

## I'm sorry, I can't remember<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Each time a person in a language class responds to a question with “I’m sorry, I forgot,” the person is implying that language learning consists mainly of memorizing. The long lists of vocabulary items learners try to commit to memory also imply that memorizing is the key mental activity required in language learning. Questions in textbooks and on tests that ask for facts also send the message that learning and memorizing are equivalent.

In fact, though we need to memorize some things, much of all of learning, including language learning, requires thinking: processing sounds we hear and symbols we see. Processing requires us to analyze messages we see and hear and compare them with our previous knowledge.

In the article, techniques will be introduced to show how activities in textbooks that require only memorization can be changed to require thinking as well. As you introduce some of the activities, it is hoped that learners will say, “Let me try—please wait a second” after you ask them a question rather than “I’m sorry, I forgot.” The words “Let me try” suggest that learners are aware of the fact that language learning requires thinking. And the words “please wait a second” show that the learners know that since thinking requires use of previous knowledge, time is required.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a reformation of a plenary and workshop presented at the Post RELC Seminar 2000 at Chulalongkorn University, on April 24 and 25. Consequently, there are few references as the intention of this article is to accurately reflect the nature of both the plenary and the workshop. However, there are some suggestions for further readings for those who want to read academic papers on the same activities and themes in this article.

## Introduction

While most would agree that memorizing words and patterns is necessary for language learning, other mental activities are necessary as well. The bulk of the tasks in many textbooks, however, tend to emphasize activities or tasks that require memory alone. The purpose of this article is to show ways to decrease the number of times students say "Sorry, I can't remember," and increase the times students say "I think that she was sad," or "I am not sure but I would guess that the word refers to something we eat." Said another way, the article contains suggestions for altering activities in textbooks that require only memorization so learners have opportunities to process language and use thinking skills as well.

## Activities Preceding Reading and Listening Passages

The classic first step in a reading or listening lesson is for the teacher to write some so-called "keywords" on the board or to ask students to underline the words they do not understand in reading lessons and to try to write down words they do not understand as they listen to a tape of a spoken passage. After the words that are supposedly "key" are identified, the teacher usually defines them or asks students to look the words up in dictionaries or glossaries in the textbook being used. Often, the words are defined on the bottom or side of the page of the text. After the definitions are presented or read, a frequent question from the teacher is "Can you define *Eskimo*?" Another activity is a fill-in-the-blank activity. The reading or listening passage is presented with all the new words just defined deleted or all the times "for" is used if the focus is on function words or some

grammatical point rather than on lexical meaning. But in such fill-in-the-blank texts, there is only one right answer for each blank; memory is required and thinking is discouraged. For example, if the word "beautiful" is defined, there is likely to be a fill-in that requires the students to write the word "beautiful." But if we see a statue or painting that we like words such as "gorgeous, pleasant, pleasing to see, lovely" are also possible. By requiring students to write in a word that has just been defined rather than one that expresses their own feelings means we are emphasizing the importance of memory over genuine use of language.

The origin of "context" is related to the word "texture" in reference to different types of cloth. If I hold up a small piece of thread and ask you to tell me whether the piece of thread is from a sweater, a pair of jeans, a dress shirt, a blouse, a silk tie, etc., it will be difficult for you to identify the origin of the piece of thread. In the same way, when we present words separated from the "texture" they are part of, readers and listeners will find it difficult to place the word in texture from which it has been removed. Each time we write so-called "key" words on the white board separated from the sentences they are part of, we are implying that learners have no power to make predictions about the meanings of what they are reading or listening to. Individual words, like individual threads, are harder to predict the meanings of the larger samples of data. If we see an arm of a sweater, it is easier to guess that we are holding a sweater than if we have only one pieced of thread from the sweater. If we have one word, it is harder to predict the meaning of the word and the sentence it is in than if we have a group of words, or a series

of sentences. Writing so-called “key” words on the board to activate the schemata of learners is like holding up a piece of thread from a piece of clothing. In presenting any data in isolation, we are removing from learners the chance to make predictions using the language around the words that they might not be familiar with. Said another way, the claim that we can help learners by isolating words or presenting them to students before reading a passage to activate their schemata needs to be reexamined.

An easy option to starting classes by defining words determined by the authors of the textbook is to ask students to cross out words that they do not understand in a reading passage. In a listening passage, they can be asked to write words that were said before and after words they did not understand. The gaps that are created by the crossed out words in a reading passage and the blank between the word that precedes and follows words that were heard but not understood become cloze passages. There is a critical difference between reading passages with words deleted that have been identified as difficult and cloze passages. In cloze passages, words are deleted randomly--every nth word. So in some passages, every sixth word is deleted, in others every seventh word, etc. But there is no pattern to the deletion. The cloze passage is based on the fact that language is redundant: 1. we tend to say the same thing in more than one way; 2. there is usually more than one grammatical feature that expresses the same message; 3. words and phrases in one part of a passage are repeated in another part of the passage in a slightly different way.

What these 3 characteristics of language means is that when we read or listen, we catch only part of the message

through our eyes or ears. The rest of the message we have stored in our minds. Our previous knowledge of vocabulary, the world and grammar allow us to understand what we read and listen even though we do not notice all of the signals in the reading or listening passage. For example, in English, if we hear “The old man with the grey hair was holding his six books,” if we do not hear or see the word “old,” we infer he is old because we are also told he has grey hair, which from personal experience we associate with old people. If we missed the word “man” and do not know the gender, we have the word “his” later in the sentence to indicate the gender. If we miss “six” or associate “six” with “sex,” the word “books” with an “s” on the end indicates that more than one book is being held. And since someone is doing something with books, the word preceding “books” might refer to numbers. But if a reader or listener knows old people concerned about sex, then the word “sex” is also possible. Subsequent sentences would indicate whether the books dealt with sex or whether the man simply had more than one book.

The basis for cloze passages came from an experiment done by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T). When everyone used telephones connected by wires, the electrical signal that carried our voices weakened as it travelled through the telephone lines. AT&T had to mount transformers on telephone poles to strengthen the electrical signals so that people could hear each other’s voices. To see how many transformers they needed, the company performed an experiment. They sent company representatives into the homes of customers to sit with those answering the phones. These representatives asked those receiving calls to write down what they

heard when they received a call from AT&T. The company representative had a copy of the questions and comments that the person from AT&T used when calling the customers. One question asked was something like "Good evening, I'm calling from AT&T. I'd like to speak to your \_\_\_\_\_." Sometimes the person from AT&T calling omitted the word at the end of the sentence. Other times the person from AT&T calling said "wife, husband, mother-in-law, son, daughter." As it turned out, the person receiving the call wrote a word that fit whether the person calling said a word or omitted the last word in the sentence. Thus, if the person from AT&T called and said "I'd like to speak to your mother-in-law," but the person who was living in the home was the mother rather than the mother-in-law, the person receiving the call wrote down "I'd like to speak to your mother." even though "mother-in-law" had been said rather than "mother." And when no word was said, the person receiving the call would write in the person who was there. In many cases, the person wrote "I'd like to speak to you." even though the word "your" followed by a blank or another person was what was actually said. In other words, we all "complete" or "cloze" what we read and listen to, based on our own interpretation of the message. When we proofread our own writing and miss errors, we are doing a kind of reverse "cloze" in which we see the correct form even though the marks on the paper are incorrect.

Because we miss errors in our own writing when we proofread and because we fill in or complete what others say or write does not mean that we want to encourage our students to be inaccurate in their reading and listening. On the contrary, the goal of using cloze passages is not to fill in the

blank passages but to teach accurate listening and reading. But accurate listening and reading require thinking, not just memory. And when students fill in words in a cloze that reflect the correct meaning but are not correct such as writing the word "arid" in the blank in this sentence "I am \_\_\_\_\_ and need a glass of water" when the word "thirsty" collocates with thirst while "arid" collocates with deserts, it is imperative to point out the difference. But in putting the word "arid" in the gap, the student has shown understanding of the meaning required in the gap. "Correct meaning, but incorrect collocation" is a very different message from "Incorrect!" which is the usual comment after a student misses the one acceptable word in a fill-in exercise.

Gaps in cloze passages can be filled with sketches or words in the students' first language as well as in English. Once the sketches or first language words are produced, appropriate English equivalents can be produced by fellow students or the teacher or a dictionary. The more students have experiences in predicting meanings rather than filling in particular words, the more we will move beyond suggesting to students that learning a language requires only memory, not thinking.

Another way to encourage thinking rather than memory in discovering the meanings of words or phrases is to ask students to classify unknown phrases or words. For example, in the sentences "The experts are right. Kids watch too much TV. Step-fathers are not responsible." If the students do not know the words "experts, kids, and step-fathers," one way to start discovering meaning is to ask a series of questions. "Do you think that these words refer to people or things? Do you think these words refer to emotions or people? Do

you think that the words are nouns or verbs? Are the words singular or plural?" By asking a series of yes/no questions which suggest ways to discover meanings, we can encourage students to discover meanings on their own rather than to depend on our explanations or dictionaries alone. In fact, all of us ask a series of yes/no questions when we have a puzzle to solve. If I am in a room and want to exit, I try pushing the door. If I cannot push it, I try pulling it. In Japan, in some cases, neither pushing or pulling works so I have to slide the door to the right or the left. But the options are limited both in the ways we can open doors and in the way we can discover words. But each time we define a word or ask a student to look up the unknown word in a dictionary, we fail to provide experiences to encourage students to learn on their own. Classifying words as animal, vegetable or mineral, as singular or plural, as referring to people or things or emotions or actions and any other categories that you and students generate, reminds students that thinking can lead to learning as well as memory.

Sometimes it seems easier to check memory than thinking. In fact, if we ask students to fill in the blanks and want them to use only the words we have just defined, it is easier to check their work. Either they put in the word that we taught or they did not. If students have discovered that a word refers to a person but are not sure whether the person is young or old, good or bad, how can we evaluate the response since it is incomplete? One option is not to evaluate but to push the student to another level of understanding. "Yes, it is a person, look again at the passage and try to find out whether the person is young or old by clues in other sentences." By setting new tasks to lead students to discovery rather than by

evaluating what they have remembered, we can encourage students to understand that learning a language requires not just memory but also thinking and processing skills. In the long run, we might increase autonomous language learning if we show ways students can discover meanings and grammatical patterns and spelling conventions and pronunciation rules on their own.

A central limitation of cloze passages is the implication that individual words are critical to understanding and to the making of predictions. Of course, in many cases, groups of words or phrases need to be understood rather than individual words. Consider what groups of words that we need to make predictions about in this sentence:

*It's not surprising that the global economy is fuelled by everyone's desire to make money—governments, corporations, individual workers—are all jockeying for their piece of the pie.*

The words "jockeying for their piece of the pie" need to be understood together. Consequently, when we construct a "cloze" passage, we need to feel free to deal with groups of words rather than individual words. Leaving one space for the seven words in the phrase allows students to write down words such as "competing for gain" or "are greedy" or "seeking profit." The goal of cloze passages is to develop the ability to make educated guesses about meanings, not to simply replace single words. And so if there are many words that imply one meaning, we need to delete groups of words and allow students to write in fewer words than those that have been deleted.

#### **Activities Following Reading and Listening Passages**

Typically, reading and listening passages are followed with a series of

questions asking learners to recall facts about the passages. Though the labels used for these types of questions --“Reading for meaning” or “Thinking and language”-- imply that more than memory is required, this is rarely the case. “Who took the money from the bank vault? What time did the bank cease its hours of operation? Was the thief a man or woman?” are examples of typical so-called “comprehension” questions. Even native speakers who have read and enjoyed passages sometimes cannot remember a number of facts after they have read the passage.

One alternative is ignore the questions in the text and ask students to write questions about the story that they would like to ask the author. Another option is to ask students to write questions to ask the teacher that start with “Why” or “How.” Alternatively, the students can be asked to write questions for either students or the teacher which contain the words “you,” “like,” or “experience.”

Since most students will assume that the author knows who took the money, what time the bank closed and the gender of the thief, they are likely to ask the author questions such as “Why did you create a female thief? How long did it take you to write the story? How many drafts did you write? Did you enjoy writing the story? What time do you start writing--in the morning or afternoon or evening? Do you eat or drink as you write? Do you write by hand or use a word processor or a typewriter?”

Of course, since they cannot present the written questions to the author, they can present them to other students and the teacher. And all can create answers to the questions imagining that they were authors of the story. Or, they can create answers

based on what they would do if they were the author.

The questions for the teacher that begin with “Why” or “How” might be similar to those written to ask the author. But in addition, they might ask questions related to teaching such as “Why was this passage included in the textbook? How much did you like reading the passage? Why did the author use so many words that I had to look up in my dictionary such as ‘vault’ and ‘cease’?”

Questions for students and teachers which require the use of “you,” “like” and “experience” are likely to engage the readers or listeners in a discussion. After one student asks another “What did you like about the story?” a response such as “I liked the suspense” is likely to be followed by a comment from another student such as “I didn’t think it had much suspense. I knew what was going to happen.” A question such as “Have you ever experienced a robbery?” is likely to lead to some students sharing personal experiences that they have had related to thefts. Some might also refer to movies they have seen or other stories.

There are at least three differences between the alternative types of questions suggested and the typical questions. First, students are asked to write the questions, not ask them orally. Second, they are asked to write questions rather than write or say answers. Third, the types of questions that are generated are unlikely to have only one correct answer. Most of them ask others to make inferences, make comparisons or in some way compare their own experiences and knowledge with each other and the text that they have read or listened to.

Some teachers object to having students write questions since they believe that communicative competence is so important.

The purpose of writing the questions is to provide prompts to the students. Even newscasters who are experienced in speaking to large audiences use teleprompters to deliver the news orally. If we ask students who are using English as a second language to compose their questions orally, they will produce fewer and shorter questions than if we allow them to write the questions. If we can circulate around the room and edit some of the written questions as they are writing them, when the questions are finally asked, in fact, there will be a larger percentage of correct English spoken than if we asked students to produce their questions only orally.

To ensure that students use their brain to process what they have written before they say it, it is imperative to tell students that they cannot look at the words they have written as they speak. The students need to be told to read their question silently, as many times as they wish. Then the students need to be told to turn their paper over and say the question to another student or to you. The oral version of the sentence they wrote might be slightly different. In fact, if the students are processing the language, the oral version is likely to be a variation of the written version. But by asking students to read silently, then pause and cover their written version and then speak, they will produce fewer errors than if they are asked to generate questions orally only. And they will produce a wider range and more complex questions if they write them first. Finally, in processing the written sentences and converting them to spoken questions, they will process the target language, often paraphrasing what they wrote.

Students should never be allowed to look at the questions or sentences that they are being asked to read orally. By focusing

on the printed version, we are emphasizing word calling--a memory task. But when we ask them to read silently, pause and process the meanings and then cover the sentences and say what they have read, we are emphasizing the processing of language--a thinking task.

Another option is to ask students to group the questions that follow the reading or listening passages in the textbooks you use. (Of course, they can also group the questions they generated.) Grouping requires comparison. Students and you have to see similarities and differences between the questions. Some will notice differences in form--those that start with "Who" are put in one column, those that start with "What" in another column. Others might start by counting the number of words and group them into long, medium and short questions. A few might see that most of the questions tend to require memory and facts. Some might see that some are related to personal experience while others are related only to the text. One or two might think some questions are stupid, too difficult or not worthwhile.

As with the requests for students to create questions, the request to classify the questions does not require one single correct answer, which is the central characteristic of almost all memory questions. Said another way, the alternative types of tasks allow for a range of questions and answers that cannot be predicted. By definition, questions or tasks that require thinking cannot be evaluated as right or wrong. Rather, in evaluating such tasks, we have to evaluate the quality of the thinking and creativity that produced the question or the task. One of the reasons that textbooks contain so many tasks with only one right answer is that it makes the evaluation of responses easy--

black and white. Either the student remembers and regurgitates the answer that is expected and thus is correct or is wrong. But when students write questions or classify questions, we cannot easily indicate which ones are right or wrong. In fact, all we can do is comment on the nature of the question. All we can do is classify the questions. And the more variety of questions the students generate, the more complex the classification system we develop will be.

But in dealing with the ambiguity of evaluating the quality of questions students generate, we are provided with an opportunity to think, to do more than present information to our students. And so the apparent freedom that we feel when we can say that a response is right or wrong in fact can lead over time to stultifying our own thinking processes.

#### **Activities During Reading and Listening Passages**

The activities presented both before and after reading and listening passages include a number that are in fact done during the time students read or listen to passages. In fact, the usual sequence of preparation for a passage, reading or listening to a passage and follow up activities after a passage has been read or listened to, while logical, is not parallel with the way we listen and read outside of the classroom. We read and listen because we have something we want to learn or discover. If we want to encourage processing skills, there is no need to start with an introduction to the vocabulary in the passage nor end with questions about the passage. We can start with the questions about the passage and then try to discover the answers as the second step as we read or listen. And the discovery of the meanings of

phrases or the noticing of new grammatical patterns can occur as we read and listen rather than before we have been exposed to the passage. So a final alternative is to start with the activities which usually are last, do those that are second second and ignore the first, introductory activities.

#### **Writing and Speaking Activities**

The processing of language is needed not only when we present reading and listening passages. The processing of language is also needed during writing and speaking activities. Of course, when students say the questions they have written and when others respond, they are speaking. When students discuss ways to classify questions, they are obviously speaking. But many textbooks have dialogs in them to develop speaking skills. Usually the focus in dialogs is on memorizing the lines. Here again, with small changes, there are ways to augment the memorization of dialogs with the processing of meaning in dialogs.

Even in such simple dialogs such as "Where do you live? How old are you?," thinking skills can be developed. Rather than having students simply repeat the lines from memory, we can ask students to say the lines with various emotions. For example, "Say 'Where do you live?' as if you are drunk or a person short of breath or a young child just learning how to speak or a bold person or a shy person." Of course if we simply ask students to repeat the words in a line we can more easily evaluate their performance. Either they have repeated all the words or they have not. But repeating the words shows no language development, no processing of language and no thinking skills. Whether a student has said the sentence as if he/she is drunk is of course harder to evaluate. But we, teachers, do not



prepositions are as critical for communication as the so-called "keywords" that they tend to dwell on. Some realize that their ears can provide only part of the meaning and that the patterns of word order they have in their minds are equally important. As a result, they begin to see that thinking is as critical as memorizing.

As a result of experiencing activities that require thinking plus memory, some students may begin to listen in totally different ways both to English and their first language to songs, dialogs in movies and oral discourse around them. They may begin to understand at a deeper level that communication requires mental processing as well as memory. Some will begin to realize that when they ask their teachers to say each word with equal stress--these/two/key/etc., they are failing to understand that the brain is as important as the ear in communication. They are failing to understand that they can reconstruct meaning based on the patterns, function words and suffixes in their head together with the stressed words they hear. In short, they will realize that memory is only a small part of language recognition and learning.

### **Conclusion**

Some criticize education that focuses on memory (Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969). They claim that when memory is emphasized in activities such as repetition of what others say in drills and repetition of definitions that have been memorized and oral reading of words that might not be understood, language cannot be developed. The purpose of the present article is not to condemn memory activities or tasks. Rather, the purpose has been to suggest ways to supplement memory activities or

tasks with tasks and activities which require more than memory, with tasks and activities that require thinking or processing of language. When test scores are compared from various countries, some countries do well on sections of tests that focus on memory and some do well on sections of tests that try to rate thinking skills. Some argue that providing opinions and criticizing others is a central role of education. Others agree but say that the opinions and criticisms need to be based on facts. Others argue that all we need is information (Barnes 1976; Bloom, 1956; Dewey, 1970). The activities you have just read about are based on the premise that both memory and thinking skills are vital to any type of learning. The implication of the article is for you to supplement the activities you do so that there is a balance between memory and thinking or processing activities.

Some students will in the beginning be bewildered by activities that do not have clear cut answers. Some teachers will find it difficult to introduce activities that cannot be evaluated easily as correct or incorrect. There is no need to introduce all the alternatives suggested in a short period of time. Rather, it is probably more useful to introduce one alternative activity at a time, during a short period of time during a regular lesson. If one alternative is introduced for around five to ten minutes a day, once a week in the beginning, both students and teachers can slowly adjust to changing the balance between memory and thinking activities. In addition, introducing thinking activities slowly will not undermine the value of memory activities nor suggest that the energy that has been expended on memory activities has not been useful.

### The Author

John F. Fanselow started teaching English in Nigeria as a member of the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers sent to Nigeria after John F. Kennedy established the American volunteer organization. He was subsequently invited to the graduate school of Teachers College at Columbia University in New York to start Ph.D. studies and to teach new volunteers who had been selected to teach both in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal, Somalia and Togo.

After he returned from Africa, he completed his Ph.D. studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, and was immediately invited to join the faculty. For the last twenty years, he has worked with English teachers in Japan, first through JALT workshops and seminars at private language schools and since the late 80's as Director of the MA Graduate Course in TESOL that Teachers College, Columbia University provides in Tokyo in cooperation with SIMUL International.

In addition to *Try the Opposite*, he wrote *Breaking Rules* and *Contrasting Conversations*, both published by Longmans and produced *Teaching English in Exhilarating Circumstances*, distributed by the U.S. Peace Corps. Two of his articles in the TESOL Quarterly have been reprinted in books, and one has received an award from New York University.

He has served as President of TESOL International as well as the New York State Affiliate of TESOL. He has made countless presentations at TESOL, JALT and dozens of TESOL affiliates around the world. In the 1999 January/February Issue of *ESL Magazine*, he was named one of 30 American ESL Pioneers.

He became Professor Emeritus at Columbia University Teachers College in 1997, at which time his students established a scholarship fund in his name to encourage "Fanslovian" ideas and practices among MA Candidates in TESOL in New York and Tokyo. He was subsequently appointed President of International Pacific College, a tertiary institution for the internationally minded that he had been associated with since before it was founded in 1989.

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