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ABSTRACT

Intended primarily for language teachers in underfinanced school districts or underdeveloped countries where educational resources are scarce, this article suggests ways and means of using material resources as instructional realia. The author proposes several principles on which the use of audiovisual materials in the classroom should be based. Specific examples of realia illustrate how useful teaching aids can be made from useless, discarded objects. (RL)

I have found a good deal of the debate on, and most of the exhibitions of, language teaching aids rather distressing in recent years. Distressing and disappointing for three main reasons: a bemusement with electronics and projection, the minimal thought that sometimes seems to have gone into the writing of the programmes for use with these expensive machines, and the fact that manufacturers appear little interested in anything but affluent, western type consumer societies.

There are many places in the world where conditions are very different, and it is in these that my interests mainly lie. Countries like one I know pretty well where teachers' salaries are abysmally low - the highest educational salary in the country might be \$700 US annually - where there is no hope whatever of any budget for any aids at all, and where Parent-Teacher Associations, when they exist, are mostly concerned with such basics as raising money to buy chalk for the school. What do you do with no money at all?

My generalised answer is that you use things that would otherwise be thrown away - thrown away in even the least affluent society. (Additionally to the chalkboard, of course, the least effectively used of all aids. One of the best slogans I ever saw was "USE YOUR BLACKBOARD! DON'T JUST WRITE ON IT".) The sort of waste bits and pieces that I have in mind are these. Cigarette packets - the kind made of cardboard with flip-up tops. Empty match boxes - remember to strip off the striking surfaces if young children are to use them. Used local stamps - foreign ones too, if these are not likely to disappear. Used envelopes. Old cardboard of any kind - boxes, the mass of unnecessary packaging that manufacturers love to put round their products, discarded files, and so on. Polystyrene - this is a bit rarer, and generally not as useful as waste cardboard, but still not to be despised. And a ragbag of things - old inner tubes, short bits of string and wire, odd bits of plastic, and so on.

There is one very important point about all these: nobody would want to steal them. In many countries security is a very significant limitation on the teacher's willingness to use aids - provide a tape recorder, say, and the whole staff will be so scared of it being stolen that no one will ever dare to take it out of the double-locked cupboard. But don't blame the teacher for this attitude - he is right. If that tape recorder is stolen and it is shown to be his fault, how many months' or years' salary will be required of him? So, if the aids consist of things which not even the least sophisticated thief will want to take, the teacher can rest easy about security. And then imagination in the use of the aids can begin to work.

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Later in this paper I am going to give some examples of useful aids which can be made from these useless materials, but first, a paragraph or so about what I take to be some of the principles on which aids should be used in the language teaching classroom. I propose to mention only four, though I am sure that more could be distinguished.

First, the aid and its use must be dictated by the language item or skill being learnt or developed. To my mind, this is a fundamental distinction between real teaching aids and other objects such as commercially produced wall charts. These are useful in other ways, but unless they are specifically designed to accompany a given set of course books, or are in some other way precisely related to a scheme of work which the class is following, they are not - for me - aids.

Second, each learner, or pair or group of learners, should rather frequently be able to have, handle and use his own, or their own, aid. The aid, that is, should not be something which is always, or even generally, held up, pinned up or otherwise manipulated by the teacher. I suspect that here there may be something of a distinction between the use of aids for teaching a language and for teaching certain other subjects - mathematics always excepted. In language teaching, I believe, one must be as attentive as possible to creating a situation for the learner, a situation which he experiences as realistically as possible - from this comes, I believe, both understanding of meaning and confidence in communication.

Third, and connected with the second, of course, the aid must help to create interest. I would argue that the failure to create interest has been, and still is, the greatest general weakness in language teaching. Any teacher who has taken over a class accustomed to mindless drilling as the main or only avenue of learning, and has given them the ~~needed~~ practice but within interesting classroom happenings knows the staggering response he can get. Any teacher who has not done this is advised to try it.

Fourth, and again connected with the second, there is the capacity of a good aid to assist the teacher in producing a certain sequence of activities, or in clarifying a particular contrast in the use of the language. Try teaching the 'this/that/these/those' contrasts in a bare classroom, and then try it again when each child has one or two old cigarette packets on his desk. Or leaves. Or bits of scrap paper. Or some stones picked up off the road outside

Now to deal briefly with some examples of using the kinds of aid I am advocating.

Any objects which can be brought into the classroom in large numbers (see above) can be used for teaching: the contrast mentioned in the last paragraph; subject-verb concord; noun-pronoun concord; prepositions of place, and so on. Obviously one does not begin presenting the 'this/that' contrast with every learner having two or three cigarette packets on his desk, and probably playing with them, but this is a stage of personal experience - of actually living the contrast personally - which one would aim at reaching fairly quickly.

Stamps, used matches, bits of scrap paper, old nails etc can be used with matchboxes, cigarette packets, old envelopes and any other form of container for practising the 'in/on' contrast, some other prepositions of place, and many of the two-word verbs. e.g. when the class has learnt a few of these verbs, it is easy to construct a game whereby one learner gets such directions as: Pick up the match. Put it down. Pick it up. Put it in the box. Take it out. Pick up the tin. Put the box in the tin. and so on.

Stamps can be used for practising simple communications involving colour, numerals and certain comparison patterns. This is perhaps a suitable point to suggest that when a teacher uses costless realia in this way, he is doing something basically different from what he does when his class is drilling. If he says 'It's a blue stamp', then the learners repeat, then he says 'green' and they chant 'It's a green stamp' - if this sort of thing happens, it may be a necessary stage, but it soon degenerates into mere mindlessness. But if, having drilled the pattern a little, one learner holds a stamp so that only one other learner can see it, and this second learner reports to the rest of the class 'It's a red stamp', then, I suggest, a certain minimum of real communication has been achieved.

Cigarette packets, cut up, and other cardboard can be extremely useful in the first year or so of the development of reading skills, especially when - as is so often the case - few learners have any books. The backs of the packets can be used for flash cards, admittedly not as large as one might like, but large enough certainly for group work. At a later stage, the same pieces of card can be used for 'Read & Do' cards. In using these, the learner reads some simple English - reads as an individual, and with a purpose, not as a dehumanised anonymity in a chanting mass - reads some simple English and shows his understanding of what he has read by doing what the card has told him to do. It may be an action which involves moving about the classroom, or it may require him to do something on paper or in an exercise book. A teacher can easily make up large numbers of these cards, at times convenient to him, and over a period, build up quite a considerable stock. Here are two examples of such cards, the first from a set to be used early on, the second from a later set:

1. Draw a picture of a car near a tree. Show the picture to your teacher.
2. Mr Brown is walking past a shop. He is carrying a small bag and an umbrella. There is a small boy behind him. The boy is wearing a hat, but Mr Brown isn't wearing one. Draw a picture of this.

These examples are most appropriate for fairly young learners, but adaptation to older interests is possible. The teacher, of course, is not in the least interested in the learner's skill at drawing - or he ought not to be - all he checks is that each pictureable point on the card appears in the drawing. He is checking comprehension, not art.

Waste card can also be used to make some very useful reading aids for which the only name I have been able to think of is the excessively clumsy "Picture and Caption Matching Sets". 'Caption Sets', for short, perhaps. It has been very gratifying to see the excitement generated by these in a class of bored 15 year olds. Variations are possible, of course, as always, but basically one gets (how, to be explained in a moment) two pictures which illustrate the same theme or subject, but which have differences of detail. The card is cut up into pieces about 7 x 3 centimetres and captions are written on these pieces, one caption to a piece. The wording of the captions is chosen so that some describe one picture, some another, some both, and perhaps, some neither. The learner reads the captions and shows his understanding by sorting them correctly. The teacher can easily check understanding by glancing at how the cards have been sorted. The pictures, which are pasted on larger pieces of card, can be cut from magazines or drawn. The second system is often the more useful, since it is then possible to select pictorial content to fit the particular lexis and grammatical patterns the teacher wishes the learner to experience in his reading. Nevertheless, if a manufacturer wishes to expend vast sums of money trying to persuade us to buy his products, there is no reason why we should not make sensible use of him by cutting out his ads for caption sets.

One further use of card I hesitate a little to mention, because this was a large cooperative effort spread over some weeks of a course, but since it does show what can be done with waste materials and hard work, I think it should be described. A group of teachers, unashamedly plagiarising the idea of the SRA Reading Boxes (whose products were financially, for them, as far away as the moon), made a do-it-yourself reading box. They wrote, collected, amended etc some 80 short reading passages, and wrote questions and answers for them all. These were then stencilled, mimeographed (the only point where money was needed, but where an interested Ministry of Education came to the rescue), and cut up. Each teacher took a set away with him, collected lots of waste cards, pasted the passages, questions and answers on to separate cards in five different grades of difficulty, packed the lot

in a shoe box, and became the proud user of more reading material than his school had probably ever had before. I say that the teachers did all this. Of course, being wise teachers, they did not do all this. They enlisted the help of their classes in collecting, cutting and pasting - a very desirable procedure and, as I can testify from having watched one class doing it - great fun. In fact it is to my mind a cardinal principle that whenever possible the learners should be directly involved in the making of the aids that they themselves will use.

A final word. On occasions when I have demonstrated aids like these, they have often included ones drawn with felt tip pens. This normally leads to an accusation that I am breaking my own rules in using things that cost money in order to make my aids. But not so. It is easier to use a felt tip pen, if you can afford it, but it is far from necessary to use one. It is perfectly possible to make costless pens, inks and adhesives - thoroughly effective ones. Certain kinds of twigs can be frayed into brushlike ends; felt markers can be made by binding scraps of cloth to sticks with bits of thin wire, string, or elastic bands; botanists can usually suggest how dyes can be simply processed from locally available plants (e.g. for black ink, take the sap from a banana trunk, bottle it, leave for about two weeks, and use*); and useful glues and cements can be made from rubber scraps and petrol, or from starch sources and water.

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