Stimulus-based teaching

Tessa Woodward

offers a five-phase

framework for getting the

most from teaching material.

In Issue 24, I argued that it was a good idea to use a wide variety of starting points when planning lessons and courses. As we saw, these can range from a coursebook page to an interesting object, a song, a painting or a joke.

Not only is it more interesting for students to work from different kinds of stimuli, but it also helps starter teachers to increase their repertoire of teaching moves and materials, while encouraging mental flexibility in more experienced teachers.

How much material do we need?

When I started teaching I used to go to class every morning weighed down with piles of books, photocopies, cassette tapes, posters and pictures. I was so worried about running out of things to do with my class that I festooned myself with enough for a term's worth of lessons. My Director of Studies commented on this at my first staff development interview, gently suggesting that once I was more experienced, I'd be able to 'make two lines of text last all day'. At the time I thought he was crazy, but now, many years later, I know he was right!

I'd like to share with you a simple generative framework called *Stimulus-based teaching*. It will help you to make the most of any material you use as a starting point for your lessons and courses and will also cut down on your planning time.

The stimulus

By 'stimulus' I mean anything you choose to use in order to cause students to want to work in English. This stimulus could be almost anything: a story, a picture, a poem, a unit of the coursebook, a student, an object, a test or a gesture.

Working with the stimulus

We can apply five categories of move to any stimulus:

- Encounter
- Analysis
- Personalisation
- Alteration
- Creation

I'll take these categories one by one, explaining what each is good for and giving examples of the sort of activities that can fall within it and how they can be applied to a particular stimulus.

(!) After each one, you might like to think of another stimulus it could be applied to and another activity that would fit within the category.

Encounter

Students don't have to meet the complete stimulus immediately. An **object**, for example, can be wrapped in paper so that students have to guess what it is by its weight, size and feel. **Pictures** can be masked or flashed quickly or upside down. **Texts** can be gapped or jumbled. Not revealing the whole stimulus immediately means students can learn language for predicting, matching, sorting and re-ordering. It can also heighten their curiosity and interest.

Analysis

Once the stimulus has been totally revealed to students, they can start to identify it, name its parts, describe it and discuss where it came from and how it was made. Thus if we were using a **newspaper article**, we could raise vocabulary such as *headline, caption, line, paragraph, column* and so on. We could discuss how we know that the text is from a newspaper and from which page. We could discuss how it has been produced. We could map its contents and count its passive verbs. The analysis category often involves work on vocabulary and really helps students to feel they have got to grips with the material in detail.

Personalisation

Here you try to get a connection between the students and the stimulus in order to make it more interesting and meaningful to them. If you want to use **pictures**, for example, you can ask students to choose one, then to draw themselves into the

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picture or imagine themselves in it. Ask them to write or say what they can see and how they feel. This is the category of moves that includes asking students, 'Have you ever ...? What does this remind you of? What would you do if ...? How are you the same as, or different from ...? Can you bring in an example of ...?' Anything to get a connection between them and the material.

Alteration

Once the stimulus has been met and dissected, and has become meaningful to students through their involvement with it, the alteration phase encourages them to work with the material flexibly, thus improving their thinking and language skills. For example, if the **coursebook** is our stimulus, options here include summarising the main learning points in a unit, expanding a text to include more adjectives and adverbs, altering the ending of a story, reversing the biographical details of the characters in a dialogue, changing the time and tense in a grammar exercise, etc. Students are still working with the original stimulus, but they are changing it in some way.

Creation

Here the students move on from the stimulus, using it as a springboard to new skills and products. **Creative activities** that would fall into this category are: creating stories, roleplays, discussions and debates, writing letters, projects and posters, adverts, graphs and timetables that are related to the stimulus and seem to lead on naturally from it. The emphasis is on natural progression, imagination and creativity.

Questions worth asking

It is very easy to plan several hours of useful language work around the simplest of stimuli by working through the categories one by one. When doing this, teachers on training courses often discuss the following issues.

● *Is it a good idea to use all these categories of move in one lesson?*
It is just about possible if you have a lean stimulus, a long class and you

work really fast! It's not the main idea, though.

● *Is it a good idea to use the categories in the same order each time?*
Well, 'Encounter' probably needs to come first, followed perhaps by Personalisation or Analysis. But there are lots of logical progressions after that.

● *What are the main advantages of stimulus-based teaching?*
You don't need a lot of materials and you can get a lot out of a very little. It is therefore confidence-building for a teacher. Once you know you can make a little go a long way, you need not be stressed out when asked to teach at very short notice, or when you mislay some materials just before class. Thinking in terms of these categories can show you, too, where the patterns are in your own teaching. You may discover, for example, that though you do plenty of work with your students on analysis and alteration, you tend to miss out chances for creation. Or perhaps you realise that you don't use opportunities for masking the stimulus and slowly revealing it, thus increasing student curiosity. The different categories of move can also give you a useful system for storing new activities as you gradually pick them up.

● *What are the main disadvantages?*
The only one I have come across is the desire to use small amounts of material slowly and thoroughly. Once you learn how to do this, it becomes very hard to be 'spendthrift ' with material. And of course we need to be able to ring the changes with *everything* in teaching, including the amount of material we use.

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In the next issue I would like to look at notions of 'good' lessons and courses, considering what is necessary for us to be able to learn something new and thus what we need to include in our lesson and course plans. *ETp*

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TALKBACK!

It was interesting to see an article about mind mapping in Issue 23. I have often introduced classes to it, and many students have found it very helpful. However, I have to admit that I myself do not find mind mapping useful at all. My mind simply does not focus on the visual. Learners with a more auditory bias will be at a disadvantage if teachers insist on emphasising *only* the visual. Auditory memory is often seriously underestimated: think, for example, how many songs and rhymes you know without having seen them written down.

Different learning styles are a reality, and the best way teachers can help all students to reach their full potential is to expose them to as many ways of learning as possible, including mind mapping so that they can experiment to find out which ways work best for them as individuals. Most people are right-handed, but it is generally accepted that forcing the left-handed to write with their right hands is not brain-friendly. It may be true that most people are visually-oriented learners, but please do not tell those of us with an auditory learning bias that mind mapping works for everybody.

Angela Rogers
Bandung, Indonesia

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I'm writing to congratulate you on the article 'Correcting techniques' by Maria Alice Antunes, published in Issue 24 of ET*p*.

Not only does it clearly present the framework the author devised for researching the effectiveness of the different correction techniques, but it also discusses the importance of dealing better with the (poor) written performance of students (possibly due to the unsuccessful and inadequate treatment of this skill throughout their school life in Brazil) via effective learner training.

While it is true that some of the techniques mentioned will not be completely new to ELT teachers, so focused and organised is the cycle described that I must say that these ideas had never made so much sense to me as they did after reading this article.

I believe my students' writing will certainly profit from my reading about Maria Alice Antunes' work.

Cesar Elizi
Campinas, Brazil