 1986) we may speak of grammar-as-fact and grammar-as-choice. The former really includes things to be memorized or facts of language: forms of irregular verbs, paradigm of the verb 'to be' in Present Simple, morphemes used to form the plural of nouns. In contrast, the latter deals with situations when several variants are possible. The speaker is supposed to choose the most appropriate form to express the meaning he/she intends to express. For instance, a period of living in place N for 10 years could be described by all of the following sentences: I lived there for 10 years; I've lived there for 10 years; I was living there for 10 years and many others. And choice is always connected with problem-solving.

Problem-solving has recently become a fashionable label. However, it is not enough to just pose a problem to students in order to develop their problem-solving skills. It is essential to give students tools (or models) which can be used to resolve the problem. Otherwise, we risk teaching guessing rather than problem-solving.

One of the key tools students master when working upon the Creative Grammar Technology is the Element-Name of Feature-Value of Feature (ENV) model. (Khomenko in preparation; Nesterenko in preparation). In other words, students learn to describe the differences between grammar forms by means of defining values of certain parameters (names of features) which express the meaning of this form. (See episodes 2 and 3 of the classroom conversations). As a result, students arrive at the summary of the difference. A possible example of such a summary is presented below.

### Present Perfect and Past Simple – Summary

Feature (Parameter): *Time of Action*

Values of Feature: *Past (both)*  
*Finished*  
*Unfinished*  
*Known*  
*Unknown*  
*Important*  
*Unimportant*

Feature (Parameter): *Vision of Action*

Values of Feature: *Finished (both)*  
*Immediate (emphasis is on the present)*  
*Remote (emphasis is on the past)*

### Teaching principles

A closer analysis of the above conversations will reveal several principles behind a grammar class.

- Explicit grammar teaching (explaining grammar) is avoided as much as possible
- Learners are always presented with a situation where the solution is not known to them, i.e. they are offered exercises dealing with themes they have NOT studied before or have forgotten (they don't need to make models if they already have some)
- Learners compose their own models of grammar by applying tools offered by the teacher
- The teacher does not evaluate the quality of the proposed models by dividing them into 'right' and 'wrong', his/her main role is to provide samples of language (either in the form of exercises or just by giving examples on the spot) which can help students test their hypotheses (models) about grammar
- Students reconsider their models by collecting and analysing samples of languages where the model doesn't work
- As learning is a non-linear process, both students and teachers are ready to deal with any grammar phenomenon in any lesson

### 3. Sceptic's reaction

*Sceptic:* This approach just offers new names for old things. We all know about discovery learning.

*TA Teacher:* It is true that the term 'discovery learning' has been with us for quite a while already. The given approach doesn't claim novelty in terms of WHAT is done in a grammar lesson. However, it does provide a specific answer HOW 'discovery learning' can be implemented in the classroom. Learners are offered specific tools for solving grammar problems.

*Sceptic:* It still appears quite vague what you offer. For instance, Sorting Out and Concept Questions have been known for a long time and they are present in many modern coursebooks.

*TA Teacher:* I have to mention several things here. First, it is not enough to offer a Concept Question exercise to students, it is more important to know its purpose in the classroom. Many teachers use these exercises to help them explain grammar. While agreeing that this is a possible function of a Concept Question exercise, this work has nothing to do with Creative Grammar Technology as students are not involved in composing their models of grammar, or, in other words, inventing grammar.

A second thing is that we offer a system rather than a collection of separate exercises. There is an ultimate difference between parts of a car and a car, as the latter can perform a new function – to move people and things

on the road. The 'new' function of the Creative Grammar Technology is to teach learners to invent grammar.

*Sceptic:* There is nothing to invent in grammar. We have the grammar of English. It must be learnt.

*TA Teacher:* A famous metaphor says 'the map is not the territory'. We have many descriptions of grammar, or grammars of English. Due to this or that reason, we may choose one of them and teach to students, claiming it to be THE grammar of English. However, the approach we advocate is different – students are given tools and encouraged to build their own models of grammar and put them to test against a massive corpus of language samples. It's exactly in the process of composing models and testing them when learning occurs.

Another thing is that a part of grammar (grammar-as-fact – see above) is to be memorized. However, even here we can make it more student-centred. Sorting Out exercises can help us reach it.

*Sceptic:* Let's suppose that when we deal with grammar-as-choice there can be many grammars. But coursebooks and many grammar materials present one of them. Shall we say that what students learnt from their books is wrong?

*TA Teacher:* One of the principles outlined above is that students must face a problem. If they know the rule and are happy with it, i.e. it helps them solve all grammar problems they face, they don't need to invent anything. The teacher's role here may be to challenge the rule by offering language samples which are problematic to deal with by applying the rule students know. In general, we prefer to speak about applicability limits of this or that model (or rule) rather than it being right or wrong. See, for instance, episode 2 where the teacher tries to challenge the rule 'use Present Perfect when speaking about today' applied by one of the students.

*Sceptic:* I could accept it if we speak about advanced learners. Yet, this approach is not applicable if we deal with lower level students, and most of them are such.

*TA Teacher:* I can't agree with you here. Cognitively lower-level students are definitely not weaker than the so-called advanced learners, so there is no reason to assume that they are unable to build their models of grammar. The only limitation may be that of language competence. However, if you analyse the classroom conversations above, you will see that language-wise even elementary level learners are able to participate in this kind of discourse.

*Sceptic:* Another claim you put forward is asking students to do what they haven't been taught yet. But it is ridiculous – what is the role of the teacher then?

*TA Teacher:* Traditionally, we view the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge. In the context of teaching grammar, it normally means that the teacher is expected to present necessary structures and their meanings and

explain the difference between widely mixed up forms. A good teacher is the one who can explain grammar well. The role of the teacher in the Thinking Approach is fundamentally different. The main task is to offer a challenge to learners and propose tools which may help them cope with it. In other words, learners must be put in a situation when the solution is not known to them (challenge) and given instruments which may help them construct a solution. If we use a fashionable word, the role of the teacher is that of a mediator.

*Sceptic:* We all know that even if taught traditionally, grammar is difficult to understand. In your approach, you seem to be speaking about everything at each lesson instead of having a strong focus on a particular grammar point. I'm sure it will just end up with a complete mess in students' heads.

*TA Teacher:* Many teachers believe that organising the syllabus in a linear fashion will give systematic knowledge to learners. However, all teachers know that in reality going from Present Simple and Present Progressive to Past Simple and Progressive and then Present Perfect hardly ends up with students having understanding of a system of tenses in English. In the same way, learning about different positions of a gear, location of pedals and functions of mirrors will unlikely make one a good driver. There are activities where doing many things at once are essential for mastering the skills. Both driving and language learning belong here.

## 4. Students say...

When judging this or that method of teaching, it is essential how students respond to it. The Creative Grammar Technology has been piloted with various groups of learners in Latvia over the past couple of years. Although students eventually agree that this approach increases their awareness of grammar, there are a number of typical reactions the TA teacher must be ready to face. They can be roughly divided into two groups.

### Give me back my rules

*"Why are rules bad? What do I need all this for? I don't understand all these features and values..."*

Admitting that it might take some time to master a description of grammar via parameters, a fundamental problem behind this reaction is different. In consumer society the customer must be pleased. A language learner is often hardly more than a customer to numerous publishers and some teachers. So, instead of a complex boring grammar you are offered a simple one in glossy packaging. Lots of operational rules give you a pleasant feeling when you come across them. Yet they turn out useless if you are determined to understand how language works. (Consumers are not

supposed to understand!)

Shifting people's stereotypes is one of the most difficult endeavors. However, if changing the mindset of an adult learner is often close to impossible, young people appear much more flexible. They are ready to adopt new values, especially if teachers are consistent. All efforts may become vain if the teacher gives up and offers a rule as soon as the student gets stuck facing a grammar problem.

### **How will I pass a test?**

People learn best what they are going to be tested on. Unfortunately, most grammar tests don't seem to give much value to the awareness students have developed. A traditional approach to grammar is often enough for many tests students face, as it provides them with practice which is very close to the test format. Division of everything into 'right' and 'wrong', usually without a need for further explanation, is appreciated much more than an ability to find appropriate contexts for various usages. No one seems to need the new skills. Why bother then?

Fortunately, there is another side to this issue. New tests appear on the market and an alternative assessment, which is much closer to the skills students need in real life, is gaining in popularity. Moreover, even traditional tests stop frightening learners at some point if the teacher has not given up. The highest level of awareness brings students to understanding that the 'right' answer in a test is nothing more than giving preference to a certain value of parameter by default in a situation when multiple variants are theoretically possible.

Despite the fact that many of our students found work on Creative Grammar Technology confusing at the beginning, with time we could hear more and more often that this approach to grammar, as our students put it, helps them feel it.

## **5. Insider's reflection**

One of the greatest concerns of teachers when getting acquainted with the Creative Grammar Technology is that it is time-consuming. 'I can't afford to spend so much time, I just have three lessons a week'.

Understanding that teaching never equals learning, we still often keep to the principle 'it's quicker if I explain'. 'Quicker for whom?' – a famous answer goes. It appears that when evaluating efficiency, teachers often forget that it is not only the time spent that matters, but also what has been learnt during this time. And here the advantages of teaching a clearly laid out grammar unit become less evident, especially if one measures acquired skills by more than a set of exercises on the opposite page of a glossy book.

We asked three teachers working upon the Thinking Approach based programme to share their opinion

on what they like about the Creative Grammar Technology.

First of all, I have to admit that I enjoy working with Creative Grammar tasks. I have to make sure that I see all the features students are supposed to arrive at myself in order to feel confident. This confidence and understanding helps me lead the discussion about the answers and possible features between students. By the way, this is my favourite part of creative grammar tasks. I like to ask prompting questions, confront two opposite answers of the same student and see how students correct their own mistakes and arrive at the right features. Students learn to contrast, compare and analyze. They also learn to explain their choice, providing some arguments. Of course, this is all due to constant encouragement from the teacher.

*(Julia Sokol, Riga Pushkin Lyceum)*

To my mind, the greatest difference between usual grammar tasks and Creative grammar technology is that in the first case students just learn 'by heart'. They learn the rules for making and using one particular grammar topic and when it's over and they must use it, they are confused in a whole system of language and do not try to connect it with real everyday life. (Of course, day by day doing loads of tasks they start recognizing those 'task' patterns, but they do not see connection with real situations). Creative Grammar technology offers opportunity for students to discover language parameters themselves and to see the connection between language and real life situation where a particular pattern is used. This is the aim - that students start thinking about language.

*(Inga Ieraga, Riga Centre Language School)*

1. The Creative Grammar Technology requires a strong involvement of students into the process of learning, it helps students discover grammar by themselves, which ensures a deeper understanding and better knowledge.
2. The Technology is based on the algorithm, a system of training that logically leads students to more thorough understanding of grammar. It develops students' awareness of grammatical phenomena.
3. The Technology helps students see grammar as a system and see the inner connections within the system.
4. The technology focuses on the meaning of grammar structures not just on formal rules. What is important, it is done consistently.

I like this way of teaching grammar very much.

*(Irina Buchinska, Daugavpils Russian Lyceum)*

## **6. Way forward**

The Creative Grammar Technology has been developed to present grammar as a dynamic model. Students learn grammar by inventing it, thus mastering both

inventive thinking and language skills. The given article gives some ideas how it is done when facing a problem of choice between Present Perfect and Past Simple. Piloting materials with various groups of learners in Latvia demonstrates that other problems of choice involved in something referred to as the English verb can be successfully approached in a similar way. It appears that general principles of the Creative Grammar Technology will work when dealing with other areas of the English grammar as well. However, it requires further research.

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## Appendix

### Samples of exercises

Several ideas on how these exercises are treated in the Thinking Approach classroom are given in the first part of the article – classroom conversations.

### (Sorting Out) Task

*Divide the sentences below in two groups according to the form of the main verb.*

(some examples are taken from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)

1. We've had a great party.
2. Have you ever been in love?
3. We always have a good time together.
4. Do you mind if I have a look at what's on television?
5. Our new apartment has a huge kitchen.
6. How long have you had your dog?
7. My husband has more than 20 employees.
8. Sorry, John's not in. He's just left the office.
9. Do you have any single rooms?
10. I have lots of happy memories of my time in Spain.
11. I expect he's had lots of women.
12. Have you ever had your own business?
13. I'm afraid your son has had a serious accident.
14. They have had a lot of difficulties with a new software package.
15. She always has the TV going at full blast.
16. I normally have lots of phone calls in the afternoon.

### (Concept Questions) Task

*Answer the questions below. Be ready to explain your answer.*

1. I have lived here for 10 years.  
Q: *Am I speaking about the past?*  
Q: *Is it possible for me to live here for some more years?*
2. Shakespeare wrote a lot of sonnets.  
Q: *Did he write them in the past?*  
Q: *Can he write some more sonnets?*
3. Max has written many interesting songs.  
Q: *Did he write them in the past?*  
Q: *Can he write some more songs?*
4. I've already had coffee this morning.  
Q: *What time could it be now?*
5. I've thought much about it and here's my decision.  
Q: *Do I emphasise present or past action?*  
Q: *Is it important when I thought?*  
Q: *Can I think about it again?*
6. When I was a child I was not fond of reading.  
Q: *Do I emphasise present or past action?*  
Q: *Do you know when the action took place?*  
Q: *Can the action take place again?*
7. It's the first time I have come here.  
Q: *Do I speak about present or past action?*  
Q: *Do I make an emphasis on present or past time?*
8. I've worked here since 1996.  
Q: *Do I speak about present or past action?*  
Q: *Do I still work here?*  
Q: *Do I make an emphasis on present or past time?*

Feature Training. Task. Write sentences which express the meanings summarized below.

1. Time of Action: Past, Unfinished  
Vision of Action: Finished
2. Time of Action: Past, Finished  
Vision of Action: Unfinished
3. Time of Action: Past, Unfinished  
Vision of Action: In progress
4. Time of Action: Past, Finished  
Vision of Action: Remote
5. Time of Action: Past, Known, Important
6. Time of Action: Past, Known  
Vision of Action: Immediate

(These and other creative grammar exercises can be downloaded from the Thinking Approach Project website: [www.thinking-approach.org](http://www.thinking-approach.org))

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