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Naming the World: Writing, Reading, and Culture in a Refugee ESL Class

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SIT Graduate Institute

Naming the World:

Writing, Reading, and Culture

in a

Refugee ESL Class

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Abstract:

Techniques for teaching reading and writing to ESL learners include ones derived from both L_1 literacy methods and L_2 oral methods. In both categories, some methods, and consequently some techniques, utilize cultural materials from outside the classroom and the learners' culture. Others use materials with no overt cultural content. Still other methods use learner-created materials. These differing methods are explored for their potential in teaching both literacy and culture. The culture- and literacy- learning experience of one Asian-refugee ESL class: multi-level, multi-age, multi-ethnic, and rural, is described. Learners wrote their own reading materials, largely based on pictures from Asian and U.S. cultures. The process and results are described, as well as other methods used to facilitate reading, writing, and cultural interaction in this class. Culture and literacy techniques are suggested for refugee and immigrant ESL classes of varying composition.

ESL
Writing
Reading
Culture
Refugees

to Dave

who made it possible

to Paul

whose birth made it difficult
and whose life made it worthwhile

and to the memory of Emily

with love

Note:

In the text, the teacher is referred to as "she" and the learner as "he." This convention was adopted in an effort to be evenhanded and to avoid the constant use of "he or she." It is not to be construed as exhibiting a partiality toward female teachers or male learners.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this project is to explore existing techniques for improving reading and writing in order to choose those which appear useful in teaching Indochinese refugees; and in addition, to develop new techniques specifically for use with refugees.

The techniques are chosen on the basis of two assumptions. The first is that familiarity with cultural content will foster success in reading and writing.[1] That is to say, a Lao refugee will find it easier to read a story set in the familiar background of Laos than to read a story of similar linguistic difficulty set among Lapps in Finland. Also, if given the opportunity to write, it will be easier for the refugee to take as a subject his own daily customs, familiar places in the homeland or objects of native culture rather than the new and less familiar sights and occurrences around him, or the even less familiar happenings in a textbook. The picture that brings to

mind strong memories is a thousand times more powerful in bringing forth words than the slick new illustrations of Gloria or Mike in the middle-American milieu of a popular ESL textbook.[2]

If familiarity breeds success, happy memories of the familiar provide added encouragement. My second assumption is that positive associations with the cultural content of a lesson will help learners develop confidence in their reading and writing ability.[3]

The picture in front of the learner is of a beauty-spot in his native Laos, hills rising out of mist. He has been there several times, it's not far from where he lived, so it is very familiar, but also it is special to him. His eyes light up as he contemplates the view, and there is an eagerness to communicate just what this place is like. He questions the teacher. What is the word for this? How can he say that? What is this spelling? And the result (with teacher corrections) is impressive:

> The location is in the countryside not far from the city. It is in Laos. There are very beautiful forests and mountains. In the morning and evening, it is foggy around these mountains.[4]

The inspiration that comes from the familiar and the loved is enough to overcome difficulties of expression in someone usually reticent and normally not eager to test his capabilities, to take risks. Familiarity provides a starting point, and attachment provides the push: to get the words on paper, to read all the way through that long sentence to find what has been said about someone who is important to you, to write the paragraph, to read the story.

The techniques that were developed on the basis of these assumptions have been successfully used with Indochinese refugees, but their potential use is broader. Other groups of refugees are the obvious beneficiaries. For all refugees, the lost homeland is precious, more so than for voluntary immigrants. The remembered places will never be seen again, the remembered faces are lost across an impassable barrier of space and time. Their country as it is now and as they last knew it is not the true homeland. That exists only in memory or in faded pictures. News is spotty, knowledge of loved ones hard to come by.[5] It is important for refugees to store up the memories, to preserve them. They are all that remain. In the old country,

words on paper did not have the importance they now have. The world was whole: the cousins were there, and the farm, and the hills, everything in the place it had always been, and it did not have to be talked about or written down. It could be touched and experienced.[6] But then things changed; the old world was broken, and the family separated.[7] How to recapture it? In words spoken to other refugees, in letters (if they can write in their own language), or in English words spoken with difficulty and written with even more difficulty: to explain to the outside world just what it was that made life special there, before.

The refugee experience creates an urgency of expression that may not exist in other groups of ESL learners, but immigrants also have a need for expression. It is hard for them to talk and write about the new country. The experiences they have had here may not be very satisfying; they may also be confusing, therefore hard to talk about, and impossible to write about. More confusing still, because less familiar, is the life of Americans which immigrants think they aspire to, but which they do not fully understand. It

is easier to talk about the ways of home, the favorite dishes, how the local trees looked, how evenings were spent in the old country. If they can write about anything at all, they can write about the familiar, and if they are in a class of immigrants, how much easier it is to read of the experiences of their classmates, people like them, from a similar background, with similar memories and customs, than about the new and unfamiliar.

As important in the ESL class as improving reading and writing ability is gaining cultural understanding. It is important for refugees to be able to express what they feel about their country, and to talk about the things that are most fundamental to them: their home, their family, their native customs. They need to touch on what is most basic to their culture, and often their only vehicle is the new language, and their best opportunity comes in English class. The need is strongest in refugees because they, unlike some immigrants, have brought very little to the new country. What they have is, for the most part, inside them. It is no longer in the native country where the home and the farm no longer exist, or in what they see around them in the new land

except for what few possessions they have been able to bring with them. It lies in the memories and skills they carry in their heads and their hands.

Some day, the skills may be put to use in a job or in passing down a craft from mother to daughter. In the meantime, the memories can be recounted to those who will listen. The teacher should be there to listen, to help the learner find the words to express the pride he feels in his own culture, to lovingly describe the way things were, to cherish the past.

These feelings for the homeland are already in existence, but they need to be nurtured and the learner must come to know that it is possible to talk in English about things that are very "un-American." The refugee needs to know that he too is part of the new world, that his concerns are comprehensible to someone who speaks the new language, that he is not beyond the pale, because he begins to wonder. There are no Buddhists in his community; therefore, there are no Buddhists in America unless they are other refugees. If he doesn't talk about it, he will never know anything different. He looks in the ESL text and sees only references to pizza and hamburgers, and his

sponsor gives him gift certificates to McDonald's; therefore, this is the only "American" food. The food he tries to cook at home from the inadequte ingredients available is indescribable in the terms given to him. It is out of the realm of American possibility, and therefore unspeakable. The fears that his beliefs are outlandish and his food unacceptable continue to plague him until he is able to talk about them with the only people who can reassure him, Americans who know what Buddhism is, or a teacher who can laugh with him in his relief that Americans commonly buy something called "chicken noodle soup." Feelings of ambivalence continue to exist. He refuses to believe that "real" Americans can be Buddhists, or that any of them have black hair, or that we really like his food. He is always on the verge of thinking that his native customs, his very being, un-American as it is, is "bad" or "wrong." But the more Americans he can talk to, Americans who express curiosity or even surprise at his way of life, but are nevertheless interested and friendly, the more he is able to step back from the abyss of isolation and take a fresh look at the world around him.

He can regain pride in himself not only from a teacher who encourages cultural expression, but also from his interactions with other learners. His class may contain members of several ethnic groups. Even if they are all Asians, as in a class of Indochinese refugees, the customs of each group will be quite different from those of the others, and at first the different groups may feel quite ill-at-ease with one another. There may be a long-standing rivalry, mistrust, or lack of respect between two groups of refugees. For example, some Lao may regard the Hmong as primitives, to be held in contempt.[8] But in the United States, in close proximity to one another in the classroom or as neighbors, the two groups discover that they have more in common with one another than with anyone else. They come from the same country, often speak the same language, and sometimes dress similarly. Cultural isolation breaks down, and the different groups begin to see that they will always be different from one another, but that it is possible to be different and still be together. They can work together in class, talk together outside of class, and even, on occasion, go shopping together and enjoy one another's company at a party.[9]

The teacher needs to find ways to encourage this interaction which is a means of achieving harmony and understanding, not only within the class, but in the lives learners lead outside the classroom. The refugees begin to see that if it is possible to make friends with people they would scarcely have spoken to in their native country, it might be possible to have friends who come from groups whose existence they were unaware of before coming to this country. The teacher can help them to be aware that other groups, as "different" as they are from their stereotypic view of Americans, are a part of this country.

The refugee should know that Blacks and Chicanos are as much a part of America and of his community as the blond and the blue-eyed. If he doesn't learn this, he is doubly isolated: he thinks that he can never be a real American, that he is not really part of this country, and at the same time he sets himself apart from other minority groups in a position of false superiority. He is not American, and he thinks they are not either. Perceiving himself to have nothing in common with these other groups, he allows his residual feelings of xenophobia and racism to come to the fore.

It is somewhat of an uphill task for the teacher to counteract these feelings, especially if the ESL class is composed solely of Asian refugees, but there are ways it can be done. It is a mistake to neglect such cultural orientation to American life.

The diversity of races, religions, and ethnic groups is a central feature of American culture, and any approach to culture in the classroom has to deal with the multi-faceted nature of American life. Presenting a cultural monolith will not do. The teacher's task is made easier if she also pays attention to the varieties of Asian peoples in her class, celebrates the uniqueness of each and shows the parallels between their arrival in this country and the arrival of the other people who live here. The learner may begin to see that the teacher is not the sole repository of the one correct understanding of American culture. The man on the street, the Chicano neighbor next door, the Black kid his son plays with at school: each of them has a part of the answer, and when he has been here a bit longer, so will he. His understanding of American culture is increasing every day and the more varied his sources of information, the more complete his understanding

will become. The same is true of his reading and writing skills. The more he writes, the more he reads from more varied sources, the stronger he will become in those skills. What an opportunity it is for both teacher and learner if the process of improving reading and writing skills can be used to widen cultural knowledge and understanding. Through writing, the learner can express his feelings about his own culture and his interest in and confusion about the new cultures he is encountering in a way that can be shared with others who have similar needs and frustrations, and, in reading together these thoughts and feelings, the class can come together. Reading, writing, and cultural understanding will be developed simultaneously. This project seeks to explore and develop ways in which this can be accomplished.

MY CLASS

Different techniques were explored and materials developed in a class which I taught from July 1980 through March 1981 in St. Johns, Michigan. There were thirteen refugees in the class, which met four nights a week. Since this was the only class available to refugees living in a rather wide area, many levels of

speaking ability were included in the class, as well as a wide range of reading and writing levels. All of the learners had received several weeks of English-language instruction before I began to teach them. This was a class which had begun meeting during the previous spring. So all learners had some oral English proficiency, although in some cases it was extremely limited. Variation in reading and writing ability was wider than the range of speaking ability. There were no learners in the class who were completely non-literate in their first language, but several were only semi-literate, and their literacy was in non-Roman alphabet languages, either in Lao or Chinese. The learners who had the strongest reading and writing ability in English were, as might be expected, among those who were fully literate in their own language. There was not a perfect correlation between first and second language reading ability, however. One student who was fully literate in his first language, Lao, had great difficulties reading English, attributable in large measure to low listening and speaking proficiency.

During the first six months of the class, no aides or tutors were available to help in dividing the

learners into reading and writing groups. I was able to give a minimal amount of help to the two lowest-level learners on an individual basis, and somewhat more time to a group of three whose reading was very slow and based almost entirely on sight words. Since it was necessary most of the time to deal with the class as a whole, most of the reading materials used were those which closely complemented previous oral work, allowing most of the lower-level learners to follow along and even to participate, while drawing on their powers of memorization and their fund of sight-words. This worked well for most of the learners during the first few months of the class when the assigned text was Modulearn, Lessons 21-40,[10] which relies heavily on dialogs and pictures to convey meaning. When the class advanced to English for International Communication, book 2,[11] it became evident that approximately half the class could not cope with somewhat unfamiliar reading material, i.e. familiar vocabulary and structures, but unfamiliar situations. At that point, it became more necessary to divide the class in two for reading periods, with advanced learners reading silently while the less-

advanced read simpler materials aloud with the teacher, worked on sound-sign correspondence, or practiced conversational skills. Divisions of this sort became feasible on a regular basis during the last three months I worked with the class. Then, at last, the ever-more-widely divergent reading levels in the class could be dealt with, both in reading groups and as learners met individually with a tutor.

In addition to the differences in reading and writing levels, there were cultural differences: eleven of the students were Lao, and the remaining two were Chinese-Vietnamese. Of the Lao students, ten were members of two families. One family consisted of a middle-aged father and mother and three children, aged 14, 15, and 16. In the other family, there were a younger husband and wife, whose elder daughter, aged 19, also came to class. The other members of this family were the wife's parents, who were in their 60's. The Lao student who was not a member of either family was a single man, aged 25.

The Chinese-Vietnamese in the class were a middle-aged woman and her 15-year-old son. The age makeup of the class lessened the importance of cultural differences.

The Chinese-Vietnamese woman was closest in age and interests to the Lao mother of three, whose elder son was the high-school classmate of the Chinese woman's son. Tensions were stronger between the two Lao families than between the Chinese and Lao. The Lao showed interest in the culture of the Chinese-Vietnamese and vice versa. They enjoyed sharing their food, looking at photos of one another's families, and swapping refugee tales to the extent possible, since the only language they had in common was English. The teacher was able to build on this mutual trust and interest to improve language skills.

Since learners were eager to talk about themselves, the teacher first encouraged them to do so and then helped other students in their attempts at asking questions, thus getting discussion underway. Similarly, the curiosity of students about one another was a stimulus to composition. For anything students wrote about themselves and their countries, there was a ready audience.

The different linguistic backgrounds of the class also aided in ameliorating reading and pronunciation difficulties. Peer-correction could be used to an

extent not possible in a monolingual class; the Lao and the Chinese-Vietnamese each had trouble with different English phonemes.

A program designed to deal with reading and writing improvement at the same time as cultural awareness was able to deal simultaneously with many of the most important communication needs and problems of this group of refugees.

Within the class there were many differences in addition to the basic ones already touched on. An analysis of the resulting needs and problems of the class provided the basis for choosing appropriate methods to facilitate reading, writing, and cultural awareness.

It soon became apparent that some students in the class were learning at a faster rate than others. When I first started teaching the class, it was possible to consider it as one class of learners at approximately the same level of English proficiency, but within two months, two marked levels had appeared. By the time I finished teaching the class, there were three distinct levels in addition to the elderly couple (with their own problems which required

individual attention in almost any learning situation). Among the adult members of the class, ability to read and write seemed to be the determining factor in the speed of progress in English. Thus, the middle-aged couple, who had a lot of trouble reading and writing, were not able to progress orally at the rate of the younger couple or of the young single man, none of whom had reading difficulties. This was also true for the Chinese-Vietnamese woman; her efforts to read were so time-consuming that she was severely limited in the amount of new material she could comprehend. In this consideration of slow vs. fast learners, there did not appear to be any difference between the Chinese-Vietnamese and the Lao. The Chinese-Vietnamese teenager was in the forefront along with some of the younger Lao. His mother was one of the slower learners along with some of the older Lao.

Although it was hard to keep the class together as one group because of the various levels of English, fortunately the levels did not break down along cultural lines, so perhaps there were forces just as strong keeping the class together.

Age differences were a significant factor in the

potential fragmentation of the class. The two oldest students had learning problems directly attributable to their age and state of health. The oldest man in the class was a stroke victim who had considerable problems of motor coordination and memory. These problems, when combined with frequent absences due to ill health, kept him from progressing beyond rote expressions and isolated vocabulary words. Despite this, there were ways he could participate in the work of the class as a whole. He was able to repeat sounds and words, although somewhat imperfectly, and the rest of the class appreciated this participation which he himself greatly enjoyed. He was grateful for any effort to include him in the class, and the others, always respectful of age, certainly made that effort, laughing with him at his generally unsuccessful efforts, but never at his failures.

His wife had no health problems. However, she relied on her daughter to supply her with answers when she did not understand, and the daughter was eager to supply them. It was often hard to determine how much she could read with understanding and how much was rote memorization or repetition. Weaning her from dependence on her daughter was necessary.

The students who had the least difficulty in expressing themselves either orally or through writing were the older teenagers. The gap between them and the adults became evident after the public school year began, and they started to get heavy doses of English during the day. They had much more opportunity to speak, read, and write English than their parents. They were in high school all day, often had after-school activities, and had friendships with Americans and a constant flow of new experiences to reflect on, talk about, read and write about. The age difference did not appear to be the crucial factor, but rather the amount of contact with English. The young single man also had a lot of contact with English in a series of CETA jobs he held, and his conversational ability also improved. He carried this advantage over into his reading and writing, largely through extra study at home.

Since the younger people had more contact with English speakers, the gap between them and the older learners threatened to increase unless subjects of common interest were introduced into the classroom. It was boring, if not painful, for older learners to listen to their children boast of schoolday triumphs

or casual conversations on the job, when they sat at home all day with little outside stimulus and small chance at jobs. The older learners felt pride in the accomplishment of the younger ones, but also some resentment at their flaunting of it--their eagerness to show it off, and to show their parents up. The traditional attitude of respect toward elders was starting to break down, and when children started to correct their parents, and the parents flared up at them, it was clear that something needed to be done to try to bring them back together again, at least within the class context.

While these factors separated the older class members from the younger, the fact that most of the learners were members of three families helped create a special learning environment. Since family members helped one another both in and out of class, these relationships were both a help and a hindrance to progress in reading and writing. It was not beneficial, for example, when the youngest son of the middle-aged Lao couple tried to prompt his parents in their reading. They were clearly glad to have his help, and possibly even expected it, but he was not a very good

reader himself, much weaker than his older brother and sister. Because of upheavals in the family's situation in Laos, he, unlike his older siblings, had been unable to go to school and learn to read in Lao. He had very limited notions of word-attack skills, making wild guesses at most words longer than a syllable. His real help to his parents was negligible, and the result was that he felt embarrassed for letting them down.

However, help of a more knowledgeable nature could also be detrimental. The Chinese boy began by giving his mother help with her English, both in and out of class. With a little prompting from the teacher, however, she was able to see that her son could not learn to read and speak for her; she would have to do it herself. After a while, she refused to accept help from him in class, and even painstakingly did her homework herself. Her son was proud of her independence but also a little baffled that she would not accept his superior abilities. The progress the mother made on her own opened up a new world to her. With English, she could communicate with the other refugees (none of whom spoke Chinese) and with other

people in the community. Her gregariousness helped to bring the class together.

As we have seen, family closeness proved a hindrance to individual improvement of reading and writing. But it did serve in some ways to bring the class together, and that togetherness ultimately aided in the reading and writing we were to do in the class. Parents were solicitous of other people's children as well as their own, and the younger Lao family treated the young single man almost as a younger brother. For these people, the worst thing about being a refugee was being separated from their families. One learner had no family nearby at all, two of the children of one of the families in the class were in France, and the Chinese boy's father and sister remained in Vietnam. Aunts, uncles, and cousins were equally missed. Therefore, the re-creation of families or of a family atmosphere was very important to these people. They would travel long distances to see cousins, and the closer they could be to other refugees, the more muted the pain of separation. Thus, the tendency to want to be together and work together outweighed the division of the class into three families, despite tensions

between individuals which prevented the class from being one big happy family.

Tensions were exacerbated by the fact that the members of the class plus the five younger children of one of the families in the class were the only Asians in town, except for a Vietnamese woman married to an American. They were all thrown together in their isolation, people who in other circumstances would have had very little in common. Since they did not have a common language or identical customs, a certain effort had to be made to create a common culture in the classroom, and also outside it. English was a force bringing the learners together, and as they realized they wanted to share and communicate more, efforts to struggle along in English increased. In the class itself, the first language was heard only within families; the two Lao families which could have communicated with one another in Lao did so in English. It was different, of course, outside class, but the willingness to make this effort in class carried over into interest in listening to or reading the writings of fellow students in English.

There was much more of a feeling of cultural cohesiveness in this group of people who lived twenty

miles away from their nearest compatriots and thousands of miles away from their closest family members than there was in classes in Lansing, the state capital, where the learners tended to separate into pockets of their own nationality and yet in class were not as supportive of any of their classmates.[12]

The cultural cohesion of the St. Johns class had two salient features: a pride in or cherishing of the features of individual national cultures, and the recognition of a broader Asian culture. Learners showed pride in their culture by sharing it with those outside that culture. As features of the Lao culture were communicated to the Chinese, they became part of a common refugee culture. Ironically, the act of preserving the culture resulted in its change.[13]

However, the Asian culture did not become diluted with American culture, at least among the adults. Their contact with American life was so limited that their culture could not be seen as in any danger of assimilation into it. On the contrary, their lack of contact with American culture was a real hindrance to their learning to communicate in English. It was almost as if they were living in a foreign country. For a while, both larger refugee families were living out

in the country, isolated from one another and with no near neighbors other than a sponsoring family in one instance. Their relative isolation could be balanced against the fact that they had cars and could venture into town if they wished. They did not wish to very often, since they had few friends there other than the other refugee families. The only adult in these two families who was employed longer than a few weeks was the older man who worked cutting grass in the town park during the warm months: a job that gave him no opportunity for conversation.

These learners had a curiosity about, and almost a yearning towards things American, but they could not begin to understand Americans until they got more exposure to American life and more confidence in their ability to communicate with Americans. Getting them to form their curiosity into comments and questions in the classroom seemed to be one step towards the goal of understanding. Looking at life outside the classroom had to be another. Communication and cultural understanding would have to be achieved together, if at all. But communication among members of the class had to come first, along with their own Asian cultural understanding. Both of these were big steps

for all the refugees, and in building this necessary foundation they might be creating a new multicultural society in microcosm. Their ultimate need was to be able to go beyond this, while retaining it as a support to be relied on in difficulty and enjoyed in better times. But that eventual reaching out and breaking away might not be possible for some refugees. The leap would be too far; the support system too fragile to risk letting go of, even for a minute.

Notes

[1]Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Teacher (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 28.

[2]Richard C. Yorkey et al., English for International Communication (New York: American Book Co., 1979).

[3]Ashton-Warner, pp. 31-35.

[4]From classroom composition of Khamphy Phommachanh, 3 Mar. 1981.

[5]See Rosemary Sayigh, Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries (London: Zed Press, 1979), pp. 10-11.

[6]G. L. Barney, "The Hmong of Northern Laos," in Glimpses of Hmong History and Culture. Indochinese Refugee Education Guide, GI 16 (Arlington, Virginia: National Indochinese Clearinghouse, Center for Applied Linguistics, n.d.), pp. 18-44.

[7]See Yang See Koumarn, "The Hmongs of Laos: 1896-1978," in Glimpses of Hmong History and Culture, pp. 9-17 and W. E. Garrett, "The Hmong of Laos: No Place to Run," National Geographic, Jan. 1974, pp. 78-111.

[8]Personally expressed opinion of some of my students.

[9]See Celestine Bohlen, "Tensions, Adjustment for Asian Refugees," Washington Post, 22 Oct. 1981, Sec. B, p. 1, cols. 2-4; p. 8, cols. 1-5; p. 9, col. 1.

[10]English as a Second Language: A New Approach for the 21st Century, Student Leaflets, Lessons 21-40 (San Juan Capistrano, California: Modulearn, 1979).

[11]Yorkey, et al.

[12]All classes cited were part of the Indochinese Education Project at Lansing Community College, Lansing, Michigan. The extension class in St. Johns, Michigan is described in this thesis. Other classes referred to met in downtown Lansing and were composed of refugee students actually living in Lansing and East Lansing.

[13]See Bohlen, p. 1.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS FOR UTILIZING CULTURAL INFORMATION TO FACILITATE READING AND WRITING

There are a number of well-documented methods for eliciting writing from learners (and also thereby increasing reading skill) based on the utilization of either the culture of the learners' community or of the perceptions of the individual learner, shaped as they are by that culture.

There are also methods of teaching a second language which explicitly utilize material from the learners' culture or into which such material can easily be integrated. These methods of teaching a second language focus on aural-oral skills rather than reading-writing skills.

The problem facing the ESL teacher facilitating reading and writing in the new language through material created by the learner himself or coming from his culture is that of choosing reading-writing methods useful in an ESL context, and accordant with a chosen

method of language teaching. To see how this can be done, it is first necessary to examine relevant reading-writing methods and their applicability to the ESL class.

First-language Reading and Writing Methods

Sylvia Ashton-Warner

Of the methods which rely on the thoughts of the individual learner, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's method of "organic reading" is probably best known.[1] Variants of this method are known as "language experience" and have been described and utilized by many reading theorists and teachers.[2]

The Ashton-Warner method was developed for young children learning to read for the first time, although not necessarily in their first language. In fact, most of Ashton-Warner's pupils were Maori children in New Zealand's state schools. Their culture was not the mainstream culture of the officially adopted text-books. To "bridge" the gap between the Maori culture and the English culture which the pupils had to come to grips with if they were to succeed in New Zealand society, Sylvia Ashton-Warner "gave" the children their own words.[3] This "key vocabulary," different

for each child, consisted of the words which came from the child's lips, from his naming of the pictures he drew or the "strong words" which recurred in his story-telling and conversation.[4] The teacher wrote the words, one each day, on stiff cards for the children to repeat to themselves, trace with their fingers and teach to their classmates. If the words could be recalled the next day they remained part of the key vocabulary. If not, they were discarded. From a vocabulary of forty "key" words of an unforgettable nature (one's own name, "Daddy," "frightened," "kiss") the pupils progressed to writing a sentence every day and then longer and longer passages until they were filling pages and notebooks. These first writings were also the first reading, which they read to themselves and to one another.

Ashton-Warner recognized that if these children were to succeed in the school system and eventually in the society at large, they had to learn to read the standard texts used in the higher grades. In order to prepare them to do so, she wrote "transitional" readers which accustomed the children to the standard format and vocabulary, while presenting familiar Maori

people and places, and using Maori words to make the writing more accessible to the learners.

Can a method designed, as this one is, for the initial teaching of reading to children be applicable to L_2 learners of a variety of ages? Certain elements of it definitely can, others are perhaps less relevant. Ashton-Warner's basic tenet, that one needs to progress from the inner world out, is certainly to the point with immigrants and refugees. With this method, they write very soon, and through writing can express their feelings about their world, which at this point consists of memories of another culture and the first acquaintance with a new one. Ashton-Warner dwells at length on the mechanics of putting pen to paper, necessary for the person learning to read and write, whether child or adult, but less so for the literate L_2 learner unless he is learning a new alphabet. The literate adult L_2 learner should be able to benefit from the Ashton-Warner system without much time spent writing a "key vocabulary." He is ready to write about what he knows and cares about as soon as he has learned the simplest of structures in the new language and is able to make known to the teacher the words he

needs. His "key vocabulary" might consist, not of words he is able to say to the teacher, but of words he cannot yet speak but which he can nevertheless ask the teacher for, through gesture or picture. If Ashton-Warner is right, these are the words he will remember because they are the words he needs. He can write sentences from the beginning of his language learning and continue to progress more rapidly than children would thereafter. The process of learning to read English for the non-literate L_2 learner can follow the original Ashton-Warner scheme with only slight modification.

Ashton-Warner's system should not be thought of as applicable only to children. It does not condescend to the learner, but asks him to give his best. The product, the written work, is different for adults than for children, but the process can be the same. Adults, with their broader experience and more sophisticated perceptions, write differently from children, but the methods through which they are empowered to say what they need to say can be identical, as long as their knowledge and imagination are respected.

Kenneth Koch

It is instructive to examine here a method not specifically designed to teach L_1 reading, but to encourage the literary creativity of children in the early years of reading. This is Kenneth Koch's effort (in a New York public school) to help children write poetry.[5] The majority of the children in Koch's project were native speakers of English, but there were also a number of Spanish-speakers. He did not teach them English, but used the language they had, English with an admixture of Spanish words, as a vehicle for their poems. The poems began with an "idea": for example, a class collaboration or a noise poem. Koch encouraged the use of poetic devices which were appealing to and accessible to children. Repetition was a frequent device. Rhyming, which requires an extensive vocabulary and can easily result in cliché, was discouraged. One of Koch's "poetry ideas" was a "wish poem" in which each line was to begin "I wish" and to include the name of a comic-strip character as well as a color and a city or country. The children were writing about something that related to them personally ("I wish"), but at the same time were being encouraged

to let their minds range far afield as they combined the familiar (colors, comic-strip characters) to create unfamiliar juxtapositions. What they were doing was easy for them, but the results were strange and interesting. With each new poetry idea, they were being presented with new possibilities for using language and viewing themselves and the world.

Koch felt that some of his best successes were with the N.E. (non-English-speaking) classes.[6] These were not ESL classes, but classes for children whose first language was not English and/or children who had trouble reading. In fact, all of the children could communicate quite well in English. Writing made them uncomfortable since they hadn't been successful at it, but they were able to succeed at class collaborations and individual poems which they dictated to a teacher or helped one another with. The ideas were there, waiting to come out, and with a little encouragement, creativity overflowed.

This type of activity would be easily applicable to an ESL context, even in an adult setting. Repetition of structure and vocabulary make writing easier, not harder, for an L_2 learner, and the structures

needed for poems are often simple ones. At the same time, the ideas expressed are the learners' own. The "poetry idea," especially the more detailed it is, makes the basis for a controlled composition of the most creative sort. Class collaboration, dictation, student exchange of ideas, and help with the mechanics of writing all might lend themselves to use in an ESL class. Are poems of this type too "juvenile" or will they be seen as such by adult learners? Probably not, in a class of learners with a non-literary or even a non-literate background. Written poetry may be as unfamiliar to these immigrant or refugee learners as it is to American elementary school children.

Instructive, in this light, is another teaching experience of Kenneth Koch, described in his book, I Never Told Anybody.[7] He conducted poetry workshops for elderly people living in a nursing home. These were native or fluent speakers of English whose only possible exposure to poetry had been many years before, at school. Koch's approach was similar to that he had used with children: poems came from a poetry idea, were often class collaborations, and the work of the other members of the class was the prime literary

inspiration. The elderly poets had many limitations, not only the physical ones which meant that all the poems had to be dictated, but such an utter lack of contact with the outside world that they had to draw constantly on their distant memories to provide material for their poems. Ultimately, a number of them wrote quite sophisticated poems, sometimes even drawing on the poetic literature for inspiration (Koch read poems to them). In a similar way, the refugee writer of poetry can be considered handicapped. He has trouble with the mechanics of writing (if he's learning a new alphabet), he has difficulties expressing what he knows he wants to say, and he has a vast understanding of things which are long ago and far away, if only he can find the means of describing them, while his vocabulary in the new language fits more closely his present experience, which he may not wish to write about. Poetry can help the learner talk about the past and his feelings by giving him a structure into which he can fit both simple vocabulary and strong emotion.

While Kenneth Koch's efforts were directed towards the writing of poetry and not specifically towards the

development of basic reading and writing skills, these skills were certainly developed by his students in the course of their writing poetry and the inevitable sharing of it with their classmates.

Cultural Journalism

Basic skills can be a product of a program which is designed with their development in mind, but in addition has other goals, more obvious and appealing to the learners.

An instance of this is "cultural journalism," exemplified by Foxfire Magazine, produced by high school students in Rabun Gap, Georgia, with the aid and encouragement of their teacher, Eliot Wigginton. Students improve both oral and written skills through interviewing, transcribing interviews, and doing most of the rest of the work required to publish a magazine, including corresponding with subscribers. The people they interview are rural old-timers who still practice mountain skills or produce handicrafts. The resulting magazine articles (now collected in a series of books) describe in minute detail the building of a log cabin or the making of soap, and also provide a more general picture of mountain life and mountain people.[8]

The interest for the Rabun Gap students lies in getting out of the classroom into a world from which they have come but know little about. Learning about their own mountain culture, in many instances, from members of their own families, and then being able to transmit their knowledge to the wider world, provides the impetus for doing an accurate and thorough job of recording and organizing their work into publishable form.

The learning process is just as important as the finished product. This process includes learning about and coming to understand their traditional culture as well as mastering writing skills and the mechanics of publishing. The process is seen as valuable by the students because it has such a successful end, but also because, despite the hard work involved, the individual tasks are enjoyable or rewarding.[9]

There are other instances of students in American schools successfully using methods of "cultural journalism" to explore and help preserve their cultural heritage.[10] While the method is most easily used in a relatively stable community with a large number of older informants who can describe and demonstrate the

way things have been done in that place for as long as anyone can remember, it also lends itself to use in a heterogeneous or even a relatively new immigrant community.

A multicultural urban community is documented in Fox Point and Its People: A Community Diary.[11] This booklet was put together by teenagers participating in a summer employment project in Providence, Rhode Island. The Fox Point neighborhood is ethnically diverse, and has long included large numbers of Cape Verdeans and Portuguese. The teenage writers in this project were primarily Americans with a Cape Verdean background, but they attempted to draw the broad range of the community into their project. They spoke to and wrote about elderly lifetime residents of Fox Point as well as recent Portuguese immigrants. They recorded such things as Cape Verdean recipes, the churches and small businesses to be found in the neighborhood, the history of the area and current impressions of the community by its residents. The major focus is on the present, whereas in Foxfire it is on the past, but the collection of interviews shows that this is a community fighting to preserve its

heritage while remaining vital in the present. A project such as this serves the goal of bringing young and old together in the work of strengthening and preserving the community, while helping young people with needed oral and written skills.

It is possible to include the immigrant with limited English skills in such a project both as an informant and a reporter-writer. Bilingual members of the community can interview those who do not speak English and transcribe the interviews in the original language, translating or paraphrasing them in English for publication. A continuing publication, such as a community newspaper written by children or a magazine designed for a wider audience, is an excellent vehicle for the participants to improve their L_2 skills while maintaining involvement with their community of mother-tongue speakers. At first, the better writers will write more, and the better English-speakers will feel more confident about interviewing those in the English-speaking community. Beginning ESL learners can be informants, writers of short and simple pieces, typists, and organizers. The community involvement engendered by their participation in the project should encourage

them in their efforts to learn English, and the practical work of publishing should provide the needed practice in second-language skills. Cultural involvement, in the immigrant community and also perhaps with other ethnic groups, can thus reinforce the skills of the ESL classroom and be a vehicle for their transmission.

Paulo Freire

Any discussion of literacy methods which have a strong cultural component cannot fail to include the method of Paulo Freire, for whom cultural transformation is the goal and literacy a means to it. Freire's concern is the liberation of oppressed peoples, in the sense of a mental or cultural liberation. He worked with peasants in Brazil and with people in newly decolonized Guinea-Bissau. These people led lives of physical oppression and poverty, and, more importantly for Freire, were culturally oppressed. They had no feeling of themselves as agents for change, but were stuck in the mire of their oppression, unaware of the fullness of their humanity and of their ability to individually or collectively change the things that made their lives miserable.[12]

Freire adapted his method to fit the need of these people for political action groups or for education, particularly literacy and post-literacy training. For Freire, the role of teachers is always to work with the learners and to learn from them during the process of education. The teachers first familiarize themselves with the situation of the group of learners they are to work with. Time is spent in observation of the community and discussion with the people to find out what their needs are. Out of this period (in which the teacher is the learner) come a series of "generative themes," keys to the oppressed state in which the people find themselves. These themes will provide a focal point for the work that needs to be done: evoked through pictures, they form the basis for group discussions designed to transform the participants into people who are conscious of their situation in life, able to act upon it and change it. Distilled into "generative words," they provide the basis for literacy training.[13]

The generative words are different in nature from Sylvia Ashton-Warner's "key vocabulary" in that they come out of a collective experience rather than

the individual psyche. However, the intended impact on literacy training is remarkably similar. In both cases, these are potent words for the learners, and the mastery of them gives an initial feeling of accomplishment along with the knowledge that it is possible to learn to read and, therefore, to take a step towards mastery of one's environment.

Freire's specific literacy techniques, which include breaking down the generally lengthy generative words into their constituent syllables, and forming these into other words, are somewhat more applicable to languages such as Spanish and Portuguese, phonetic as they are, than to English, but his approach to working with the learner has universal applicability, even in situations where political or economic oppression is not evident.

For example, Freire's approach can provide insights to guide a teacher who is working with a group of immigrants or refugees. It is especially suited to work with a homogeneous group, since it is the duty of the teacher to learn the concerns of the group and to deal with these concerns, rather than with the separate concerns of each individual in the

class. The less homogeneous the class, the harder the teacher must work to pull common threads of concern from the mass of needs and interests found within the class. Therefore, while it may be useful to spend a lot of time talking about Hmong society if the learners are all Hmong, in other instances it may be necessary to generalize, and take up consideration of Southeast Asian society or the condition of being a refugee or, broader yet, problems of foreigners in American society. Above all, the teacher needs to discover what is important to the learners, whether it is re-examination of the native culture in light of new experience, or an examination of the new culture with insight from the old, so that the new arrivals can find their way in the new society without losing track of their roots. Again, it is important to stress that the needs of the learners as a collectivity are paramount, so the teacher is always concerned with the needs of the group. She initially elicits shared concerns and interests, and then finds ways to work with these concerns within the group. Thus the learners continue to share ideas, and to develop their cultural and language skills within the group. The

individual draws strength from the group, which becomes a microcosm of the society with which he must cope in the world outside the classroom.

Certainly there are striking differences between a class of Indochinese refugees isolated in an American town, and a group of Brazilian peasants in the society of which they have always been a part. It is harder for refugees to understand their new society than for peasants to understand the society in which they have always lived. But once understanding begins, it is often far easier for the refugee to change his life so that he can be an active member of his society than it is for the peasant to change the long-held patterns of his existence, to rebel against the negative aspects of his society. The refugee has already rebelled against his old society or against some of the negative aspects of his former existence, and therefore knows that he can effect change. He needs only to learn how to create the desired balance between retention of his native culture and finding an active place within his new society. A class consisting solely of refugees, far from hindering entrance into the new society, can be a great help.

First, the refugee is part of a group with a similar background. There are familiar things in common, a basis for understanding and support, and a starting point for discussion.

Second, there is a common need to learn specific things about the new society, to be able to utilize language for specific purposes, to be able to come to grips with life in the new community. The class members readily perceive these needs and it is easiest for them to learn how to act on them along with the other members of the group, instead of being thrust out alone to deal with a difficult landlord (or a difficult sponsor). Third, problems with literacy skills are likely to be similar in such a group, and even if some members of the group are much more advanced than others, there is an appreciation of the problems of the beginners which would be much harder to find in a culturally heterogeneous group. Finally, perhaps the greatest underlying need for the refugee is to effect a balance or come to a synthesis of the old culture and the new, something each individual will do differently. It seems far more likely that this will occur when the newcomer does not feel isolated

from his original culture. In a comfortable group situation he can avoid the extremes of total retreat from the new and frightening society or complete rejection of his old life.

Second-language Methods

It is evident that various L_1 literacy methods can be useful in an ESL literacy class, in that they can provide ways of working with the group in a cultural context, and also general insight into techniques for fostering reading and writing. However, some of the techniques used by Freire, Wigginton, and Ashton-Warner are not easily adapted for use in a beginning ESL class of non-literate or semi-literate refugees. Since oral-aural skills need to be developed at the same time as or prior to literacy skills, methods of second-language learning which emphasize oral communication skills but also provide a framework for literacy training are needed. For a class of refugees, whether homogeneous or culturally diverse, it is equally important that a culturally sensitive approach be utilized.

Community Language Learning (Curran)

One approach to L_2 learning which maintains cultural sensitivity and can be made to incorporate the necessary literacy instruction is Charles Curran's Counseling-Learning, which in its specific application to L_2 learning is known as Community Language Learning.[14] Just as Paulo Freire's goal encompasses far more than learning to read, so Curran is concerned with much more than developing ability in foreign languages. His concern is "to engage the learner as a whole person,"[15] and while his interest, primarily as a psychologist and only secondarily as the developer of a method of language learning, is in the individual's attitude toward the target language and towards language-learning in general, his method places strong emphasis on the group. Language learning is seen as a form of therapy, with interactions taking place at beginning stages between the individual learners in the group and a "knower" (teacher and counselor) who supplies each learner with linguistic knowledge and provides the emotional support necessary for the learner to be able to communicate in the new language within the class. In later stages of learning, the

learners become relatively independent of the knower and the counseling relationship may actually be reversed, with the learners needing to provide reassurance to the knower that her skills are still of use to them. Throughout the five stages of learning which Curran identifies, the learners develop communicative competence in group conversations during which the knower is constantly available (outside the conversation circle) to provide a linguistic model, but not the actual content of the conversation. In the initial stage, learners speak to the knower in their native language and she gives them the second-language translations they use in their conversation within the group. Later, the knower supplies words, pronunciation, correction, and idiomatic usage only as necessary at each stage. The group conversations form the first or "investment" phase of the lesson. The second phase, "reflection," involves two things. First, the learners express their feelings about the conversation they have just finished. The knower does not offer her own comments, but reflects back to the learners the ideas and emotions they have expressed, serving as a sort of sounding-board. In the second

part of the reflection phase, the learners, with the help of the knower, reflect on the linguistic aspects of the original conversation. They listen to a tape of it, transcribe it with the help of the knower, and look at the linguistic structures involved. This stage of reflection may be broadened to include drills and other types of practice of the material contained in the conversation. After this phase is completed, learners are ready to begin a new conversation.

There are obvious advantages to this method from the standpoint of both literacy training and cultural awareness. Since the content of the class conversations comes entirely from the learners, it consists of subjects they both know and care about. In a refugee class, subject matter can range from life in the old country to the daily problems of the new life in America. For those learners who are reluctant to express their deepest feelings in any sort of group situation, the Community Language Learning setting, with constant linguistic and emotional support available from the knower, greatly increases the likelihood of some expression of feelings. The method "forces" the learner, if he is to participate at all, to express

thoughts and feelings in a give-and-take situation. If the method is to have any success in such a class, it is especially important for the knower-counselor to have the trust of the learners. It may be necessary to establish this trust through use of less threatening (i.e. more impersonal) activities during the period when the teacher and learners first come together.

The reflective phase of the CLL lesson easily lends itself to literacy instruction. In the early stages of language learning, conversations are brief. The teacher plays back the tape of the conversation and has the learners dictate to her what they hear. This transcript is put on the blackboard for immediate reading practice, and later, copies of it are given to the class members to aid them in reading and in work with the structures and vocabulary contained in the conversation. Writing practice occurs either when learners copy the conversation from the board or when groups attempt their own transcription through listening to the tape or from memory.

Community Language Learning is the method of second-language learning which seems to lead most

readily to the twin goals of literacy and multicultural education. There are other methods, most notably modifications of the audio-lingual approach, which might be beneficial, again given a sensitive teacher who can inspire the trust of the class.

Modifications of Audio-lingual Method

The standard audio-lingual lesson, consisting of a dialog presented to the class by the teacher, memorized and dramatized by the learners, and then drilled in its component structures, can with some modifications provide a venue for cultural sharing as well as reading and writing practice. The teacher must choose the dialog to fit the class. A series of dialogs in a textbook may be well-graded according to grammatical structures and yet have little relevance to a given group of learners. If the class is one of adult refugees or refugees of mixed ages, it is wise to stay away from a textbook designed for high school students or those about to enter college. The learner's time will be wasted with lessons about school sports or vacation travel experiences of well-to-do students, when what he needs is help in talking to his landlord or applying for a job. On the other hand, some texts

designed with the immigrant in mind may be too specific in their setting (New York City) or depicted cultural group (Hispanic) to be completely useful with a rural class or a class of Indochinese refugees. The teacher may find it helpful to make minor adaptations in dialogs from such books when using them in the classroom: changing the names of the characters to more accurately reflect the ethnic composition of the class, or changing some vocabulary to reflect the perceived needs of the learners. But a teacher may find that her students' needs are best served if she creates her own dialogs, utilizing situations familiar to the learners in the class, or situations they may be likely to encounter in the future, and incorporating the necessary grammatical structures or semantic functions.

Since the audiolingual or aural-oral method concentrates on oral skills, the teacher using this method needs to find a way to incorporate reading and writing into the lessons in a way which goes beyond mere reading and copying of dialogs. Perhaps the best way of doing this is suggested by the "CLAD method" developed by the Centre de Linguistique

Appliqué de Dakar (Dakar Center for Applied Linguistics). It is a variation on the audio-lingual method consisting of a set of graded dialogs with a standard cast of characters. The dialogs are presented to the class by the teacher, memorized and acted out by the students, and then adapted by the class as a whole into new dialogs utilizing a similar story structure and grammatical features, but varied vocabulary. As student knowledge of the new language increases, adaptations become freer. Material from previous dialogs is utilized and less input from the teacher is needed. The use of such dialogs developed by small groups of learners could provide an opportunity for learners to practice and develop their writing skills (in the composition of the dialogs) and reading skills (with the exchange of newly-written dialogs among groups of students). The role of the teacher in the composition phase would be as a resource person, to supply needed words or to provide ideas for varied dialogs if learners were stymied. In the exchange or sharing phase, the teacher would be there to give help and encouragement as learners dramatized their dialogs. Finally, she could help the class

preserve the dialog content by writing the dialog on the board as learners dictated it, or by helping transcribe a taped dialog. The original CLAD method emphasizes oral composition and dramatization of new material, but if it is important to work on reading and writing, that emphasis can be shifted, and the resulting dialogs, while less spontaneous, will be more polished and will perhaps enable learners to integrate more material.

The opportunity to write their own dialogs enables learners to draw on their own experience as well as on their fund of linguistic structures. There is the possibility of a dialog or playlet created by the entire class and drawing on common experience, and of dialogs created by small groups or pairs which may reflect more individual experiences. Here the idea for the dialog is likely to be based on something that actually happened to a learner, rather than conventional subject matter which learners have read about rather than felt or experienced. Particularly in a large class, this small-group production of dialogs is a way for the teacher to learn more about the class members, their interests, and their culture. She can

utilize this learning in her own creation of further materials which will in turn provide the jumping-off point for further student literary production. In this way, dialogs become something more than materials to be memorized. They are the occasion for the initiation of a process, a dialog between teacher and learners and among the learners themselves.

Notes

[1] Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Teacher (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), pp. 25-45.

[2] See Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1971), pp. 107-111 for one New York public school's use of "language experience."

[3] Ashton-Warner, pp. 28-30.

[4] Ashton-Warner, pp. 38-40.

[5] Kenneth Koch and The Students of P.S. 61 in New York City, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry (New York: Vintage-Random House, c. 1970).

[6] Koch et al., pp. 46-53.

[7] Kenneth Koch, I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home (New York: Vintage-Random House, c. 1977).

[8] The Foxfire Book, ed. with an introduction by Eliot Wigginton (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, c. 1972).

[9] For description of process, see Eliot Wigginton, Moments: The Foxfire Experience (Washington, D.C.: IDEAS, n.d.)

[10] Salt, a Maine publication, is a good example.

[11] Participants in the CETA Summer Youth Employment Program at the Fox Point Community Organization, (Providence, R.I., 1979).

[12] For a description of Freire's theory and method, see Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum-Seabury, c. 1970).

[13] Freire, p. 101.

[14] My summary of Curran's method is based on Charles A. Curran, Counseling-Learning in Second Languages (Apple River, Illinois: Apple River Press, c. 1976).

[15] Curran, p. 1.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EXPERIENCE OF ONE CLASS IN LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE ENGLISH

Techniques Used In Reading and Writing

The various methods and techniques described in the preceding chapter obtained varying degrees of success in my class of thirteen Indochinese refugees when it came to fostering the twin goals of English literacy and multicultural education. Some techniques which did not utilize culture-based content were nonetheless useful in encouraging reading and writing, and could be fruitfully used in conjunction with more culturally-oriented methods and materials. Sometimes culturally-based materials which originated outside the class and the cultures represented in it caused problems which hindered intercultural understanding as well as progress in literacy. However, there were some techniques which enabled even these materials to be used with some success both for reading and writing

and as a basis for intercultural education. Finally, those methods and techniques which were found to be most successful were those utilizing content from the class itself, and the cultural background and experiences of class members.

Techniques from Silent Way (Gattegno)

Techniques used which were not overtly culture-based derived largely from the Silent Way. I had at my disposal various materials developed by Dr. Caleb Gattegno and other exponents of the Silent Way, including a sound-color chart, a fidel, and a set of Cuisenaire rods. From the start, I used the first two (in conjunction with other methods and techniques) to work on reading and writing, mainly to facilitate sound-symbol correspondence and fluency in reading and writing. Rods were introduced later for use by small groups for grammar and vocabulary practice, which were afterwards reinforced with reading and writing.[1]

The sound-color chart (which has no letters on it, only blocks of various colors, each representing one of the phonemes of English) was useful primarily as an introduction to the fidel, Dr. Gattegno's series

of charts comprising the English sound system in writing. For my Indochinese students, work with the sound-color chart was a game, sometimes amusing, but often confusing to the older learners, who were not only slower to catch on to the idea behind the chart, but slower to distinguish one vowel sound from another, and to remember from one session to the next which color was which sound. The chart might have proved much more useful if it had been introduced at the beginning of their language and literacy learning. As it was, the students had already worked for several weeks in a book with which they were familiar and even comfortable, although some of them could read no more than isolated memorized words, others no words at all, and the more advanced had very imperfect notions of the pronunciation of the English words they read. Thus, it was necessary to find a way for the learners to reach a better understanding of how the sounds of English went together to form words, and of what those words looked like in English writing. The sound-color chart, having no letters, could help accomplish only the first of these goals, so it was soon dropped in favor of the fidel.

From the sound-color chart, the learners had begun to grasp the variety of English sounds and to distinguish the vowels in words with which they were already familiar. I would point to a color representing a vowel sound and the learners as a group or individually would say the sound. Or I would spell out short words in color and then the learners would say them. Some students spelled out words on the chart for the rest of the class to "read," but for the most part they were not accustomed to "playing teacher" and were reluctant to have so much attention focussed on them. However, when the rest of the class was otherwise occupied, several of the students enjoyed playing with the sound-color chart by themselves.

When the fidel was introduced, one chart at a time, it had an immediate appeal for the students. Most of them grasped that the colors representing each sound were the same as on the sound-color chart and they were happy to have some letters to look at, something to which they could attach the sounds.

Reading English was difficult and confusing for these students. Only one, a Vietnamese teenager, was accustomed to reading in a language written in the

Roman alphabet. The English text they were provided with did not give them any help with phonics.[2] It was full of words, phrases, and conversations which were intended to be those most useful to new immigrants as they tried to organize their lives in the United States. Even in the early lessons it contained long words and words difficult to pronounce and read. Interspersed among the lessons were some pronunciation drills consisting of minimal pairs, followed by sentences using the sounds presented. These drills were useful but were not enough for these students, who were having problems with much more than the two sounds worked on in each pronunciation lesson. Some of them had no way of puzzling through the lessons other than memorizing word by word.

The fidel proved to be an easy and interesting way of introducing and practicing vowel sounds and then vowel-consonant combinations. Several techniques were used. I would point to a vowel sound in one of its most common spellings, for example the pale yellow "u". One student at least would be able to say it--[ə]. Then the others would chime in. In this way, I would review the previous lesson and

familiarize the class with a few more vowel sound-symbol correspondences each day, always giving different students a chance to respond, and utilizing peer-correction and repetition by the entire class. When I was sure that the students were together in their recognition of and ability to reproduce the correct vowel sound from the color and the letter or letter sequence, I would begin to point first to one of the vowel sounds and then to a consonant, creating pronounceable combinations, always progressing to two-, three-, and four-letter words. Most of the words chosen were already familiar to the students from oral work and possibly from their book as well, but there were always new words introduced which the students learned to pronounce from the chart even before learning their meaning. The goal of these exercises was first and foremost to concentrate on sound and symbol. Meaning was secondary.

Once students were somewhat familiar with the new sounds and spellings, a series of students were given a chance to take the pointer and spell out words. This was most successful when one of the more advanced students would point out the sounds and wait for

a choral response. Learners who were having problems did not feel singled out by their classmates, nor were the more advanced able to monopolize the class they could if they were called on individually.

These exercises were valuable for all ability levels in the class. The beginning or slower students could practice their recognition of letters and corresponding sounds while beginning to recognize the spelling of familiar short words. The better readers were able to learn some new vocabulary and to reinforce the sound-symbol correspondences they had already grasped. It was an enjoyable activity for all of the students, something to challenge the memory, a contrast to book lessons.

The initial exercises with the fidel relied for their success very much on the memory of each person. No words were written down by teacher or student. One sound at a time was pointed out on the chart, and the students had to put the sequence together in their heads and then say the resulting word. This was quite a challenging type of reading. To get full benefit from this learning, it was reinforced by silent dictations in which the students would write the

pointed-out sequence instead of saying it. The resulting list of words on the students' papers was corrected by having individual students write the words on the blackboard and then say them. Finally, there was a reading exercise in which I randomly called on learners to read the words on the board. At this stage of the lesson, most of the learners, including the beginners, could read most of the words.

Through weeks of doing exercises with the fidel, the class progressed to more and more sounds and spellings, new vocabulary and lengthier dictations. Instead of lists of words, more of the dictations were new texts, always presented silently, tapped out by the pointer on the fidel. The texts were presented slowly enough and with enough repetition that many of the students for whom writing was still slow and laborious were able to write a reasonable approximation of them. To check and reinforce the exercise, I had students orally dictate to me what they had written, and I wrote the corrected version on the board as dictated. Then other students read the text aloud from the board. Everyone had a chance to make his own corrected copy which he could then read at

leisure. The result of these exercises was that the learners, who had begun by attaching sound to symbol and symbol to sound, were now able to attach meaning to the sound and symbol. A by-product was improvement in reading speed, which came with concentration on the spatial orientation necessary for reading English. Students looked at letters, sounds and words in a sequence, joining them together, rather than trying to memorize the spelling of word or phrase.

In addition to the sound-color chart and the fidel, we did some work in class with Cuisenaire rods. These are helpful for work in small groups, especially with beginning students. They were used primarily to introduce and practice elements of grammar. Here, I will discuss a few ways in which that initial grammar work was extended to include reading and writing practice. Normally, a conversational exchange was initiated by the teacher or tutor: "Give him a rod." A student would perform the action and then he or another student would give the same or a similar command ("Give her a rod," "Give them a rod," "Give me a blue rod") to other students. The teacher would prompt as necessary. Reading and writing were

introduced in several ways. One was to present a student with such a command written on a slip of paper. The student then read the command as if he were initiating it. If he had difficulty, another student would try. These commands were used to facilitate a series of conversational exchanges. Another way of introducing the written word was a follow-up exercise to conversational rod work. The group was presented with a transcript of a previous conversation which had been copied by hand or taped by the teacher. The students read it to themselves or out loud, and reproduced it in action as well. An alternate method of reproducing a previous rod exchange was to transform it into a narrative, for example: "Pheuy gave Somnieng a rod. Then, Muoi gave Nancy a blue rod." This provided a text to read in class, and to follow with both oral and written questions: "What did Somnieng do?" "What did you do?" The latter question received different answers from each student. These extension exercises provided not only practice of grammar structures beyond those in the initial conversation, but reading and writing practice with various types of sentences.

Sometimes oral dictations were based on the content of the previous written exercises.

In this work with the rods, the students were beginning to get away from reading and writing which concentrated on sound rather than meaning. They were going in the direction of student initiated and controlled reading and writing, although as yet the content was limited to classroom situations, interesting only because the learners could say and write new and different things, but not those things which were of greatest interest to them. They weren't talking about their needs in the real world, about their lives today or in the past. This was a limitation in the usefulness of the Silent Way materials and techniques. There were also difficulties for some of the learners which were inherent in the techniques themselves. Because work with the fidel naturally focuses more on sounds than on the look of words as we usually see them on a page, some students still had difficulty with spatial orientation. The pointer gave them the letter sequence too quickly. During a silent dictation, they could not retain a sequence long enough in their minds to be able to write the entire word or phrase

before the pointer continued. This sort of exercise accentuated the difference between the quicker and slower students, and did not help to improve slower students' reading or writing ability. Because the vocabulary emphasis in work with the fidel was on words containing specific sounds, rather than the most useful words stemming from the experience of the learners, beginning students were introduced to words which were not very useful to them. More advanced students with larger vocabularies could more readily use some extra words.

Silent Way techniques are best used in a class of uniform ability, although as was seen with some of the fidel work (recognizing and repeating individual sounds and reading the elicited words after they had been written on the board), there are ways in which various levels can simultaneously benefit from a lesson. If the class is multi-level, some of this work as well as work with rods is best done in small groups with help from a teacher as needed. The rod work is an excellent way of tying grammar to reading and writing. However, it is difficult to link it to the most useful real-life situations, and therefore

it is somewhat lacking in interest or excitement. There is an intellectual satisfaction for the learners in knowing that they have gotten the correct structure through their own effort, working together, and then in learning to write a correct sentence. For some students, the effort is almost too much of a challenge. It is a slow process, and continual practice with the rods is necessary for good retention.

The major drawback of work with the Silent Way materials was the lack of transference from working with sound, symbol, and structure to being able to talk about things learners want to and need to say about their world. Certainly it is possible to build on rod work utilizing the same structures but different vocabulary, or to have the rods represent real-life objects and situations. However, I found that with my students a better approach was to move as quickly as possible, generally within the same lesson, from the more abstract work with phonics and grammatical structure to real-life situations, even if they were merely life-like situations involving fictional people. There were bridges between the two realms: the new and useful vocabulary that was sometimes introduced

via the fidel, the follow-up to rod work which reproduced in writing actual conversations of the students, and vocabulary lists and flash cards utilizing words from both sources as well as from books and the students' conversations on real-life topics. The Silent Way work became a companion to work with material of overtly cultural content, which itself was always reinforced by written exercises bringing out the relevant grammatical structures and stressing some aspects of phonics.

Other than the work with Silent Way materials, almost all classwork dealt with real-life situations, either situations set up by the teacher, or provided by a book, or created in some way by the learners themselves. Various methods and techniques were used to involve the learners with the material and, through the material, with the linguistic and cultural content of the English language and their own lives. Those materials not originating with the learners themselves came either directly from books or from classroom situations devised by the teacher and eventually transformed into writing by the teacher or the learners.

Work With ESL Readers and Texts

More than half of the class's reading came from various ESL readers and texts. Most of the time, this reading was not used to provide an occasion for writing. It was used to improve grammar, increase vocabulary, and provide practice in reading materials with which learners were already very familiar through listening and speaking. Some of the available and designated reading materials proved to be much more successful than others either because their cultural content was easier for the learners to assimilate or because new linguistic information was presented at a slow enough pace for most of the class to benefit from it.

Reading materials providing greatest success were those dealing with families or immigrants, and ideally, with immigrant families. Those which proved least useful dealt with city life, with Europeans, and with college students. In practice this meant that certain parts of a book went over very well while other parts were boring or confusing for most learners. Let me illustrate by giving examples from three books which were texts for the class, showing the type of material

contained in them and the techniques that were used in reading and writing activities drawn from them.

The Modulearn books comprising English as a Second Language, Volume 2, were the initial texts used in this class.[3] A typical lesson in the student book is built around a theme, either grammatical (using the present continuous tense) or situational (talking about clothes). In the latter case (Lesson 16), there is first a presentation of new vocabulary, well-illustrated, followed by a short reading passage of several sentences, then a series of two-and-four-sentence dialogs relating to the reading passage. These are also illustrated, and serve for practice of the vocabulary and reinforcement of the grammatical structures being used. Finally, there are sections labelled Reading and Writing, consisting of a longer dialog on the same theme and a series of questions on the dialog to which the student is to write answers.[4]

The bulk of the lesson leading up to the final reading and writing section can be presented to the learners before they ever see it in the book. If that is done, the vocabulary presentation and initial reading passage become exercises in listening

comprehension, and the short practice dialogs brief exercises in memorization, aided by the teacher's prompting and by visual aids which are supplied by the publisher. Only after the listening and speaking practice do the learners go back and read the lesson materials before proceeding on their own to read the final dialog and answer questions about it. This is the authors' suggested method. An obvious variation would be for the students to see and read the material in the book as they hear it, eliminating the necessity for memorization. If this is done, the learners from the beginning associate the sounds with the written word and are less likely to memorize the entire dialog as a substitute for learning to read it. Still, there is a danger that with such very repetitious material, progressing in small increments of grammar and vocabulary, lacking a strong continuing story-line and containing no original input from the learner, the class will become bored. The learning that takes place is rote, requires little learner investment, and does not translate well into the ability to read and write independently. When first presented with a short text which he reads together with his class,

the student is then able to read by himself a very similar text and to answer questions presented in exactly the form previously encountered, but has trouble going beyond that.

There are ways the teacher can help improve the learners' reading and writing ability using this material. The teacher might ask the class to name additional articles of clothing not mentioned in the text and to write the names, the teacher supplying the spellings if the students can't. The teacher might supply the students with the beginning of a dialog and have them complete it in their own words, either as an oral or a written exercise. The class can write its own texts and dialogs following the model or the general theme of the lesson, but using the experiences and interests of members of the class. Also, the teacher need not feel tied to the textbook, even though the learners will probably expect to use it frequently and progress through it. If there is a particular lesson which the teacher finds unappealing or not useful (say on the subject of pets), it is possible for her to devise her own lesson utilizing whatever important grammatical

or other content is in the book lesson, but choosing a new topic, for example gardening, and presenting vocabulary on this subject, as well as a new text or dialog as a basis for student dialogs, questions and answers.

Thus the major limitations of the Modulearn books are in the unimaginative structure, which can be overcome by an imaginative teacher. Other drawbacks are minor, in the nature of subject matter and "characters" in the books, and in the use of books such as these with a multi-level class. No published textbook, however carefully chosen, will be perfect for every teacher's class. The subject matter of the Modulearn books was not perfect for my class. These books were designed around the needs of immigrants, particularly Asian immigrants in an American city. My students were Asian, but they had very little direct familiarity with American city life since they were living in a small town or in the country. The problems of dealing with apartment managers and city bus systems were mostly of academic interest to them. Also, the Modulearn books assume that students will be exposed in their American lives

to a broader range of other immigrant groups and the various ethnic groups found in a city such as Los Angeles. In fact, the books were designed for use in Southern California. For my students, some of the references, to Mexican food for example, were quite exotic, although they found them interesting. In a way, this incongruity was good in that it exposed the learners, who in their daily American lives had been introduced to only a very limited part of the American cultural spectrum, to something much broader, perhaps a foretaste of what they would later encounter.

Perhaps a more serious drawback to the continued use of these books is the lack of any real narrative progression or even of identifiable continuing characters in them. A story line or the introduction of some interesting characters livens up any textbook. The Modulearn books use people with many different names but with otherwise few distinguishing features. There is an anonymity, perhaps intentional, which might allow the learners to inject their own personalities into the dialogs were it not that all questions and responses are already spelled out. The use of the books becomes quite mechanical unless the

teacher is careful to vary the lessons with additional material.

These are not ideal books for a multi-level class. The presentation of new material is fairly slow-paced and very consistently so, offering little challenge to quicker learners. Slower learners are able to grasp the material but the material is not interesting enough or open-ended enough to really encourage them to make much progress. Initially, the security that such a book gives the slower learners is good; the high amount of repetition, the short texts, and simple dialogs can give them a start with reading, if they are not allowed to simply memorize, but are also doing a lot of extra work with sound-symbol correspondences. However, eventually even the slower students need material with a higher interest level.

One solution to this problem is a book such as No Hot Water Tonight.[5] This is a reader for beginning ESL students. It has a continuing narrative which appeals to both older and younger students. The characters in the "soap opera" story include an elderly widow, a single mother and her teenaged son, and a Spanish-speaking immigrant family, all living

in a run-down apartment building in New York City. Everyone in my class could identify in some way with these characters and their problems with loneliness, generational conflicts, and living in a new land. The story, presented in the form of dialogs interspersed with short texts in paragraph form, was easy enough for the slower students to follow, but contained cultural nuances to which the more advanced students could react and which provided a basis for discussion. The book's presentation of life in a big American city and its treatment of the fragmented American family and rebellious teenager fascinated my students. Some of the concerns in the book reflected things they were beginning to observe or experience in their own lives. In their own isolation in rural America, they could sympathize with the isolation the old woman Mrs. Gold experienced in the big city, widowed and far from her children. They were somewhat shocked at the insolent behavior of the teenager, Bobby, but it did not come as a total surprise to the teenagers in the class, who could observe the attitudes of their high-school classmates, or to their parents, who saw their children growing away from them into an alien culture.

No Hot Water Tonight is a good book for such a multi-level, varied-age group for another reason in addition to its high interest level. Each chapter ends with a series of exercises ranging from simple true-false and matching exercises to challenging open-ended exercises requiring the reader to make inferences from the reading or to think about his own experiences and attitudes in relation to the situations presented in the book. The beginning students had a lot of trouble with the latter although they were certainly able to develop opinions about the characters as they were reading, and to express them, if only in the simplest black-and-white terms. Other students in the class were able to articulate their opinions better, to express their understanding of why the less sympathetic characters behaved the way they did, and to verbally compare actions and attitudes in the book with Asian attitudes and with what they saw around them in rural Michigan.

The exercises in the book were useful for the entire class because of the depth of interest and the breadth of ability level they encompassed. The open-endedness of many exercises also lent itself to

development of class writing activities beyond the scope of the book. For example, a sentence-completion exercise, "People are happy when_____"[6] was used to create a class composition, a prose poem with contributions from each student. The students dictated their sentences to the teacher, who wrote them on the board, to be read aloud in class, and later copied for each student. "People are happy when it's the New Year . . . when they have a lot of corn on the farm . . . when they're dancing. . . ."[7] Such a composition is itself evocative, providing a chance to discuss New Year celebrations in different countries, or the different crops grown on a farm.

The frequency of cloze exercises and other sentence-completion exercises in No Hot Water Tonight made this a familiar form for the students, and I was able to create my own completion exercises, providing a basis for simple guided compositions by the students. After they read in No Hot Water Tonight about the Torres family, refugees from Cuba, I encouraged them to write about themselves by giving them a fill-in exercise: "My name is _____ _____. I was born in _____. I came here by _____. I came

because _____. . . ." Students read each other's compositions and then each wrote another composition, this time about one of the other members of the class.[8]

While many if not most of the units in No Hot Water Tonight provided themes which could be linked with my students' daily lives or their memories of the past, sometimes the New York-urban content of the book proved confusing or disturbing to them. One of the subplots in the book involves two single women as they venture out to a bar to meet men. The women eventually think better of this misguided adventure, but I thought better of it first, and moved on to a new topic rather than continue reading something that was confusing and disturbing to most of the class and which didn't relate to any of their lives. Teachers working with small-town or rural classes might think twice about using the sequel to No Hot Water Tonight (No Cold Water, Either[9]) which features urban crime and drugs.

Urban content is a drawback in another book I used with this class. Intercom 2[10] is a low-intermediate level textbook that has a number of

attractive features: varied lessons, good pictures, and relatively slow pacing. However, its target audience is not refugees or immigrants, but university-bound young people from around the world. The setting is American urban or suburban, the characters are bright young European or Asian students and American high school students, and much of the content involves either academic life or searching for skilled jobs in the U.S. Travel and vacations are other featured topics. It was frustrating for my adult students to try to identify with the bright young things in the book. The teenagers in the class succeeded better, but they were all a few years too young to get really caught up in American university life or indeed any of the topics dealt with, other than sports and health. Intercom 2's antiseptic vision of American life was further away from the experience of these students than No Hot Water Tonight's darker urban picture, one that the students found interesting and with whose characters they could sympathize.

The major value of Intercom 2 in helping my students' reading and writing was that it provided a variety of general topics which could be introduced

via the book and then worked with in class using additional, more useful materials. Thus, a section on job-seeking which featured rather sophisticated resumés was a good opportunity to look at the variety of jobs, many of them simple and unskilled, available through the local paper's want ads. This was of direct value to the class members, whose knowledge of available jobs had heretofore been only through word-of-mouth from their sponsors. It was also not just reading practice, but a functional use of literacy. The book provided a grammatical progression and a source of reading practice, but it only became really valuable when treated as a basic syllabus from which the inklings of topics of interest could be drawn, to be expanded upon in class discussion, readings from true-life sources, and the students' own writings.

This is the real value of textbooks and readers, whether they are "relevant" ones such as the Modulearn and No Hot Water Tonight books, or those of more limited interest such as the Intercom series. They can provide a framework for class discussion, and for reading and writing which utilize a similar basic

vocabulary and grammar but delve more deeply into the learners' real interests and needs. The best exercises which arise from these books are open-ended, allowing the class to express feelings about the characters and situations in a book and then to compare these situations with their own lives. The closer the situations and experiences are to their own, the easier this is, but there is no book with which a given group of students can completely identify unless it was written specifically for them by someone who truly understands them, an unlikely prospect. Ultimately, it is only the learners themselves who can write the materials most valuable for them to read, texts which will express their understanding of themselves and of one another and their perceptions of the outside world.

Techniques Utilizing Learners' Culture

The stories of other people can be catalysts for student writing, but even more promising is the use of the learners' immediate experience or of pictures to evoke memories of past experience. Using these as a basis, the learner can, with the technical help of the teacher, create written materials to read

himself and to provide other class members with interesting and useful readings.

Several approaches were taken towards the goal of student-produced reading materials, all intended to give the writers increased control over the content of what they would write and then read. Since a concomitant goal was to get the class members to communicate with one another, most writing opportunities were either designed as group activities or eventually resulted in an exchange of work among the students. The main classroom techniques used, beyond exercises stemming from books, were: conversation, collective dictation, and individual dictation or independent story-writing based on pictures.

The collective writing processes provided an immediate exchange among the students. Conversation was used in two ways to foster reading and writing. The first was to have a short class conversation and then to have the class members recall it as the teacher wrote it on the board. At times, a tape recorder was used to facilitate the class's memory, but used in this situation it was often a hindrance, slowing down the initial conversation and thus

decreasing spontaneity, especially since several of the older students were very self-conscious about speaking into the microphone. Tape playbacks were good for listening comprehension, but an unrecorded conversation gave students a chance to test their powers of recall, and the end result, seeing their words in print, was the same.

This technique comes, with a few modifications, from Community Language Learning. In the classic CLL technique, the teacher is basically a resource person, supplying the learners with the language as needed but otherwise staying clear of the proceedings, except perhaps to serve as the recorder, although this function is often taken by class members.[11] I tried to stay within the spirit of the method, while necessarily injecting myself much more into the process. The idea of conversing in a classroom was new enough for these learners that it was necessary for me to facilitate the conversation, supplying a topic, and often asking questions to draw conversation from the class. If this sounds like a mere question-and-answer exercise that is because it often was, but it was an initial step towards enabling students to talk,

read, and write about subjects not contained in their textbooks.

A more successful approach, designed to give students a chance to ask more questions and initiate more of the conversation themselves, was for the teacher to initiate a conversation by throwing out a topic of interest to the class, a topic which required them to ask her questions. Of course, such a procedure makes the teacher the center of attention, but students enjoy this, and sometimes it is the best way to get the shyer students to participate. My class was once very successful in conducting a conversation on what I had done the previous Saturday. I began the conversation by telling them that I had gone to St. Johns (their town) that Saturday, something they knew I didn't normally do. No further prompting was needed for them to elicit the story of how I had visited the local cider mill. I supplied the briefest possible answers, which required them to ask more and more questions and to discuss and comment among themselves in order to understand what cider was, how it was made, and where the cider mill was. Some of the information was supplied by teenaged

members of the class who had visited the mill themselves. While on the face of it, this was a teacher-centered activity, it provided the students with an opportunity to talk with one another in English, and to exchange interesting and useful information. I taped the rather lengthy conversation and later provided the class members with a transcript, which they read aloud in class and kept for future individual reading.

The CLL techniques worked best in this class when modified so that the teacher took the larger role Asian students expected, thereby eventually encouraging the learners to communicate more; and when the mechanical aspects of recapitulation took only a small role in the original conversation. When a tape recorder ran in the background, conversation was unimpeded, correction was kept to a minimum, and a "cleaned-up" transcript could be presented to the class the following day. In the follow-up session, sometimes the tape was played, sometimes not, as the class followed the transcript. If the tape was relatively ungarbled, and there were relatively few grammar corrections, it was useful for the students

to hear it, but in other circumstances it was difficult for some students to try to read a text while listening to a tape of many voices talking at once or voices saying things that were transcribed a bit differently.

The follow-up or recapitulation of the conversation became a reading exercise, and it was one of the first chances for these students to see their own English speech in print. A group activity such as this was a first step toward individual original composition.

Other opportunities were taken to create activities in which students would hear and discuss a topic and later have the essentials of the matter in print, to read and to use. A basic format for this was provided by the book, ESL Operations: Techniques for Learning While Doing.[12] The "operations" in the book range from simple daily tasks such as setting an alarm clock, to instructions for games, to more involved survival skills such as finding an apartment. We had the most success with the most concrete, in which all the individual tasks of the operation could be accomplished or at least clearly demonstrated in the classroom, and the end result of which was learning new skill, not

merely the English vocabulary for something the student could already do. The book provides a few operations in the form of simple recipes (making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or instant pudding). We tried more elaborate recipes, with considerable success. In the classroom we made applesauce. The choice of recipes was not arbitrary, but came out of the class's interest in what I had done with the apples I had bought at the nearby cider mill. They were curious about the applesauce I had made, so the following day I brought apples to class and we made some applesauce. I discussed the procedure with the students as I demonstrated it, and I got them to help. After we had eaten the applesauce, I asked them to tell me the procedure, and eventually elicited step-by-step instructions which were written on the board.[13]

Making a chocolate cake for the birthday of a class member was interesting, even though the procedure could be only partially demonstrated because we did not have access to an oven. I made the cake beforehand, then demonstrated the lengthy procedure. In this instance, students were given an instruction sheet so they could follow along. The frosting was made and the cake frosted in class.

Western cooking was a fascinating subject for the class members. One woman in the class had been a cook for a French family in Vietnam for about ten years and had a lot of expertise to contribute to our discussions. Because these people were the only Asians in their town, and had to largely depend on the local markets for their food, they were forced to eat Western-style food sooner than refugees in the city. The teenagers were rapidly learning to make such specialties as pizza, the women were starting to make macaroni and jello salads under the encouragement of their sponsors, and the men were at least curious to try some of the strange food. Simple written recipes were good reading material, especially since some of the best cooks were the slowest readers. They had little trouble remembering the cooking procedure, and their memory helped them puzzle out the difficult words. An excellent project, one not attempted in this class, would have been to compile a collection of Southeast Asian recipes. Such a collection, introducing Chinese cooking to the Lao students and Lao cooking to the Chinese, might have helped forestall the rapid changeover to Midwestern American cooking which I inadvertently helped along.

Materials Produced by Learners: Through Writing, for Reading

The conversation and operation techniques, although they encouraged active student participation, required considerable teacher direction, as well as injection of content by the teacher. I wanted to find a way for students to write about subjects they themselves had selected. In order for them to do this, the subjects would have to be ones with which they were already familiar. Here the students' limited English vocabulary could prove a problem because, if they were writing about something with which I was unfamiliar, I might not be able to help them. My solution to this problem was to have the students write stories based on pictures. This technique allowed students to have a broad choice of subject matter, to write about some things with which they were familiar, to learn about some things that were strange to them, and to write stories individually which they could then share with the class.

I found the National Geographic to be by far the best source of pictures. Aside from the subject matter, which is extremely varied, the photographic style tends to be simple, designed to convey information

rather than to be artistic. The pictures generally speak for themselves without ambiguity.

Sometimes the setting of the photos was important. Fortunately, I was able to find many pictures of Vietnam and Laos, of varied subject matter. There were also many pictures of American subjects, presentations of everyday life. And there were pictures of people from around the world, in which the emphasis was not on their exotic customs, but on universal human qualities and actions. I tried to steer away from the most dramatic pictures. These were often strange or confusing, and it seemed important that the class work first with things that were familiar to them in their personal lives or from some contact in their native lands. I wanted them to be able to write about and discuss their own culture and heritage, and to describe and reflect on what they could see around them in the U.S. The pictures were a convenient means of drawing out memories, reflections, comments, and questions about both past and present.

The actions depicted in these photos were ones which I thought were either universally familiar, or would be familiar to someone in the class from personal

experience. There were pictures of people at work in different countries--building boats, working in the fields, planting trees. There were pictures of families at home in different countries. There were pictures of old people, and pictures of children, portraits rather then depictions of cultural differences. All of these pictures could be used as subjects for writing.

From Process to Product, A Method

The process of writing was quite straightforward. I would cut pictures out of old magazines which I had bought for a quarter apiece at the St. Vincent de Paul store in Lansing. A number of pictures would be hung on the walls of the classroom, at least one per student. Generally on a given day these followed a theme. For example, when the class had been giving oral descriptions of one another, they were presented with a number of pictures of Lao, Hmong, and Vietnamese people. Each was asked to choose a picture and to write a description of the people in the picture. There was always some previous preparation, either use of the theme in another context, or a group composition based on a picture similar to those from which

they would make a choice. The element of choice was important. Usually each student was strongly drawn to one or two of the pictures, associating a particular picture with a memory, or feeling an identification with a person in the picture, or finding it funny. Sometimes two students would write about the same picture, but most of the time they liked to have their own picture to write about. This helped to make what they wrote their own.

Before the writing began, there were always a lot of questions. Many of these came as the students walked about, examining each picture before making a choice. They would discuss the pictures among themselves and ask me questions about unfamiliar aspects of the pictures. What country was this person from? Where had I gotten the pictures? As soon as they had chosen a picture, they would take it down from the wall and return to their seat to write about it. At this point there would be more questions. Sometimes, these were about puzzling aspects of the picture. Why were the people in such and such place? What was the man in the background doing? Questions such as these could be discussed with and among the students. Other

questions were requests for English words: "What's this?" (a sash worn by a Hmong woman). "How do you spell 'yard'?" The more literate students could proceed from there, writing several sentences of description, often with many grammar and spelling errors, but saying what they wanted to say, in words that were comprehensible to me when I read them later. Other class members needed more help.

Those who could not readily express themselves in writing were usually able to tell me or one of the class tutors what they wanted to say. They could dictate their compositions, often with little prompting on the part of the scribe. However, the more constant the give-and-take between learner and scribe, the more valuable the writing process was as a learning tool. Since the learner was more advanced in oral expression than in literacy, it was desirable for the transcriber to write down the words slowly, going over the text phrase by phrase and sentence by sentence to make sure the text would make sense to the author when he read it back to himself. Often this made the writing process very slow, the result being that those learners who had much difficulty writing usually wrote very

short stories. That was fine, because a short dictated story meant that there was much more likelihood that the learner could later read with little hesitation what he had written. The writing process itself provided an extended chance for communication between teacher and learner; what eventually appeared on paper was a distillation of this learning dialog which was in itself at least as valuable as the written product.

There was a lot of student-to-student communication involved in the writing process. Class members discussed their pictures with their neighbors, to clarify content, to search for English vocabulary, and to get spelling tips. They would look over one another's work in progress, offer suggestions, and sometimes collaborate. They were eager for help where ever they could get it, but the main impetus for working together seemed to be mutual interest in the subject matter.

Beyond the help with vocabulary needed by the more advanced writers, and the transcription of dictated stories needed by the beginners, the major function of the teacher in the writing process was to help the writers organize their work into coherent paragraphs. At first, it seemed sufficient to get the learner to

put sentences down on paper, perhaps three or four sentences which conveyed his impressions of the picture at hand. Often the result looked like the product of a disjointed conversation. I followed several approaches to encourage paragraph writing. The most successful were indirect. They involved group work, which it was hoped would serve as a model for individual writing, and the reading process, in which students were exposed to one another's finished work and asked to reflect on it in various ways.

Group work consisted either of the teacher working with the entire class, or the teacher or tutor with a smaller group of about the same writing level, or of a more advanced student working with a beginner.

Collective writing, the whole class with the teacher, was really guided dictation. The students dictated the content of the story, while the teacher guided both the content and the structure. For example, I would present the class with a picture. "What is in the picture?" Students might reply, "I see a woman with a baby." If this was the major subject of the picture, I would repeat the information back to the class . . . "a woman with a baby," and write on

the board: "This is a picture of a woman with a baby." If, given the same picture, the first response were: "I see some hills," I would repeat that back . . . "some hills," and continue to ask, "What else do you see?" until I elicited something that could form the basis for a topic sentence. Once we had the topic sentence on the board, I would ask the students additional questions about the picture: "What is the woman doing?" or "What is she wearing?" or "What else do you see in the picture?" trying to get contributions from each member of the class. These responses would again be shaped into descriptive sentences, generally following a pattern so that the result would be a model paragraph to guide the learners in their individual writing.

Thus, with the topic sentence, "This is a picture of a woman with a baby," following sentences might all begin with "There is" and "There are," or perhaps "The woman" and "She" ("The woman is wearing a red dress," "She is feeding the baby.") The paragraph might conclude with a more subjective statement following the same format: "She likes to walk outside with the baby," or a more personal statement: "I think she is very happy."

Such a model paragraph could be referred to in assigning individual compositions: "Write about your picture. Begin with, 'This is a picture of . . .' Then write, 'There is . . .' The last sentence is 'I think. . . .'" Assignments were not always this structured. Generally, on a given day, all students wrote on similar topics, so there would be some similarity of results even if identical structure were not adhered to.

The assignment might be to "describe what this person is wearing," or "What are these people doing?" (different jobs). In working individually with the students, I tried to get each of them to structure their paragraphs, even if the result was necessarily very simplified or repetitive. One student might have a series of sentences beginning with "I see." A conversational sort of narrative such as this was fine for someone who was just learning how to write complete sentences. I would work with a more advanced student to encourage him to vary his sentences: "There is a man. . . ," "He is . . . , " "His shirt. . . ," "There are also. . . ." The most advanced students could write fairly detailed

descriptions on their own with perhaps only a little help in fleshing out a description, re-ordering some sentences, or utilizing some new vocabulary.

In writing a collective composition, the more advanced students tended to be the star contributors. Therefore it was useful to have small groups of a given level work together to create their own compositions. This was particularly advantageous for the slower group of older learners. They were accustomed to working as a group with a tutor on grammar and phonics, so that conversing together about a picture, and then attempting to make a written description was an interesting activity for them. Other age-based groups did not seem to work very well together. Those who were capable of writing individually generally wanted to do so unless they were participating in a class composition, or helping a fellow student who was having problems.

Follow-up: Reading

However, once students had completed their compositions to their own satisfaction, they were eager to share their work with others. I found that this was best accomplished in two stages. Those

students who were particularly happy with the work they had done during the class period (all writing was done during class) liked to read aloud to their classmates at the end of the class. I would hold up the picture in front of the class while the author of the description read. This was not a time to offer correction or criticism, but to join in the listening approval of the entire class. The second reading stage, which took place during the following class, gave the authors a better chance of appreciating and learning from their own work, and gave other members of the class a chance to read their classmates' compositions and to learn from them.

Between classes I transcribed all the stories from the previous class, making necessary spelling and grammatical changes, but not abbreviating or reworking the stories in any way. I typed the transcriptions on a sheet of paper, along with the authors' names, and if some of the vocabulary was new to the class as a whole, I added a vocabulary list at the bottom of the page. Each word on the vocabulary list was followed by a model sentence drawn from the students' compositions. Sometimes a new grammatical structure,

or one in which the class needed more practice, appeared in one of the stories; again, I would put an example at the bottom of the page.

At the beginning of the next class, I handed out the collection of stories to each student and we had a read-aloud period in which the authors again read their works, this time with the rest of the class reading along silently. The pictures were again hung around the classroom, so the readers could compare the description with its pictorial source. During the reading, I noted pronunciation problems. After all the writers had read their pieces, we went over the pronunciation of individual words, worked on the new vocabulary together, and had a grammar lesson relating to some aspect of the previous day's writing. Thus it was possible to build pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar work, possibly even an entire lesson on what the students themselves had written about pictures which spoke to them in a very personal way.

An example of the transcription of a typical day's writing appears on the next page. The pictures from which the students drew this writing were all of Southeast Asian people, but had nothing else in common.

The students are at school. They are studying in the camp school. A teacher is explaining something to them. They are looking at the teacher and they are listening. They are sitting in the classroom. They are Hmong children. They live in a camp near Cambodia.

Nonluck

They are Meo-tribe people sitting on the ground. They are waiting for the truck to take them to go to an airplane to come to the U.S.A.

Sompasong

The people are walking. There are five people walking. A woman is carrying an umbrella. She's wearing a yellow blouse. The man is wearing a blue shirt. Another woman is wearing a red skirt. They are in the country.

Pheuy

There is one person in the picture. She's Hmong. She's taking the flowers to sell. She's wearing a black shirt and pink belt. The flowers are pink and green.

Somnieng

In the picture, I see a man. He works on the farm. He's driving a tractor in the ricefield. He's smoking on the tractor. His old hat is on his head. He has a ring on his ring-finger. He has short pants and a short-sleeved shirt. It's black. I'm talking about a farmer from Laos.

Sousack

WORDS

flower	Pink and yellow flowers are growing in front of the house.
sell	The store sells food.
shirt	The man is wearing a long-sleeved shirt.
umbrella	When it's raining, I carry an umbrella.
ground	Flowers and grass grow in the ground.
airplane	We came to the U.S.A. in an airplane.
explain	The teacher explained the lesson to the students.
classroom	Students study in the classroom.
farmer, farm	The farmer works on a farm.
pants	Jeans and shorts are pants.

I chose them as each being of some subject with which at least one student could identify or react out of familiarity. Since this was one of the first times this technique was used in class, I used a minimum amount of correction during the writing process and in the transcription. The intent was to get the students to put words down on paper, and the form which the writing took was very close to their spoken statements, somewhat disjointed and disorganized, not the least bit polished, but conveying quite well what they felt was important about these pictures.

Often, much more was said than what went onto the paper. The second description on the page is of a picture of a group of Hmong. It is significant that the writer, a sixteen-year-old Lao, used the term "Meo," a pejorative outsider's word, rather than "Hmong," which the other students tended to use. Otherwise, his description is very neutral. He allowed his feelings to come out only in talking about another picture, one he did not choose to write about. In describing a picture of Hmong girls, he said, "Those people are <u>dirty</u>." He said they were afraid of water, could not swim, and would not take showers. Extending

his description, he said that they were like Indians, using bows instead of guns. All of this was said in a very negative way. So what appears to be a neutral description of refugees waiting for a plane takes on the weight of a negative characterization, both from the use of vocabulary ("Meo" instead of "Hmong"), and the fact that he chose to describe the people as sitting on the ground, rather than to describe them as individuals by physical appearance and clothing. So sometimes the pictures were catalysts which drew opinions, feelings, discussion, and argument out of class members. What appears on the paper is only the tip of the iceberg, but nonetheless very revealing.

The model sentences given for the vocabulary on this page did not come from the students, but I tried to tie them as directly as possible to the stories from which the words came. These words were not all new. Some were included because the writers had trouble spelling them, or I felt the students needed more practice with them. The grammar follow-up to the reading of the transcription and vocabulary consisted of changing the stories from the present to the past tense. This was a whole-class activity. I wrote

a few of the transformed stories on the board as they were elicited from the class, and the others were read aloud by individual students, with each member of the class participating in the exercise.

Various types of follow-up exercises were utilized with other picture-story writing assignments. I gave the class a list of words which appeared on the transcribed page of stories they were reading. They had to find the words and read the sentences. The students for whom reading all the sentences was too difficult were at least able to pick out the correct words. Another technique for working on vocabulary (and also grammar) was a cloze exercise based on a story the class had just read. This required the students to be able to choose an appropriate word for each blank, and to be able to write it.

Most of the follow-up grammar exercises ended as writing exercises. When students had difficulty using "there is" and "there are" in their compositions, I drilled them orally on the difference, and then had them rewrite a composition using "there is" or "there are" instead of "I see." Sentence-combining exercises were also useful. Instead of "There is a Hmong man.

He is wearing a hat," they learned to write, "There is a Hmong man wearing a hat." These exercises, as well as some in which they changed sentences from singular to plural and back again, gave students more flexibility in their writing styles and more facility in using English correctly to express what they wanted to say.

Follow-up: Discussion

I have noted the reactions of students to the pictures. In addition to feelings about specific ethnic groups and emotional memories of things familiar to them in their homelands, the pictures often evoked curiosity. In many instances, students would explain the pictures to one another, but some of the pictures were of unfamiliar Asian scenes, or had compelling aspects which students were eager to understand in light of American life, perhaps for purposes of comparison to what they had known in Asia. One teenaged student was very interested in a picture of a Hmong man smoking opium. She wanted to know the vocabulary used for different aspects of drugs and drug-taking in the U.S. A very Asian picture gave her the opportunity of learning something she had wanted to know about American culture.

On other occasions, the pictures used in class were of American people and American scenes. Often they were not readily recognizable as such by many members of the class. Once, students were shown a number of pictures, all of American people. When asked where they were from, they had no idea, or thought they were from various countries. They were very surprised to learn that all the people were American, particularly the poor people and the Black people. In their brief stay in rural America, they had scarcely seen a Black American, and the poorest people they knew were themselves. They found it intriguing that the Black Americans they saw in the pictures seemed to be well-to-do, and that there were white Americans (in the rural South) who did not appear to be so. The pictures themselves and the writing that resulted from them, along with the questions and discussion they both evoked, helped broaden the class members' views of different cultures, American as well as Asian. They were beginning to see that there were many possibilities in the United States. Americans did not have to look the way the refugees' own Anglo neighbors did. Cuban-Americans

had different customs (for example, having a game of dominoes on a street corner) than their own neighbors who played bingo in the Catholic-school cafeteria down the hall from their classroom. The teenaged Chinese-Vietnamese boy who had started taking Catholic religious instruction because, in this country, "everyone is Christian; there are no Buddhists," could more easily believe that there were people of all religions after seeing pictures of Hasidic Jews in New York, people who obviously had very different religious observances from what he had seen so far in St. Johns, Michigan.

The United States was becoming a bigger country for them as they started to assimilate the idea that, if they wanted to, they could be Americans and still hold on to the things in their culture that were important to them. Americans were not only not all the same in appearance, but belonged to different socio-economic groups, ate different food, did different things in their leisure time, and had different religions from one another. These ideas were a little unsettling to the teenagers, who were just beginning to feel comfortable in their new setting by conforming as

closely as possible to the life of the young people in their local community, but it was reassuring to the older adults, who saw the impossibility of ever looking or behaving like the rural Michiganders around them.

The sharing of ideas which preceded writing, and the sharing that resulted from the writing itself and from reading, study, and discussion of the stories and pictures, was at least as important as the mastery of reading and writing skills. The learners were using their communication skills to deal with many unresolved and perhaps not easily resolvable feelings about their past and present lives. With a better understanding of themselves and how they could exist in American society, they were encouraged to use their new language skills as they went out into the community to get more education and find better jobs.

In the classroom itself, the sharing did not cease with the end of each assignment. At the end of the term, the typed-up stories were matched up with their pictures once again, and pasted by the students into booklets, organized according to themes. (Given a choice of themes, the class members chose which

stories to include in each booklet.) There were "Asian People," "American People," "People at Work," "People at Home," among others. These books provided material for students to read in tutoring groups, and to read and browse in during unstructured time, a sort of class library and picture gallery.

Notes

[1] See Caleb Gattegno, The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages (New York: Educational Solutions, c. 1976) for suggested use of rods and charts.

[2] Modulearn.

[3] Modulearn.

[4] Modulearn, Lesson 16, pp. 1-4.

[5] Jean Bodman and Michael Lanzano, No Hot Water Tonight (New York: Collier Macmillan International, c. 1976).

[6] Bodman and Lanzano, p. 25.

[7] Class composition, St. Johns, Michigan, October 20, 1980.

[8] Class exercise, St. Johns, Michigan, November 25, 1980.

[9] Jean Bodman and Michael Lanzano, No Cold Water, Either (New York: Collier Macmillan International, 1980).

[10] Yorkey et al., Book 2.

[11] Curran, pp. 26-31; and Earl Stevick, "Counseling-Learning: A Whole-Person Model for Education," in Curran, pp. 87-100.

[12] Gayle Nelson and Thomas Winters, ESL Operations: Techniques for Learning While Doing (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House, c. 1980).

[13] See Appendix.

CHAPTER FOUR

SELECTING METHODS FOR OTHER CLASSES

Many of the methods and techniques used in the class of Indochinese refugees in St. Johns, Michigan, are applicable to other settings with different learners and teachers. In this chapter, some of these applications and variations, as well as some alternative ideas, will be suggested.

Refugee Classes

The clearest applications are to refugee classes, but other classes composed of immigrants and non-immigrant learners of English could benefit from many of the same techniques.

The class whose work has been described was very heterogeneous, even though all the students were refugees and Indochinese. They were of different ages, had different languages, and different levels of reading and writing ability. Yet it was possible, out of necessity, to teach them as one class. How

much easier it could be to teach such a class if it were part of a larger program and the learners could therefore be grouped according to their level of oral or, especially, written English.

Beginners

A class which is truly a class of beginners, with very limited communication skills in English, is still likely to exhibit a degree of variation in reading and writing skills. Assuming that all the learners are literate in their own languages, Vietnamese students will find it easier than Lao students to read and write English simply because they do not have to learn a new alphabet. Both groups may have an easier time than Chinese-Vietnamese, who may only have experience reading and writing Chinese characters, and the Hmong, who may have limited or no experience reading and writing any language. Where it is at all possible, the non-literate and pre-literate students should be in a separate class from those literate in their own language because they will need to devote a lot of time just to the mechanics of letter recognition and formation, separate from the other learners.

Beginning-level classes will spend the bulk of

their time listening and speaking. Reading and writing should not be neglected, but they must initially follow directly from oral activities. These oral activities are linked to the use of objects, gestures, pictures, and perhaps rods, and therefore the words to be written and read should be directly connected to the visible and the concrete. If the words to be read do not come from the actions and objects presented and observed in the classroom, they will have no initial meaning for the learners, but even with the most concrete immediate connection, the link can later be lost if the learner has nothing in print to refer to. Some type of book is needed. The best sort of book at the beginning is one which is at least as much pictures as text. Labeled pictures of the actions and objects introduced in the classroom will help learners remember the classroom learning and also give them something to read. Picture dictionaries are also useful. Books containing short conversations and dialogs which repeat or reinforce oral work are the next stage. In all of these materials there is some distance between the originator (the textbook writer), the mediator (the teacher), and the consumer (the learner).

This distance can be eliminated if learners can create their own materials. At the beginning, the teacher will have to take an active hand in the creation. Learners who cannot read or write can dictate captions to pictures, whether single words or sentences of dialog. The teacher can help them write individual words which are important to them but do not derive from teacher-supplied materials: names, addresses, objects which the learners bring to class. If words are written on individual cards unattached to pictures, it is important that they be frequently reviewed by teacher and learner together to see if the learner can still read them and match them up with the identified object. The class can compile its own picture dictionary and eventually its own group story-book, perhaps consisting of class-collaboration dialogs, either written directly or role-played based on a teacher-given model, and then transcribed.

If all the learners are more or less at the same level, they are able to benefit from a single textbook (although they may not all be interested in it!) and to collaborate in creating and then sharing their own materials. However, it is important to

remember that learners still need to do some of their reading and writing individually. As they advance, they will not all advance at the same speed, and the faster learners should not be hindered; also, they have individual needs and interests which can be met by providing a variety of supplementary reading materials as well as by encouraging individual writing: dialog completion, dialog creation, and the writing of stories from pictures provided by the teacher or drawn by the learners.

Intermediate and Advanced

More advanced learners in refugee classes have needs which require them to be able to do a degree of independent writing, and to read types of material not often found in textbooks. Here the teacher can take her cue from the class members. They will be dealing with the welfare bureaucracy, and with various aspects of a job search. Reading and writing activities in class can aid them in learning to read and fill out forms, to read classified ads, and to write resumés. The teacher can provide models and the learners can each use their own backgrounds and needs to create a personal file of job-related materials.

Oral activities related to finding a job can lead to reading and writing practice, for example when the teacher or the learners transcribe role-played job interviews.

Intermediate and advanced students are also able to benefit from reading in a variety of books. They enjoy reading about different aspects of American life and culture, especially when presented in a narrative form. Serialized stories are popular, either the crime-adventure story as exemplified by "The Man Who Escaped," from American Kernel Lessons: Intermediate,[1] or the family-oriented soap opera from No Hot Water Tonight. Stories dealing with refugee or immigrant experiences are popular, and if they are not available to the class in book form, there may be magazine articles or stories from the local newspaper which can be used in class.

Many sorts of newspaper articles provide good reading material. Feature articles, "Dear Abby," obituaries, weather reports, and recipes are all possibilities, along with straight news stories. Various types of advertisements also make good reading material, from food ads to help wanted,

garage sales, and apartment rentals. More advanced students may like writing their own news stories and even creating their own class newspaper.

Other than this, there are a number of writing activities that can be tried with an advanced class, with the emphasis on learners using their own experiences and their own writing needs as they improve their writing skills. In an advanced class, it is possible to get away from simple models and assignments based on pictures, although the latter are always appealing. Class members can write reminiscences, accounts of experiences in the U.S., poems, and their own transcriptions of classroom conversations. Class collaborations are possible, but writers should be encouraged to develop their own writing skills and to work on individual problems.

Younger Learners

Learners of different ages will have different needs and interests, so it is perhaps easier for the teacher to choose methods and techniques if she has a class composed entirely of adolescents or entirely of adults. There are lots of books written with the younger learner in mind, although many of them have

as a target audience college-bound international students. For the refugee or immigrant adolescent, texts which are thoroughly grounded in American life, which feature teenagers, and deal with contemporary American problems are the ideal. If they also focus to some degree on family life, that is a help because these learners are likely to be much more family-oriented than Americans of the same age. No Hot Water Tonight and its sequels are strong on all these points. Reading and writing which relates to academic subjects class members are studying is very useful. Reading which requires problem-solving (verbal puzzles or values-clarification exercises) can help with oral skills and with the reading skills necessary for working on such things as math word-problems. Teenage learners are often open to much more playful uses of language than adult learners. Crossword puzzles and other word puzzles can be used to extend vocabulary, and the sort of poetry ideas used by Kenneth Koch[2] can provide a basis for writing. A group of teenagers is likely to have quite varied individual interests, and the teacher can encourage reading and writing based on particular hobbies, academic interests or vocational interests.

Adult Learners

Adult learners, especially those in more advanced classes, also have individual needs for language which should be met within the English class. Reading material with specific vocational content should be available for class members who are mechanics or seamstresses or who have other skills they need to translate into an English-language context. All adult learners will be interested in general vocational information and in developing the reading and writing skills needed in finding vocational training or employment, and in keeping a job once they have it. There is also a general need to learn how to fill out various forms related to the welfare system, education, and employment. The teacher can take her cue from the questions class members bring to her, working on some problems with individuals and involving the whole class in issues of general applicability, some of which can be more easily dealt with in group work involving role-play and discussion.

Adult learners also have specific reading and writing needs which relate more to the personal or social side of their lives. They may want to exchange

letters with friends in English, read recipes, understand labels on canned goods, read fish and game regulations, and write reminiscences of their homeland. Again, the teacher should make her choice of such material based on the learners' expressed needs.

One Culture or Many

In my multi-level class, the difficulties of working with such a group were mitigated by the fact that the class was mostly composed of three families and therefore the more advanced students were quite tolerant of and helpful towards their slower family member-classmates. From the beginning, there was a community of interest in the class. When one is teaching a class whose members are unrelated, there are likely to be both more of a spirit of competition and more of a feeling of insecurity on the part of some learners, as well as perhaps some antagonism if the learners are from different cultural backgrounds.

When learners are from a common culture, the teacher can help put them at their ease by encouraging them to share their culture with her. Since it is something that all class members have in common, occasions can be devised which will give them an opportunity

to work together to communicate information and feelings about their homeland and customs. They can prepare class meals, explain traditional dress, and produce skits illustrating their customs. The learners become culture teachers while the teacher is helping them with the English necessary to express what they are trying to convey. The teacher can then reciprocate by sharing aspects of American culture with the class. The unfamiliar culture will seem less threatening when the learners perceive that the teacher is interested in and respects their own culture. The learners should be encouraged to ask questions and to compare aspects of the different cultures with the idea that whole-hearted acceptance of the new is not being called for, but rather an awareness of differences and of the possibilities that await them. An exposure to American food, an effort as early as possible to acquaint learners with examples of polite and impolite behavior in an American context, and the creation of an awareness of the diversity of the American people are all things that the teacher can share with such a group of learners.

When learners are from different cultures, the

sharing becomes even more exciting, and the task of learning about American culture less of a threatening one, as learners are simultaneously learning about one another's cultures. Learners will feel even more comfortable if the teacher is able to show them what part their culture already plays in American society, for example making them aware of the existence of Buddhism as an organized religion in the U.S. or of the popularity of egg-rolls among average Americans (pictured advertisements can help here).

In a situation where learners are part of a large community of refugees or immigrants, all speaking the same language and fairly self-sufficient, it is important to encourage forays by class members into the non-immigrant community. Culture-sharing among learners in class is less important, but the teacher certainly still needs to show interest in and respect for the learners' culture. Other Americans should be brought to class, the class should make frequent excursions, and the learners encouraged to encounter the foreign culture on their own, by taking bus trips out of their neighborhood, making inquiries in English, and visiting stores where only English is spoken.

A balance needs to be struck between the learner being able to cope with U.S. culture, and at the same time being able to preserve his own culture.

Non-refugee Classes

The experience of my class of refugees, a group of people of different ages, different levels of literacy, and different cultures, shows that such a class can function as a whole and that the individuals in it can make real progress in their learning. Heterogeneous classes can succeed, and non-refugee classes which are multi-level or multi-age might benefit from some of the same sorts of activities and organization as this class of refugees.

Multi-level Classes

For classes with both slow and fast learners, and classes including both literate and non-literate learners, grouping is necessary. With the help of a tutor, slow groups and individuals can be given the extra help they need with perhaps a portion of every class period devoted to intensive group work. However, it is very important for the cohesiveness of the class to have whole-class activities from which all learners can benefit, and if possible to have some

sort of peer-tutoring in which the slower and faster learners work together. The teacher needs to foster an atmosphere which is relaxed and non-competitive enough that learners will be willing to help one another and not feel that they are either being held back or pushed excessively by other class members or the teacher. Activities such as writing from pictures give enough scope for individual interests and abilities that the class can feel it is participating in a common project while individuals are able to work at their own pace.

Multi-age Classes

More problems are posed if there is a wide disparity in the ages of the learners. Here, needs and interests of individual learners may be quite divergent. Perhaps the best solution is for the teacher to try to find as many printed materials as possible which are multi-age oriented. A good example is No Hot Water Tonight, which not only has characters of all ages, but openly deals with intergenerational conflict. It seems a mistake to try to separate a class into groups according to age. Instead, the teacher should try to foster a cooperative, familial atmosphere.

Since older learners may resent the use of too many games or activities which they think are childish, these should be kept to a minimum. Younger students will like being treated as adults, and their individual interests can probably best be catered to by the offer of extra reading material and occasional help with their schoolwork from other classes. Vocational materials are of interest to both older and younger learners. Younger learners are probably enrolled in academic or vocational classes in addition to their English class, so they should not receive as much attention in this regard as adults. Older adult immigrants have the most trouble adjusting to new work situations, and to seeking jobs and training for them, so they should be offered extra help in their transition to U.S. vocational life.

Multi-cultural Classes

Groups of learners who are culturally diverse have a lot to share with one another, and this cultural exchange can bring them together as a class. They can learn about one another's countries as they are learning together about the United States. If the class is composed of immigrants and non-immigrants

(international students who will return to their own countries), the focus on American life and culture needs to emphasize, not long-range survival skills, but the daily difficulties that tourists and short-term residents as well as immigrants encounter. All of these learners are interested in understanding the American character as they encounter it in their meetings with individual Americans, and coming to appreciate the cultural differences in the class can help them be more aware of the reasons for the misunderstandings and inexplicable happenings that occur outside the classroom. Learners can benefit from role-playing difficult situations, discussing aspects of American life in comparison with what they are familiar with, and writing about their experiences and observations. Those members of the class who are immigrants may already to some degree offer a bicultural point of view that will be illuminating for the others in the class.

There may be tensions in a mixed class which includes immigrants as well as refugees. On the one hand, the two groups have much in common. The immigrant and refugee are both newcomers to American

society, both suffering to various degrees from loneliness and perhaps from disillusionment with their first encounters with life in America. On the other hand, the immigrant has made a conscious, hopeful choice to live in the U.S., whereas the refugee has been forced to leave his homeland, where, if it weren't for political circumstances he would choose to remain. In a class situation, the immigrant may not wish to deal with his own culture to the extent the refugee does. He may have an eagerness to adopt American culture which leads him to suppress his still very strong feelings for his homeland. The refugee is much more likely to be still looking backward at what he has lost.

Adolescents, both immigrants and refugees, have a particular need to remember the culture of their homeland, although they may not wish to talk about it as much as their elders. If they came to the U.S. with their families, the decision of their parents to uproot them may be resented, and they may feel that they do not know where they belong. They need to deal with their feelings for their homeland, to learn more about it and to try to remain

part of its culture, while they are adapting to their new life. A class where the cultures of all the students are accepted and respected can help them with their identity crisis and let them see that they can succeed as adults in American society without rejecting their already somewhat fragile cultural identities.

Conclusion

Which Techniques? Which Methods?

In deciding what techniques to use in a particular class, teachers need to be aware of these different needs of different groups of learners as well as of how individual class members seem to learn best. A given technique is not good or bad, it simply has more or less value when used by different teachers, with different learners. The teacher needs to experiment to some degree with each new class, remembering what worked well for her with similar learners in the past, or gleaning ideas from other teachers and testing them in her own classroom. A repertoire of techniques is not like a bag of tricks to be pulled out one by one when the attention of the class is flagging or the teacher feels the need of something "new." The techniques a teacher uses will vary from

class to class according to the individual needs of the class at the time, but they should fit within the general methods the teacher has chosen to use with the class.

Notice that "methods" here is plural. We have looked at different methods developed and used by various teachers in teaching reading and writing. These methods, the actual procedure used by each teacher, Sylvia Ashton-Warner or Kenneth Koch or Charles Curran or Paulo Freire, for the most part grew out of experiences these teachers had with individual classes, and were shaped and modified by subsequent teaching experiences. No one of these teachers would follow exactly the same procedure with all classes, but would be likely to use particular techniques within a procedure or method he or she felt suited the goals of the class, the learners' needs, and the capabilities of the teacher in a given situation.

The experience of the refugee class I have described was unique in my own teaching experience. The techniques used with this class were never again used by me in exactly the same way, for I never again

had an identical class. Other classes of refugees wrote stories from pictures, but the method into which the picture-stories fitted as a technique was different. Perhaps the goal of a later class (vocational readiness) was different, so the learners transcribed conversations and role-plays about work, read about working people in the U.S., wrote applications and resumés. They also wrote stories based on pictures and based on their own memories but the form these took in this more advanced and more homogeneous class was a series of paragraphs, with much more attention paid by learners and teacher to the ability to write a lengthy passage than was the case with the class I have previously described, where the goals were immediate self-expression and basic literacy.

In yet another class, the very class situation was different (individuals could not consistently come to class because of work and child-care responsibilities), so continuity needed to be maintained with a single book which learners could take home and read out of. The book used was No Hot Water Tonight, and many class activities were developed from the material in the book. Writing assignments

and additional reading were on themes suggested by the material in the book, and most of the class was able to benefit from the time spent together in class even though in this case it was the material that was drawing them together and not the degree of personsl interaction which would be found in a typical class.

An Approach to Language Teaching

The goals and needs of a class determine the methods used, and within the method, the particular techniques employed from day to day. In making this statement, I am already indicating something of my approach to language teaching. It is learner-centered. An approach to teaching can be seen as either philosophical or scientific. If philosophical, it is determined by an overall belief in probably unquantifiable ideas about learning, individual learners, groups of learners, and their relationship to what they are learning. Such an approach is developed and followed by the teacher because it seems intuitively right, it appears to work, and teacher and learners are satisfied with it. If the approach is scientific, it is based on provable success in a controlled learning situation, generally combined with

known scientific insights into the nature of languages.

"Scientific approaches" include the aural-oral approach, and Gattegno's approach to the Silent Way. More philosophical approaches are those of Paulo Freire and Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Charles Curran's approach is more philosophical than scientific, originating from his personal experience with language-learning.

Ultimately, the acceptance of a given approach or the creation of her own approach by an individual teacher is based on both philosophy and individual experience. If she believes that learning will come from the interaction of the learners with each other and the language, and that her purpose is to facilitate that process, then the methods used (learners working in small groups, learners supplying linguistic content, learners encouraged to take risks and to learn from mistakes) will reflect that approach, and the degree of success the teacher has with these methods will either confirm or weaken her adherence to the approach. That an approach or method is scientifically proven has no meaning for the individual

teacher if she is not able to use it comfortably and successfully with a particular class.

Each teacher needs to think through her own approach and modify it through her own experience. I have attempted to show how it is possible to do this, through looking at one class, the various characteristics of the learners, their needs in terms of ability to read and write, what other teachers have thought and done about literacy, and finally, the experience of the class as its members struggle toward reading and writing. I have indicated my belief in the uniqueness of each class and each learner, and shown how different learners and different class situations suggest modifications of a teacher's methods and techniques.

Caleb Gattegno's approach to language learning is centered around the idea that the teacher is with the learners while the learners are with the language. Thus the teacher is working with the individual learner to put him in the position of being in contact with the language, but the struggle with the language is the learner's own. He is taking risks with the language and learning through mistakes, while the teacher

is working with him, creating the situation where the learning will take place. The learner is autonomous; his relationship is with the language, not with the teacher, and not even with his fellow learners.

My own approach is quite different from this. The teacher gives the language to the learners, and the learners give cultural understanding to one another and to the teacher. Why is this, and how does it work? The teacher is the repository of linguistic knowledge in the class, and it is her job to impart it to the learners. The learners do not acquire this knowledge in isolation from one another or in isolation from the new culture. Language is cultural and social. That is, it is a transmitter of a new culture, and it exists to communicate among people. The acquisition of a new language or the utilization of existing language is nothing without cultural content to be transmitted, or people with whom to communicate. Therefore, the sharing of the things that are important to the learners as a cultural group and as individual people is the reason for utilizing language, and this cultural sharing and individual communication is what should be taking

place in the classroom. The teacher supplies the linguistic structure for this; the learners and the teacher exchange the cultural content.

This means that insofar as possible the real world is brought into the classroom, the learners' emotions enter in, the teacher's emotions enter in, and the teacher and learners take the risk that they will be changed and will grow as people. The processes of language-learning and literacy-learning gain significance from the growth in humanity gained by the learners. In the words of Paulo Freire, "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it."[3]

Notes

[1] Robert O'Neill, Roy Kingsbury, Tony Yeadon, and Edwin T. Cornelius, Jr., American Kernel Lessons: Intermediate (New York: Longman, 1978).

[2] In Wishes, Lies, and Dreams.

[3] Freire, p. 76.

Appendix

Class Recipe, October 21, 1980

Applesauce

1. Wash the apples.
2. Cut the apples in four pieces. (Quarter the apples.)
3. Put them in a pan.
4. Fill the pan half-full with water.
5. Put the pan on the stove.
6. Turn on the stove.
7. Cook the apples until they are soft.
8. Taste.
9. Add sugar to taste.
10. Sprinkle cinnamon on the applesauce.
11. Eat!

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