

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, on the 25th anniversary of *Breaking Rules* (Longman, 1987), the International Teacher Development Institute (iTDi) sponsored a celebration at the annual conference of the Japanese affiliate of TESOL – JALT. A dozen teachers shared their experiences and reactions to the book with Pecha Kucha presentations. The 100-ish participants laughed and clapped as they experienced the positive and humorous images, comments and songs from those who were presenting.

However, through the years, I have found that the positive associations to the phrase *breaking rules* I experienced at JALT are far from universal. I do various activities in my classes and in workshops to have teachers and students reflect on the phrase *breaking rules* even before I refer to my book with this title, to deal with the negative feelings many have about the concept.

2. SOME ASSOCIATIONS

One of the ways I start discussions about *breaking rules* is to ask teachers to write three phrases that come to their mind when they read or hear this phrase. Please write some that come to your mind so you can compare your associations with those others have made, which you will read below. Now, copy any of these that are similar to yours.

1. Chaos
2. Stop, don't break the rules!
3. Saying "no" to authority
4. Discipline problems
5. A rogue, a renegade, a maverick
6. Exploring to move beyond the ordinary
7. I'm a cowboy on a steel horse I rode. I'm wanted, dead or alive!
8. Changing what is thought as standard
9. Do your own thing
10. Problem teachers
11. Acting like hippies

12. Having fun
13. Moving beyond preconceived notions
14. Being innovative
15. A way to make discoveries
16. Resist and revolt
17. Changing habits
18. Naughty

Depending on how you interpret the 18 phrases I have listed, you may disagree with me, but I think of around five of them as positive (6, 8, 13, 14 and 15). The following: *Chaos* (1), *Discipline problems* (4), *I'm a cowboy. . .* (7), *Problem teachers* (10), *Resist and revolt* (16) and *Naughty* (18) are among those I think have a negative connotation. Others I can interpret as either positive or negative.

Even among those who are positive about the idea, such as Harmer (2007: 417), register some caution:

The results [of breaking rules] may be surprising and will never be less than interesting. However, breaking rules and changing environments are not for the fainthearted teacher. We need to have confidence and enthusiasm for investigation and discovery.

If you check *breaking rules* or *try the opposite* on the Internet, my books with this theme are the only ones that deal with education. Here are a couple that deal with business: *First, Break All the Rules* (1999) and *Whatever you Think, Think the Opposite* (2006).

After Tim Cook, the current CEO of Apple, finished his graduation speech at the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, a graduating student asked: “When is it OK to break the rules?” Here is his answer:

I think you should rarely follow the rules. I think you should write the rules. If you follow things in a formulaic manner, you will wind up at best being the same as everybody else. (...) If you want to excel, you cannot do that. I watched a lot of companies do that, and I think that's a rotten strategy. I think you need to write your own rules (Cook, 25th Reunion of Graduates of the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, 26 April 2013).

In writing *Breaking Rules*, I wanted to show how doing things differently from what was standard and expected can be positive rather than negative. In the first chapter, I wrote the following:

Over time, as I have seen how stable communications in classrooms and in discussions of teaching are, I have begun to describe them with the same label many others use to describe patterned communications that occur nine times out of ten: *rules*.

The idea that much of what we do is controlled by rules – unconscious conventions and habits – is central to my thinking. If we tend to do the same thing nine times out of ten in a particular situation, I don't think we do it because we are par-

ticularly clever or stupid.

I think the patterns that occur in our lessons and our discussions of teaching are so predictable because much of what we do is the result of following invisible rules which, although they become quite obvious as soon as we point them out, still can control us after we realize they exist (Fanselow, 1987: 5).

Advocating the breaking of rules might imply that I do not believe in order. I realize that rules are necessary. But because the breaking of rules requires as a first step precise description of the rules we follow, by breaking rules we become more aware of [what we do]. Of course, if we moved around the room [rather than stayed in front of the class] and broke other rules just to realize more consciously how strong the rules are, the value of such an enterprise would be limited. But each rule we break provides us with another alternative rule that is self-generated and tests the validity of our preconceived notions (Fanselow, 1987: 6).

Ultimately, I break rules, and invite you to join me, to see more clearly what we are each capable of and how our preconceived ideas sometimes limit this capability. If we realize how much more is within us, it is more likely we will be able to aid our students in coming to the same realization. Such conscious realization, paradoxically, leads in my experience to more freedom, for as we become aware of a greater range of rules on the conscious level, we are able to use a greater range unconsciously. Said another way, as we explore our craft by describing, recording, transcribing, and coding communications-rather than by seeking prescriptions and judgments from others, rules are broken that say we teachers must seek alternatives from those in charge, rather than ourselves or our peers, and that we must work alone within our autonomous but isolated and lonely classrooms, rather than with colleagues [and our students] (Fanselow, 1987: 7).

In spite of our efforts to vary our teaching, most systematic studies, as well as many casual observations, have shown that we tend to operate within a rather narrow range most of the time (e.g. Bellack, Kliebart, Hyman & Smith, 1966; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Barnes, 1976). The rules of the classroom game are remarkably stable. And, often what we think we are doing is different from what observers perceive us as doing.

Even when we try alternatives, we are more likely to judge them in relationship to our preconceived notions of what good teaching is rather than by including the consequences of the alternatives in our descriptions and comparing them. In short, though we do exercise some control and are somewhat aware of what we do, for most of us there is a whole alternative world of possibilities to discover and try out. "So, make a wish, make a dream, imagine all the possibilities!" (Fanselow, 1987: 9).

As you try alternatives, I hope that your associations with the phrase *breaking rules* or *try the opposite* will change. I especially hope that you will become more aware of the possible positive outcomes of such actions. There are of course some rules that we should

not break because we know that the results will be bad. One of the most obvious examples is the rules of the road. Ignoring them we know will have very, very bad results. Washing our hands to decrease the spread of germs is another rule that it would be foolish to break. And if bankers had not broken regulations regarding investments, the 2008 financial disaster is unlikely to have happened.

3. A FEW WAYS TO BREAK RULES

There are many ways to change our teaching routines. One is to stop doing something we habitually do. If we say “Very good” after students’ responses, we can stop saying it. Another way is to do the opposite of what we usually do. If we usually tell students the goal of the lesson at the beginning of the class, we can instead ask students to write what they think the goal of the class was at the end of the class. If we normally have students respond orally to our spoken questions, we can break that rule by having them write both our questions and their responses before they say them.

Observing how we communicate outside of the classroom and trying some of these activities in our classes is another source of new rules. When we are across a train platform from a friend and the noise from the trains prevents us from hearing each other, we often just mouth the words. So we can try giving directions by mouthing rather than saying words to mimic one rule we follow out of the classroom, but usually do not follow in our classroom.

You might have noticed that outside of classes, when people write, often they are standing up and using very small pieces of paper or pages in small notebooks. Comparing how many words students write while standing using small cards, with sitting using standard sheets of blank paper, will show the effect of breaking the almost universal classroom rule: “Write only while sitting, except of course when writing on the board”.

These new rules will not necessarily produce better results. But if we do not change our routines, we will never know. “Only by engaging in the generation and exploration of alternatives will we be able to see. And then we will see that we must continue to look” (Fanselow, 1987: 474). In *Try the Opposite*, I describe many of the options in *Breaking Rules* in everyday language (Fanselow, 1992a).

In an article called “Breaking Rules” in *English Australia*, Maley (2004: 9) wrote this:

The already-mentioned, little-known, but hugely influential *Breaking Rules* (Fanselow, 1987) (...) advocates “doing the opposite” as a heuristic for finding new ways of doing old things.

Here is how Maley (personal communication, January 12, 2010) expands on the idea of doing the opposite as a heuristic:

A heuristic is a ‘rule of thumb’ (If I do this, what will happen?) [Fanselow’s idea of trying the opposite] ... is highly generative of new ideas. (...) Fanselow’s point, which is worth thinking about, is that if we never try an alternative way of doing things, we never know what might have happened!

Heuristics are a handy way of trying new ways of doing things. Fanselow argues that it is only by systematically breaking the unwritten rules (or habits) in our class-

rooms that we can discover new and possibly better ways of doing things. This is indeed a powerful heuristic, and highly generative of new ideas – some of them worth holding on to.

It is interesting to note that the ‘Designer Methods’ of the 1970’s and 80’s derived much of their power and innovative thrust from the application of this heuristic. I do not, of course, wish to suggest that they all read Fanselow and consciously applied this heuristic, but retrospectively we can see that their procedures derive from the ‘do the opposite’ injunction.

When you break rules, some colleagues and students might feel uncomfortable. If they do, it is important to spend just a few minutes with the alternative and discuss reasons for experimenting with colleagues and students before and after you try it.

If you say something, such as: “We have finished today’s lesson, but we have a few minutes left in the class. Let me use these few minutes to try something new. Tomorrow, I will ask you how you felt about it”, your students are less likely to be upset. Likewise, if you mention to both your students and colleagues that you are experimenting to better understand what you are doing, they will probably be more understanding.

Breaking rules, incidentally, is not the same as doing different activities in each lesson. When teachers stop habitual practices or try opposite ones, they are making small changes to their routines in order to see what the results will be. Though the changes I advocate are all very small, their results are often very large and, in fact, profound.

You will see that each rule below starts with the word *Never*. When I initially wrote the rules, I started with the word *Avoid* rather than *Never*. But the changes teachers made to the activities I observed were so close to the regular routines that they did not open either my eyes or the teachers’ eyes to distinctly different, unconventional practices. As a result, the changes led to very little understanding of what teachers had been doing.

So to raise the bar in order to create highly unusual practices and stretch my mind, and the consciousness of others, I substituted *Never* for *Avoid*, outrageous as the word *Never* might seem. I hope you will select a word that you feel comfortable with to start re-thinking your roles and your students’ roles, which are determined by the rules you and they follow, very often unconsciously.

Obviously, my rules are extreme. In my day-to-day teaching, I think of the *Never* at one end of a continuum and the options under *Instead* on the other end of the continuum or someplace in between, like this:

<i>10</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Never</i>	<i>Instead</i>

But stating such extreme rules, so different from those most are accustomed to, has the potential to liberate us from the practices we are used to. I hope these rules will help you to free yourself from your own rules and to better understand what you are doing and enable your students to learn more and to learn new ways to learn.

By the way, in workshops and courses, I always advise participants to believe nothing I say, or what anyone else says, but rather, explore alternatives by breaking rules and comparing the results. Each teacher who records and transcribes what is going on can discover what students get and what they miss. Each can ask the students what they think is useful

and not useful. The time each teacher spends exploring teaching will yield stronger insights than reading what others have written, often in abstract ways, about what is good and bad in teaching. Of course, reading what others claim can be useful, but never, never underestimate your own ability to understand what you and your students are doing and evaluate the results on your own.

Breaking rules enables us to explore how what we think is effective might not be, and how what we think is not effective might be. Unless we are completely sceptical about every assumption and practice we or others follow, we cannot develop as teachers and we cannot help our students to develop as learners.

The options after “instead” in the rules below are just a few of the many possible.

4. BREAKING A FEW RULES, IN RANDOM ORDER

1. Never explain vocabulary or ask students to define words. Instead, have them use bi-lingual or monolingual dictionaries and/or imagination and/or grouping skills to discover or confirm lexical and grammatical meanings in sentences they occur in, never in isolation. I use the word *grammatical* to refer to how English works in all dimensions: the ways we use stress, rhythm and pronunciation to speak; the ways we use word order, function words and suffixes to create sentences; the ways we arrange sentences in paragraphs and longer passages, how we take turns in conversations and the like.
2. Never do so-called communicative or task-based activities if your students’ speech contains more than one error in each statement, instead, as preparation, have them practise and master structural words, sentence patterns and vocabulary they need by doing activities suggested in 3 and 4 in order to provide ways for students to master language before asking them to use it, which is a testing activity rather than a learning activity.
3. Never explain grammar or ask students to explain grammar. Instead, have your students become aware of word order, function words and grammatical suffixes,

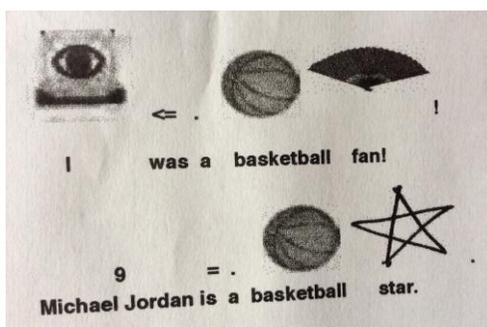


Figure 1. Iconic substitution table

etc. by using language, by tapping the grammatical information in dictionaries and by creating tables with sketches representing all words in a sentence and having students translate these into language patterns (see Figure 1).

On the millions of flash cards and pages in texts that teach the names of fruits,

for example, the word *apple* is printed under a picture of an apple rather than *an apple* and under a bunch of grapes, the word *grape* is printed rather than *a bunch of grapes*. Apple and grape without articles are used in phrases such as apple and grape juice. The words alone without articles before them or juice, flavour, etc. after them provide only lexical meaning rather than lexical plus grammatical meaning. These are examples of what I mean by the integration of lexis and grammar. Dictionaries have sketches of an elephant and under it the caption *elephant*, not *an elephant*, again presenting lexical meaning alone rather than integrating it with grammatical meaning.

4. Never ask students to read orally, as their eyes are glued to the printed lines. Instead, have your students read silently, cover what they read, pause to think, and then say what they had read silently to another person in meaningful chunks of words and write the changes. In this way, they will listen, speak, write and read as well as integrate grammar and vocabulary and so focus on meaning. (I got this idea from Michael West who in *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* said this is the only activity students need to learn English.)
5. Never answer students' question-word questions such as: *What does horse mean?* or *Why can't we say "jargons" and "vocabularies"?* Instead, have your students ask yes-no and either-or questions such as: *Is a horse bigger than me? Is a horse an animal or a bird? Which is correct: Do I have a large vocabulary? or Do I have a large vocabularies?* These require them to predict or hypothesize about lexical and grammatical meanings.
6. Never have students use erasers or the delete key. Instead, have your students edit by crossing out or tracking changes, and then re-writing or re-typing the lines to produce a final copy so they can see their development from their drafts.
7. Never, after students respond, say words such as: *very good, excellent* or *wonderful* – so-called positive feedback. Instead, observe how your students show that learning is its own reward and provide information about what they do that ensures they are accurate and demonstrates you have high expectations for them.
8. Never learn or teach computing skills such as *power point* or *excel* alone. Instead, include touch-typing skills development, as well.
9. Never do scaffolding all the time, providing complete information. Instead, adjust the information you give from complete to incomplete information such as mouthed words or passages in which you delete every fifth or sixth word, or the latter half of every other word, so that your students can tap their previous knowledge and use prediction skills to produce lexically and grammatically correct language.
10. Never correct students' speaking by recasting – repeating what they said incorrectly correctly or repeating what they say with rising intonation, saying the correct form, or saying "again", and never correct students' writing by using symbols such as "it" for incorrect tense or "u" for unclear. Instead, be explicit: "You said 'apple'; say 'an apple'" or "You said 'I am go'; say four syllables and write 'I, a g i'" on the board.
11. Never write so-called key words on the board, use flash cards with individual

words on them, or ask students to underline words they do not understand. Instead, have students cross out words they do not understand and write words that fit the empty slots they have created or draw sketches of them or have them underline the words they do understand, and then check the meanings of the unknown words in a bilingual dictionary, or predict their meanings by reading and re-reading the known words, keeping in mind that words have meaning only in context and the more context the better.

Write a couple of rules you broke by doing the opposite, stopping doing what you usually do, or trying ways we communicate outside of class in class – that you tried a few times – and to what extent the results were different from your usual practices.

5. A COUPLE MORE WAYS TO BREAK RULES

I just suggested three ways to generate alternatives. Stop doing what we usually do; try the opposite of what we usually do, observe how we use language outside of the classroom differently from inside and attempt to incorporate these differences in our classrooms.

When I discuss these three ways with teachers, they invariably raise questions about how the rules I suggest they break are related to learning assumptions or about fads and jargon in the teaching of English. Of course, there is overlap between the three ways I have suggested and ways to relate learning assumptions and fads and jargon to the breaking of rules.

For example, two other ways to break rules are to write down your assumptions about learning and fads and jargon you are familiar with, and match them with activities you have your students do. If you think that students learn from *making predictions* rather than *memorizing*, then write down which of the activities your students do focus on memorization and which focus on predicting. If you want to understand *cooperative learning* better, write down a few activities your students do in groups or pairs that you think show they are learning together and a few that show they are not.

If you re-read rules 1 to 11 you will see that some of them are related to assumptions about learning – 1 and 3 urge you never to explain vocabulary or grammar, which is related to the assumption that we learn through using language and practising it rather than memorizing definitions and rules. You will also see that some are related to jargon – *communicative activities* in 2, *positive feedback* in 7, *scaffolding* in 9 and *key words* in 11.

In Appendix 1, I show rules teachers and their students generated both from the three ways I suggest in the first two pages of Section 3 and in Section 5.

6. SOME CRUCIAL ASSUMPTIONS

One of my assumptions that underlies the rules I suggest we break is that we should never, never, never assume that what we say or write and another hears or reads mean the same to both of us, and that even if we think the meanings are the same, the intentions are likely to be different. Communication is a miracle, not the norm, as Gattegno (1963), the originator of the Silent Way, was fond of saying during workshops he did in the 1970s. Or, as Shaw

(cited in Caroselli, 2000: 71) quipped, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place”.

The words *predicting*, *problem-solving*, *discovering* – moving from *Huh?* to *Oh*. to *Aha!* – are what *learning* is made up of. A related assumption is that our role as teachers is to remind people of what they already know, to tap into both their thinking skills and their experiences and knowledge.

Another assumption of mine is that we have to always ask how what we think is an effective activity might not be effective, and how what we think is not an effective activity might be an effective activity.

Huxley (1900: 1) summed up these assumptions like this:

Sit down before what you see and hear like a little child, and be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abyss Nature leads, or you shall learn nothing.

Some people see no reason to break rules because they believe what they are doing is sufficient. Others think that there is no reason to break rules because there is a great deal of variety in the activities in their classrooms. Student dissatisfaction with language classes around the world – suggested by the huge number of discussions of lack of student motivation, suggest the need for analyzing what we do (Smith, 1998; Wragg, 1999; Murphey, 2001; Murphey & Sato, 2003). In a survey of around 9,000 adults in Japan, 80 percent said that their English classes had not been helpful and 90 percent had no confidence using English (Yoshida, 2007). It is hard to imagine any other professional endeavour that could continue with such a failure rate. And as I said above, analyses of recordings of classrooms do not support these claims either. They show a narrow range of activities (Bellack, Kliebart, Hyman & Smith, 1966; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Barnes, 1976; Jackson, 1990).

If you find routine and a small range of classroom activities gratifying, consider how they might be stultifying. If you and your students are comfortable with your day-to-day activities, consider how the activities might be tedious and boring, and might lead to comfort but not necessarily to the most efficient or effective long-term learning.

7. “ABC’s” – IDENTIFYING RULES BEFORE BREAKING THEM

WHAT ARE WE REALLY DOING IN OUR LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS?

Conversations about teaching and learning are rarely based on recordings of what teachers and students do. Not once during fifty years of interviewing teachers for jobs have I had a positive response to this question: *Have you recorded any of your classes?* A few said they had done so for an assignment for a course, but none kept it up once they started to teach.

When I call my bank, my cable company, my doctor, my credit card company, I am told: “This call may be recorded for training purposes. We’re taking a fresh look at everything we do to serve you better”. Football coaches regularly have videos made of games that they analyze with their players. Transcriptions of court proceedings have been done for centuries.

The easiest and most powerful way to understand what we are really doing in our classrooms – to identify the rules we follow – is to record, transcribe and analyze what we and

our students say and do. Then, with as few pre-conceived notions about good or bad teaching as possible, we can look at the data as children might look at something for the first time. By doing this, we can constantly demystify and gain new insights into our teaching.

The “ABC’s” are the foundation for learning a new skill (such as reading). Analyzing video clips and transcripts of classroom interactions are the “ABC’s” of learning to observe yourself and your students in the classroom. Attaining this skill, which will help you to understand what you and your students are really doing, can profoundly affect your teaching (Fanselow, 1977, 1992b; Allwright, 1988; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Fanselow & Barnard, 2005; Gebhard, 2006; Allwright & Hanks, 2009)

In *Breaking Rules*, I urge teachers to learn a descriptive system I call FOCUS – FOCI for observing communications used in settings. In the long run, learning the categories of FOCUS enables teachers to use a kind of shorthand to describe what they are doing. But in the short run, most find it cumbersome. The conversations of the three teachers below show how we can analyze in everyday language, without the benefits/burdens of the terms I introduce in FOCUS!

8. THREE TEACHERS ANALYZE THEIR TEACHING

Here are some comments made by a teacher I once worked with, Vanessa, about the use of “Very good, Excellent” after student responses. *Positive feedback* is a common term for these types of comments.

I thought that I said “very good” only a few times. But while listening to a recording, I noticed a rule that I was following that I had not been aware of. I said “very good” after each response. I had read that praising students by saying phrases like “very good” is generally considered positive feedback. So initially, I thought that I was doing what I should be doing.

After listening a second time, I had a different feeling about this. I thought I was giving positive feedback by saying “very good”, but hearing it again, I noticed, for the first time, that I said it even after incorrect answers. I made the comment so frequently that I wondered if the words meant anything.

As I discussed what I had heard with you (John) and the other teachers, and examined and re-examined the one-page transcript from my class, I wondered: “How was my positive feedback not necessarily positive, maybe even negative? Was I perhaps doing a disservice to my students rather than helping them?”

After our conversation, I asked my students to listen to a one-minute section of the recorded class and write down what they heard. Only a few students wrote “very good” even after listening a few times.

When I asked “Why?”, some said they had not heard it. Others said they heard “very good” so frequently that it seemed unimportant.

Here are some comments made by Desmond, another teacher I was working with at the same time, concerning student participation.

I had read that students answer questions with more words if they respond after a 10-second pause than after a 1- to 3-second pause. But a few students in my classes always answered as soon as I asked my questions. Adapting a practice I used for quizzes, of asking students to write what I had said, I asked students to write down my questions and their responses during a regular class.

Because the goal was not to test, I asked them to turn their notebooks over when they finished rather than hand them in for checking. Then, I called on students by name: "Ali, please say what you wrote. Maria, your comment. Okon, I'd like to hear your answer".

I counted the number of words in each spoken response as I listened to the recording of my lesson. I then counted the spoken words in a recording of a lesson in which the students answered orally without first writing down their responses. I saw that there were on average twice as many words when I had my students write their answers before they spoke.

Later, I asked my students to write how they felt about answering questions the alternative way. Here are a few, which a colleague translated from their first language:

- *Juan and Fatima always raise their hands to respond while I am still trying to digest the questions. There are five or ten students who always respond while the other twenty five of us say nothing and keep quiet.*
- *I used to think that I could learn to speak only by speaking. But I have to be able to understand what is said before I can say anything correctly. When I tried to write your questions, at first, I could only write a few words, one by one. But now, I can write a few words together and then join together these groups.*
- *I thought that you said "You like spring?" But when I compared what I wrote with Cecilia, Rashida and Jose, I realized that you said "Do you like ice cream?" It helps to match a written version of what I hear with others and with the person who asked the question or made the comment.*

I was astonished how such a small change, breaking one of the rules I had been following unconsciously for so long, had made such differences in the way the students experienced the lesson.

Here are some comments made by a third teacher, who was in that group, Ann. She is explaining two small changes she made to a very common instruction in textbooks: *Underline the words you do not understand*. She describes how she broke this common textbook rule.

In my textbooks, instructions ask students to underline words they do not understand. I noticed that my students underlined only about two out of ten words. Thinking of the value of discovering unknown words by reading the known words, I decided to ask my students in one class to cross out the words they did not understand. In another class, I asked my students to underline words they did understand.

After doing the latter, I along with my students were astonished to find out how many more words they knew than they did not know. This occurred as a result of this small and easy to execute change in the task, an example of just trying the opposite. Another alternative I tried was to have my students draw sketches of words they did not know after they checked them in either a bilingual or monolingual dictionary, so that they had a visual image of the meanings in their books and their minds. I had them draw the images above the words in the text where they occurred.

I used to make word lists of new unknown words along with word equivalents. But the words were isolated. When I see a piece of thread on the floor of my bedroom, I cannot tell which blouse or skirt it came from. I can only recognize it if it is hanging from, say, the cuff of a blouse.

So I began to wonder why word lists are so popular. Words have meaning only in context, just as I can identify a piece of thread only if I see it on the piece of clothing I am holding. The origin of the word context is weaving, putting threads together, not isolating them.

9. YOUR EXPERIENCE

Can you think of any rules you have broken in our teaching or that you would like to break? Write some you have broken and some you would like to break. Compare them with those Vanessa, Desmond and Ann broke.

9.1. COMPARING YOUR CONVERSATIONS WITH THOSE OF VANESSA, DESMOND AND ANN

I would like you to experience the three sets of comments above again. One of my assumptions about learning is that hearing or reading anything once is the same as not hearing or reading it at all. We need to re-experience the same language over and over to understand it and enable it to influence our thinking and feelings and actions. So, please re-read the three sections prior to this one, and as you re-read the three sets of comments, write a few ways that they are similar to and different from conversations you have had about your teaching.

9.2. COMMENTS FROM VANESSA, DESMOND AND ANN ABOUT THEIR ANALYSES

I also asked Vanessa, Desmond and Ann to experience their comments again and comment on them. Here are some of the things they said:

Vanessa: We each used jargon – *positive feedback, wait time, focusing on what we know and understanding words in context*. But not in the fuzzy and formulaic way I usually hear them used. These words can be slippery. We were more precise than the way I usually hear them used. The matching of these terms and examples was new for me.

Desmond: I was shown some video clips of teachers that were produced along with some methods books I had to read for a course. The teachers and the authors sound like cosmet-

ics salespeople. They were absolutely certain of their claims, but there was no evidence in the videos. The camera focused primarily on the teachers and just occasionally panned the students. I could not hear what they were saying or see what they were writing. This prevented me from evaluating the outcome. Without seeing results, how could I accept or verify or believe the author's assertions?

Ann: Discussing what we do using terms alone ends up concealing more than revealing. The promised results are removed from the actual teaching activities and observed outcomes. So many courses I take focus on reading what people say about teaching and talking about what should be done rather than analyzing what teachers actually do and the consequences for students. I found asking students what they thought and hearing Desmond report on differences in results between two alternatives to be very revealing.

10. FINDING TIME TO TRANSCRIBE AND ANALYZE RECORDINGS

Vanessa, Desmond and Ann planned their lessons as they analyzed their transcripts so the time taken to explore their teaching was not onerous. In fact, they felt that planning based on what they actually had asked their students to do and on the results was less time-consuming than their usual planning.

But until teachers try transcribing, many still feel it will be too time-consuming. One way to find time to transcribe is to do it together with your students in class. I am not suggesting you and they transcribe an entire class. I suggest that you transcribe, both alone and with your students, one to three minutes of a class, or enough interaction to fill one sheet of A4 paper. However, you cannot just do this only once a term. You have to do it regularly and often in order for you and your students to learn anything from it – a couple of times per week, as a minimum.

Another way to have enough time to write transcriptions and analyze them is to spend less time planning lessons. As you master the idea of trying the opposite, you will develop a repertoire of activities that you can apply to any material that you present or that your students bring to class.

Since almost every person who prepares teachers emphasizes the importance of detailed lesson plans, I have to provide a bit of rationale for my advice to spend less and less time on planning lessons.

The more time we spend on our lesson plans, the more we want to follow them. As you transcribe, you will see more and more opportunities to use the language the students are using rather than the language in your plans. Seeing the words they use and misuse and the grammatical mistakes they make can provide the content of your lessons.

Use what you learn and excerpts from your transcriptions as the basis of what to teach. This is what Desmond started to do. He based part of his classes on how his students' written versions of his questions was different from what he had said. And he used their written responses, where he could more easily see their errors than when they were just spoken.

The more detailed our lesson plans are, the more likely we feel compelled to follow them, even if unconsciously. Jazz musicians, soccer players or surgeons have to master the basics of their craft until the fundamental skills are automatic. Then, they must improvise

as they perform, responding in the moment to changing circumstances. They cannot write down a detailed plan of what they are going to do minute by minute.

But teachers sometimes create lesson plans that are very detailed. I believe this can be a trap. When we plan our lessons in too much detail, we go into the classroom and focus our attention on following the plan. We pay less attention to our students – to their confusions, desires and enthusiasms. We miss opportunities to be creative and facilitate real learning. The inner spark of the teacher needs to kindle the inner flame of each student, and real life interactions, not canned lesson plans, are needed for that to happen.

Of course, we need to have content in our lessons. Usually, this is provided in our textbooks. But if you have a repertoire of classroom activities and techniques that can help your students engage with the material, you can mine the textbook rather than be trapped by the instructions and exercises in it. In fact, all this is the ABC of teaching. Masterful teaching starts when you can begin to use the ABC to respond effectively to new possibilities in the moment.

So as the Boy Scout slogan says: “Be prepared!”, but do not be trapped by your lesson plans or the textbook instructions and exercises. Rather, integrate the language your students produce with the language from your textbook.

11. CAUTION ABOUT TRYING NEW ACTIVITIES

When you first start asking your students to do activities that are different from those they are used to doing, they might express their confusion more than they usually do with expressions like “Huh?” But as they use English more through novel activities, they will also express discovery more than they did before with expressions like “Aha!”

If there are no or few “Ahas!”, there is little learning going on. If there are no or few “Huhs?” either, the students are not following what you are saying or they are bored.

When we follow a plan, and especially the same plan often, we may not hear any “Huhs?” and think that our students are following and doing the activities well and learning. But if we do not hear any “Ahas!”, in fact they are not following and/or they are not learning.

Learning is discovering, either something new or something we have forgotten. In making any discovery, we pass from a confused not knowing to clarity. Learning is also realizing we know more than we think we know.

Of course, as teachers, we all like to hear “Ahas!” But “Huhs?” are also music to my ears because they show the learners are starting to grasp what was presented and/or what they were asked to do. By puzzling things out, making use of what they know to try to become aware of what initially confused them, they are more engaged than if I just ask them to repeat or recall facts.

Without some confusion and questioning there is no learning, because there is nothing new to wonder about. With too much confusion, there is also no learning, because we cannot wonder about something we are totally in the dark about. One of our key roles is to adjust the amount and level of information we give our students. If the material is too easy, the learner may find it boring and unchallenging. If it is too difficult, the same person may find it boring and frustrating. And in both cases, she/he may feel it is a waste of time.

Transcriptions provide us with a complete record of what students are saying – rather than the partial information we get in real time. With these data, we are better able to adjust our learning activities as well as the level of the language we use in the classroom.

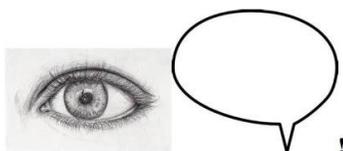
12. CONCLUSION

WHO SAYS?

At the beginning of classes and workshops, I put the following message or some variation on the board. During subsequent sessions I ask students to produce a similar message in different ways. I want to keep reminding them that, though I want them to try alternatives I suggest and different teachers generate, I want them to adopt new practices only as they see that the results are more productive and engaging than their present practices. The reason to adopt new rules has to be supported by evidence, not by my claims or those of others.

B e _ _ _ _ e

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Some think that teachers are not open to exploration. Some believe that only very confident, expert teachers are ready to break rules to better engage their students and learn about their own teaching. I have been working with teachers for fifty years. As long as I and those I explored with analyzed rather than judged what we did and realized there were no absolute rights and wrongs, we were able to explore together openly and without feeling criticized or embarrassed. Initially, teachers tell me they are anxious when I say we are going to record and transcribe and analyze, because for one thing the previous times they have been observed it was when supervisors or principals or school directors came to evaluate them. But after from six to twelve observations, I have found that almost all teachers I and others I have worked with find that teachers move from anxiety to acceptance to awareness.

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APPENDIX 1

1. Never give standardized tests produced by companies. *Instead, with your students note their language development, including the decline in the frequency of errors and the increase in the number of words they can say, write and understand per five to ten minute segments of class week by week.*
2. Never use words like *not motivated, lazy, un-cooperative*, which assume your students have some deficiency if they cannot perform in the way you had anticipated. *Instead, assume that what they and/or you are being asked to do and/or the material is deficient. (To develop language abilities, students need to read or listen to language which they understand at least 95% – 98% would be better – and they need to have some interest in the topic and feel challenged, not overwhelmed nor bored, by both the text and the activities. They of course, need to have some mastery of the grammatical meanings such as structural words – of, was –, various forms of words – go, going, goes – and sentence patterns, as well.)*
3. Never ask only factual questions you know the answer to, for example, “What is this?” (as you point to an apple). *Instead, have the students ask the questions, first in writing, and then orally. But over time give them examples of questions other than factual questions such as yes/no, question word, and either or questions about sentences in their texts and about objects or experiences that require inferences – Are apples more nutritious than candy? Which are more nutritious, apples or pieces of candy? Are pieces of candy or apples more nutritious? After you have students write these different types of questions, have them ask each other the questions aloud and have them both write both the questions asked and the responses given after waiting for a short pause after they say them.*
4. Never give long directions aloud or in print. *Instead, use single words, demonstrate or illustrate with sketches what students are to do; if you do give long directions, record them and teach the patterns they contain so students can learn them and give the long directions to each other over time.*
5. Never forbid the use of students’ first languages. *Instead, provide class time for students to clarify what is going on in their first language with each other, invite them to write and share reactions to methods and give their understanding of the rationale for what they are being asked to do in their first language, and have them use bilingual dictionaries to find meanings.*
6. Never, as I said in 3, ask only factual questions you know the answer to, for example, “What is this?” (as you point to an apple). *Instead, have the students ask the questions. But over time give them examples of yes/no, question word and either or questions related to personal experiences: How often do you eat apples? How often do you eat apples or pieces of candy? Which do you prefer, apples or pieces of candy? After you have students write these different types of questions, have them ask each other the questions aloud and have them both write both the questions asked and the responses given after waiting for a short pause after they say them.*

7. Never ask students to use words in sentences to illustrate their meanings. *Instead, have them manipulate and embellish example sentences from dictionaries, textbooks, songs, stories, etc., that contain the words.*
8. Never prepare detailed lesson plans that require you to explain content and complex instructions. *Instead, have a list of a range of activities that you can have your students do as they take in and produce language that they want to master and that engages them.*
9. Never tell students what they are going to learn before a lesson. *Instead, ask them what they think they are learning during the lesson and what they learnt at the end of the lesson.*
10. Never depend on information, experiences, feelings or ideas from outside sources alone. *Instead, integrate student information, experiences, feelings or ideas with those from textbooks and other outside sources.*
11. Never suggest that students read or listen to any text only once, as is common in extensive reading programmes. *Instead, urge them to experience the lexical and grammatical forms and meanings in the same text multiple times, at least three to five times, and in different ways – timing each engagement so students can see how, as the language becomes more and more familiar and they acquire more, they can listen to and read a text with understanding in less and less time.*
12. Never ask students to repeat or copy words or sentences. *Instead have your students listen to or read the words or sentences, wait for a short period of time, and then, while not hearing or looking at the words or sentences, say or write what they remember and have them compare the time it takes them to do this activity with the same material on different days. Have them circle differences between what they write and the originals and indicate which ones are acceptable and which are not. Check their evaluations.*
13. Never discuss teaching only with peers and by recalling events, judging them and using jargon, such as *icebreaker, key words, communicative activities, zone of proximal development, cognitive approach*, etc. to explain them. *Instead use transcriptions of excerpts from lessons you and your students make and analyze and interpret the data from multiple perspectives using your own terms or those of peers and students in order to deepen understanding, not to improve teaching. Analyzing transcripts and two to three minute video clips of what we do and the results reveals more than any standardized tests and the tests we make. And as we analyze what we did and compare the results between routine and alternative activities, we can simultaneously note what language needs more attention in our next lessons.*