
English from Christmas Crackers*

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TEFL is subject not so much to fashions as to exaggerated enthusiasms, and an analysis of the latest of such enthusiasms amounts to a 'state-of-the-art' survey. In the area of articles, workshops, seminars, etc. our profession is totalitarian : orthodoxy must be propounded, and disbelievers made to see and admit their previous errors. Fortunately, most teacher training institutes are somewhat conservative, and experienced teacher trainers know that not everything that has gone before is necessarily wrong, and they are probably quite capable of incorporating new ideas in small increments, as is right and proper. Unfortunately, however, the orthodoxy from 'communicative language teaching' through 'the learner', 'the language learning classroom', 'learner centred activities' to 'methodology', with a whole new mystique attached to it, has almost ignored the essential of the language itself. It is high time that a correction was made. The following article is thus a somewhat critical state-of-the-art survey, with the message : Let us get back to Hamlet's 'Words, Words' if we really want learners, in Thailand in particular, to get to a reasonable level in English studies.

Part I

Read the following and have a good giggle :

What is half-man, half horse
and plays football?
A centaur for ward.

What can you never have till
it is taken?
Your photograph.

Why is it dangerous to take a nap
in a train?
Because all trains run over
sleepers.

What do you call a side street
Hairdresser?
Alley Barber.

What letter is the most import
ant in "friend-ship"?
R, because without it our
friends would become fiends

What do you get when you
cross herrings and monkeys?
Fish and chimps.

What is worse than finding a
worm in an apple?
Finding half a worm

What flies yet never gets
any where?
A flag.

Why is the letter A like a
sweet-smelling flower?
Because a bee (B) comes after
it

Who buys blood oranges by the
crateful?
A vegetarian vampire.

- Question** Where did these items come from ?
- Answer** They are a sample of the 'etcetera' of the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition above. They came, with the paper hats, from Christmas crackers, in December 1986.
- Question** Are you seriously suggesting that this sort of thing has potential for language learning ?
- Answer** Sure. As long as the learners are not beginners, they have enormous potential. All except the most disenchanted learners like to work out a joke in another language. The jokes, such as they are, are highly memorable. Further, they reveal new dimensions of words, and thereby expand vocabulary, which is a bonus, even if this involves a few low-frequency items. And the procedure for explaining-or exploiting-them in class allows ample opportunity for 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1982) :
- What do you call the things the train runs on ?
- What is under the rails ?
- What are they made of ?
- etc. (again!)
- Question** But isn't your title, and the rubric 'Read the following and have a good giggle' a bit, well, facetious? And doesn't it parody the whole format of materials for learning English ?
- Answer** Yes, it does. But that is merely to attract your attention.
- Question** Whose attention ?
- Answer** Y O U. Whoever bothers to read this. After all, in modern English I can no longer say 'But that is merely to attract your attention, O Reader.'
- Question** Then you are not suggesting some new method, like pragmatic mapping (Oller, 1986), or some new dimension to games and songs, or blackboard pictures or visual aids, or something else ?
- Answer** On the contrary, I'm warning against it.
- Question** Would you kindly explain a bit further ?
- Answer** I'd be delighted.

Part II

In fact the foregoing probably D O E S have some potential for language teaching and learning, in spite of its apparent triviality. It constitutes 'text', that is, one type of English, in this case written to be spoken, naturally occurring in a 'real world' context. It happens, additionally, to be authentic, and to have come, as stated, from a box of Christmas crackers. In teaching and learning a language relatively little text which learners meet will be authentic; it will have been specially prepared for them, as learners. But it should appear to be authentic, and text which does not do so is suspect, to the linguist (which does not matter very much) and to the student, which matters very much. Thus the following, taken from the generally applauded course 'Odyssey' (Kimbrough, Palmer, and Byrne, 1983), which is now in use in Thai secondary schools, is not only suspect, on these grounds, but ultimately very much more fatuous than the 'Christmas cracker English' :

Small Talk _____

I Ask a classmate:

Do you like

movies
books

 about science?

monsters	the police	soldiers
spies	famous people	animals

But it is nevertheless 'text' though of a very inferior sort. It is not, however, the purpose of this article to examine samples of text, or to make qualitative evaluations of such samples. This has been done extensively over the years, and academic reputations made from showing that it is difficult to find a context for, say, 'I am opening the door'. My concern is rather with something else, namely the extent to which current preoccupations with 'methodology' ignore text altogether. This can perhaps be best described by the phrase 'flight from the text', which, though seemingly familiar, I have only once come across in articles or books. This was in an article by Short and Candlin (1986) where Short was referring to the teaching of literature, and stated that "...Post-war English literature teaching in the overseas context has been marked by a fairly consistent 'flight from the text'". I would suggest that the same problem, for I have no doubt whatsoever that it is a problem, has spread to language teaching.

Part III

In Part II above I deliberately accorded inverted commas to the word 'methodology'. This is not intended to indicate that there is anything strange, much less anything unwelcome, about either the word, or the concept. We do, of course, want teachers who are trained, who are efficient, and who can mediate successfully between the target language and groups of learners of varying ability and varying, but generally less than total commitment, to the learning of English. The mode, or method, of such mediation will be the T E X T, which may be spoken or written, pre-set (as with the jokes from the crackers) or totally improvised. To do this well it seems to me that a high standard, even a very high standard, of competence in the target language is required. Any reader of this article will be aware that many teachers are well below a minimum acceptable standard, and without trying to define what this standard should be, the same reader knows that there is no easy and short term solution to the problem. Enter the methodology people....

Our profession is not short of opportunists, and reputations are to be made by brilliant surgery, not by dedicated nursing. So, let us by-pass the language competence of the teachers, and concentrate on technique. Classroom technique becomes all. Technique, in this sense, means the organisation of the class, and the filling of the available time by activities which are, undoubtedly, linked with language learning. This, then, is 'methodology', and the inverted commas imply technique without text. What is being learned is scarcely considered, and it would be the greatest heresy to ask how many new words the learner had acquired in the course of the lesson.

An example, admittedly an extreme one, may illustrate the point. At a recent seminar a teacher (competent, mature) felt obliged, before video camera, to display 'technique' with a group of real students. She held before her a picture hidden beneath a sheet of paper and asked, quickly, and addressing herself to at least six students, 'What is it? what is it?'. Activity was afoot, and the professionals were satisfied. She was most certainly not looking for the answer "How can I know? You're hiding it, as part of your 'methodology'" A little of the picture was revealed and the question 'What is it?' repeated many dozens of times. Eventually, one student ventured 'Peacock.' This was repeated by a few other students. No other words were spoken. Eventually the 'mask' was removed and a picture of a sarus crane revealed. The offering of 'peacock' was neither accepted nor rebutted. Why was this a waste of time? Basically, because there was no text. A quite literal 'flight from the text'!

It is difficult to know how far this pre-occupation with technique at the expense of text has permeated classroom teaching. The explanation put forward is that teaching must be 'interesting' and 'lively' and 'motivating', though whether the learner finds it so is not clear. It is perhaps not so surprising to find that the 'learner centred classroom' is a place where learners are forced to take part in activities which are part of the acceptable range of techniques of the teacher, approved by the trainers of teacher trainers, but of no intrinsic interest to the language learner, lacking text, and, replete with game, song or some sort of paraphernalia, merely divert from the task of learning the language. But as I write a programme announcement arrives on my desk for a workshop for teachers, on the topic 'Songs in the Classroom': 'This workshop will introduce various activities and techniques for using songs for language teaching purposes in the classroom'. Note, more 'techniques'.

Part IV

I have myself no doubt whatsoever that techniques, for the teacher, and activities, for the learner, have been much over-emphasised in recent years, and that text, per se, has been much neglected. It would be interesting to find out to what extent that 'Songs in the Classroom' programme deals with the text of the songs; and if it deals with the text first and the technique secondarily. But if, in Thailand, my comments appear to be an attack on something which is still developing I would like to add that I am by no means ahead of the field. I quote the following from a paper by John Honey (1985) called 'Language Across the Curriculum: The View from 1985' given at the SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore in April 1985:

"The new stress on the learner's own responsibility for his learning chimed with the general educational ideology of the recent period, which deprecated teacher-dominated learning situations, preferring instead techniques such as drama, discussion, games and simulation, projects and problem solving, and the cultivation of the individual imagination. Most of us would accord a degree of respect to these presuppositions, though in the field of language teaching we may be reluctant to acquiesce in the demotion of the Teacher-as-Model, recognising that there is a resource here which it is difficult to make available to a student in any other form. Nevertheless, it is my duty to report to you that in

advanced education systems, the 'learner-centred' approach is seriously under attack. Both under the British Conservative education minister, Sir Keith Joseph, and, even more significantly, under the radical Socialist French education minister, Jean-Pierre Chevenement, the clock has been turned back. 'Topics', 'projects', 'cultural awakening', 'discovery methods' are now discouraged: 'too many children are wandering aimlessly through the meadow picking daisies'. The emphasis is again to be on the basics, and curricula now prescribe 'an irreducible minimum for all children: of experience they should get, of skills they should acquire and of things they should know. And I mean know' (The director of education for one local authority.)"

It could of course be argued that this is itself an overstatement, as extreme as any preoccupation with techniques which I could find anywhere, though I would like to draw attention to the telling phrase 'too many children wandering aimlessly through the meadow picking daisies' (itself a nice example of text). This wandering aimlessly though the meadow manifests itself in the current obsession with 'group and pair work', a technique which seems to be mandatory, and one for which, incidentally, text is almost invariably lacking. Methodological orthodoxy most commonly presents group and/or pair work in terms of simple mathematics, with the suspect equation of 'If the teacher asked every student in the class one question each, it would amount to one minute speaking time per student per lesson, but it....etc'; the same methodologists conveniently forgetting at this point that their studies of classroom interaction seldom reveal one question directed at one student as a repeated format. Although occasional group work, like any other technique, may have a place in the language learning classroom, it is full of hazards listed below (Long, 1986):

- a) Learners are not sure what they have to do or what is expected of them.
- b) It is easy to satisfy the teacher that something is going on, but that 'something' may have little to do with language acquisition.
- c) The tasks are often trivial (though text is suspect on this point too).
- d) Tasks which may look attractive in the text-book, such as weather charts, or maps of the London Underground system, or slightly enigmatic pictures (Cambridge University Press has published whole books of the latter) are of no interest to the learner.
- e) The task itself is a poor return on the time taken in setting it up, and supposed interaction may, for one or more learners, involve little more than 'Yes' or 'No', or at best a few words which are definitely not memorable.

Again then, where technique overrides text, as in *most* group and pair work activities, it is to the detriment of language learning; we would be better with Christmas crackers.

Part V

Is there a simple remedy for the present position?

Having asked the question I think the most honest answer is that there are no simple remedies in language learning, and that language acquisition is a long hard task. In this process the teacher is vital, but equipping the teacher with 'method' must not be at the expense of language, and the sooner the 'flight from the text' is halted the better. Though not in itself a remedy, teachers must be taught and encouraged to seek out text which is interesting, challenging, and expands vocabulary, as well as indicating and testing the parameters of words. If existing text-books are limited in scope, they must be supplemented, and for this teachers with high language competence are needed. It follows from this that the teachers themselves should be constantly improving their skills, and workshops and meetings should be pointed in this direction, rather than the present heavy emphasis on diversions and time-fillers for the English teaching

lesson. Again, if the materials are 'functional', that is fine, but again they must be supplemented, as it is not enough that the students' terminal achievement is to ask the price, or what time something starts. 'Supplemented' means *text*, which again means selection. If simplified readers are in use they should be put aside as soon as possible; they are themselves a type of sub-text, with words reduced to purely literal meanings, and all idiom and the vast range of 'fixed expressions' carefully excised. This does not mean that the teacher needs to look for literary text, or the overly-dense text of newspaper articles; and I do not believe, as Candlin (1985) suggested that there is an abundance of text staring us in the face at every street corner. But the proficient teacher can find text, and I finish this article with an example. The original had pictures, but I have removed them, as a diversion. I invite every teacher to consider the multiple things which he or she can do with the *text* for every level beyond (say) year 3 of English study in Thai schools:


1987 good reasons to see Thailand next year

Majestic temples and magnificent elephants, glittering roofs and garlands of orchids, shining seas and shimmering silks, fascinating markets and fabulous silver, enchanting people and exotic cuisine ... one could write a long book about the land they call Thailand (and many seasoned travellers have).

No other country has its unique blend of the picturesquely exotic and the sky-scrapingly modern, of friendliness that charms and surprisingness that stimulates.

And never has there been a better year to see Thailand than 1987. For this will be Visit Thailand Year in the Land of Smiles.

The whole country will throw its hat into the crystal-clear air, and, from the teak forests of the North to the silver sands of the South, a rainbow of colours will curve over the country for 12 months - a rainbow of festivities and flowers and fireworks.

Make your holiday plans now. And make sure you fly on Thailand's own airline,  Thai International, where the exotic sensations that are Thailand start from the moment you step on board.

To conclude : Text is your remedy, perhaps the only remedy, for better language learning, whether from Christmas crackers, advertisements—as the above—or any one of a myriad other sources. To manipulate that text, to mediate it to the students, requires technique. But let us not try and promote one without the other.

Note

Cracker--'small paper toy containing paper hat, etc. and made so as to explode when ends are pulled'--Concise Oxford Dictionary

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