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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this bulletin is to give the American with no prior experience in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) some idea of the range of EFL textbooks, and what they are like. It points out that most EFL texts published in America in the last 15 years are based on the audio-lingual method and that they are developed with one of the following categories of students in mind: (1) elementary students, (2) junior high or high school students, or (3) adults. The bulletin discusses such topics as: (1) what the EFL textbook does for you, the most important things being the sequencing of materials and the selection of vocabulary; (2) materials specifically geared to Vietnamese; and (3) language materials developed for other problems. (Author/TL)

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Indochinese Refugee Education Guides

#5

GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES: Teaching English to the Vietnamese -- Textbooks

The purpose of this bulletin is to give the American with no prior experience in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL)[1] some idea of the range of EFL textbooks, and what they are like.

Teaching English to the Vietnamese is a vastly different proposition from teaching English to Americans. The American student arrives in an English class already able to speak English: he knows -- although he can't talk about it -- how to put together words to form sentences, how to embed one sentence into another, and so on; if he didn't know how to do all this, he wouldn't be able to talk. Teaching him about his language is largely a matter of focusing his attention on, and teaching him how to talk about, his intuitive knowledge of the structure of English -- the knowledge that enables him to use it. (Teaching him what a noun is, for example, is showing him that many of the words he uses have certain characteristics in common, and telling him that any word which has these characteristics is called a noun.)

The Vietnamese speaker, in contrast to his American counterpart, arrives in class unable to speak English. He must be directly taught how to put words together to form sentences, how to embed one sentence into another, and so on; in other words, he must be taught precisely what his American counterpart arrives in class already knowing. For this reason, teaching English to the Vietnamese student (or any other student whose native language is not English) requires a completely different approach, and, of course, completely different materials.

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1 The field of English for non-English speakers also goes by slightly different names: English as a Second Language (ESL); English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

If you are a typical American, you have probably never had to consider this approach to teaching English; so when you are first faced with the prospect of teaching a Vietnamese student, it seems a formidable undertaking indeed. Where do you start? How do you teach pronunciation? What about vocabulary? How can you teach English to Vietnamese if you don't speak Vietnamese yourself?

Questions like these have been the object of intensive study -- (it's possible to get a Ph.D. in EFL) -- which, combined with the practical needs of EFL teachers both in the United States and in other countries, has resulted in the publication, over the years, of a wide range of EFL textbooks. You can nearly always trust an EFL texts published by a major publisher to be: readily available, written by specialists, carefully planned, and tested extensively in real teaching situations. Moreover, many of them are specially designed to be used by the inexperienced teacher; their "Teacher's Manuals" are, in effect, crash courses in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Just as math or geography textbooks vary widely in their approaches depending on the students involved, so do EFL texts. While the basic facts of English are the same regardless of who speaks it (both the first grader and the nuclear physicist have to be taught that we say I am and not I are) the presentation of the facts clearly has to take into account the age of the student, the kind and extent of English that he needs, and the amount of English he has already been taught. (The first grader is taught to say I am through an approach generally based on games, songs, rhymes and so on; the nuclear physicist is given intensive oral drill on the forms of be, backed up by written homework!)

EFL texts, then, differ widely according to intended audience. By reading the preface of an EFL text, you can quickly discover what age student the text is written for; what kind of English it teaches him (i.e., whether it is a course designed to enable him to take courses in college, or a course to teach him the jargon of medical English, or a course to teach him enough English to get around); and what knowledge the student is assumed to have already. In general, EFL texts fall into one or the

other of the following categories:

A. Elementary students
   1. Lower elementary (assumes the child cannot read)
   2. Upper elementary (assumes the child can read in his own language)

B. For junior high or high school students

C. For adults
   1. Intensive courses for college students (which go quickly through the structures of English, including the complicated ones the student runs into in college texts)
   2. Courses in "survival" English (which do not cover the whole language, but are designed to get the student functioning in an English-speaking environment as quickly as possible. These tend to be heavy on practical information such as transportation, employment, and so on.)
   3. Review courses (for the individual who has studied English in his own country, but needs a refresher course on structure, pronunciation, and conversation.)

The audio-lingual method

Virtually every EFL text published in America in the last fifteen years is based on what is called the "audio-lingual method", which is the method of teaching foreign languages based on the assumption that learning a language is essentially a matter of learning to understand and speak it first, then learning to read and write it. This does not mean, of course, that all reading and writing lessons are postponed until the whole language is learned; it simply means that primary emphasis is placed on understanding and speaking.

The audio-lingual method differs from the grammar-translation method (which is how you learned your high school Latin, and possible -- depending on how old you are -- your college French) in that neither grammar per se, nor translation, is utilized. Just about everyone in the field is convinced that learning grammatical rules is no way to go about learning a foreign language. (First, consider that the seven- or eight-year-old who

talks his head off in perfect English does not know what a noun is, or that in English the verb must agree with the subject in person and number; second, consider how after four years in college French with straight A's you arrived in France unable to communicate.) In the audio-lingual method the student is not taught the rules of English grammar; instead, correct sentence patterns are established as habits with him. He is not taught, for example, that the third person singular ending of the present tense of regular verbs is -s; he is drilled instead in the production of sentences like "I go to school every day" and "He goes to school every day" until the go/goes distinction feels "right" to him, and he makes it without thinking about it.

Translation is not utilized in the audio-lingual method for a number of reasons, some of them not overly wonderful; in general, however, it is considered that the student's first language "gets in the way", that his chances of reaching fluency in his second language are improved if he doesn't constantly have to translate. It is also the case that by and large (especially with languages as different from each other as Vietnamese and English) the sentences of one language simply do not translate smoothly into the other; as a consequence, the teacher finds himself continually embroiled in pointless discussions about awkward translations. The exclusion of translation from the audio-lingual method has two distinct advantages: the EFL textbook can be used regardless of the native language of the student, and the EFL teacher doesn't have to know the language of the students to be effective.

What the EFL textbook does for you

A good EFL textbook solves a multitude of problems for the inexperienced EFL teacher. The biggest of these is sequencing of materials, which is what EFL specialists call the problem of deciding which of the structures of English to teach in what order. It makes basic sense to teach simpler constructions before more complicated ones, but it is often very difficult to determine which of a particular group of constructions is the simplest. You can be sure that the sequencing of materials in an EFL text is the result of a lot of careful thought on the part of the authors, and that

there are very good theoretical and practical reasons for the sequence ultimately chosen; you can therefore proceed from lesson to lesson, trusting the book to present material logically and coherently.

Another of the problems a good EFL text solves for you is the problem of teaching maximally useful structures first. All of them are planned so that the student is able to communicate something in English right away. You will find, with these texts, that after the first lesson your student can use one or two structures which lend themselves naturally to exchange of information or mini-conversations; Lesson I of English For Today, for example, starts out with the structures "This is a _____" and "Is this a _____?", structures which lend themselves perfectly to your student's efforts to learn vocabulary.

Yet another problem an EFL text solves for you is the problem of vocabulary. Thinking again of your Latin or French-learning days, you know that there has to be an easier way of learning vocabulary than memorizing lists. (This is especially true of learning the vocabulary of a language widely different from your own, like English is from Vietnamese; while it didn't take much on your part to learn that the French word for table is la table, it's considerably harder to remember that the Vietnamese word for table is ban! Your Vietnamese students will have parallel problems with English vocabulary.) EFL specialists are pretty well agreed that the key to mastery of vocabulary is use. EFL texts therefore carefully control the occurrence of new words, and make sure that the words presented in lessons are used over and over again in the exercises; in this way the student learns the words and the way they are used without having to sit down and memorize them.

EFL texts are also very careful to match their vocabulary with the age and the needs of the students for whom the book is intended. While much of the vocabulary of English is common to all speakers, and therefore is taught in all EFL texts (words like is, this, that, book, pencil and so on), a surprising amount of vocabulary will be useful depending on the student's age and profession. For example, crayon is considered crucial enough to six-year-olds to appear in the first lesson of English Around

the World, a series for elementary students; it isn't taught at all in English I: A Basic Course for Adults. If you choose a text geared to your student's age and interests, you can be sure that the vocabulary therein will be maximally useful to him, and you can concentrate on other things.

A word of explanation about controlled vocabulary is probably in order here. Nearly all EFL texts limit the number of new vocabulary items introduced in a lesson, first to minimize the amount of brute memorization, and second to control for pronunciation and grammar. (When the structure "This is a _____" is presented in Lesson I of English For Today, for example, only nouns beginning with consonants are taught, to avoid for the moment the a/an distinction, which isn't actually taught until Lesson XV.) This kind of control works fine when the text is the only source of vocabulary -- as it is when it is being used in English programs in other countries -- but it tends to fall apart in situations like yours, where your student is being bombarded with new vocabulary all the time. Most of the time this will not be a problem for you, as he will pick up the right pronunciation and grammatical trappings for the words he learns. Occasionally, however, he will come to class with a vocabulary item he seems to need, but he won't know the English structure the item requires. He might find the word approve very useful, for example, but come to grief trying to say something like "My parents don't approve of my playing football", because he hasn't the faintest idea how to form gerunds in English. When this happens, your best bet is to think up a simpler way of expressing what he wants to say (like "I can't play football. My parents don't like it."). If that's not possible, you should -- on the rationale that since he's going to use the word approve anyway, he'd better learn to use it correctly -- give him a short, out-of-sequence lesson on the structure involved, explaining that the "real" lesson will come later. (A mini-lesson on approve might consist of the following drill:

Teacher: My parents don't approve of my playing football.

Student: (repeats) My parents don't approve of my playing football.

Teacher: coming home late

Student: (substitutes) My parents don't approve of my coming home late.

Teacher: walking to school

Student: (substitutes) My parents don't approve of my walking to school.

Teacher: telling lies

Student: (substitutes) My parents don't approve of my telling lies.

What about materials specifically geared to Vietnamese?

Nearly all of the EFL textbooks available through American publishers are designed to be used in teaching English, regardless of the native language of the student. This is possible because, as we mentioned before, the student's native language is not directly used in the audio-lingual method, and also because the structures of English are the same whatever the student's language.

It is widely recognized that the aspects of English which the student will find difficult to learn are precisely those aspects which differ from his native language. A Vietnamese student of English, for example, will have no trouble getting the subject-verb-object order in English sentences right, because that's the order of subject, verb and object in Vietnamese. He will, however, have trouble with English plurals, becuase in Vietnamese the plural of nouns is expressed quite differently. An EFL textbook can be used with students of varying language backgrounds because it devotes equal time to all the problem areas of English; if the teacher has a class of students, no two of which have the same native language, he will devote equal time to all the problem areas (and when he comes to the lesson on word order, his Vietnamese students can daydream for a while!). The teacher whose students are all of the same background, on the other hand, can skip quickly through the lessons which deal with aspects of English which are similar in his students' language, and concentrate on the lessons which deal with the aspects of English that are different.

It is possible, of course, to write an EFL textbook especially for students of a particular language background; this has been done in the United States: on the west coast for speakers of some of the Far Eastern languages; in Texas, New Mexico, Florida and other areas where there are con-

centrations of Spanish speakers. Note that if you pick up one of these books, you will rarely find Chinese or Japanese or Spanish there on the page; they are language-specific only (but this is a very large only!) in that the lessons are geared to concentrate specifically on the aspects of English that the Chinese or Japanese or Spanish speaker will find difficult. (Sometimes the cast of characters in a text -- remember Marcus, the Roman teenager that graced the pages of your Latin book -- will be of oriental of Spanish origin, but this is not in itself an indication that the text is language-specific; occasionally the names and illustrations of characters are changed to make it more attractive to school districts with concentrations of students of a particular linguistic background.)

Because there have not been, until now, sizable numbers of Vietnamese in this country, there has been no reason to develop extensive Vietnamese-specific EFL materials, as there has been for Spanish, and Chinese and Japanese. While there are Vietnamese-specific EFL materials in existence, most of them were developed for military purposes, and are neither available nor suitable for the purposes of the refugees. The materials developed by civilian EFL specialists are very few in number, and not generally available.[2] Moreover, for obvious reasons they are limited in scope (all of them are written for the adult college student or professional man), they have not been extensively tested and revised, and they are not designed to be used by the teacher with no EFL experience.

For these reasons, we feel that you will find a general EFL textbook far more effective than a Vietnamese-specific one. First, EFL textbooks published by the major publishers can be ordered through your local bookstore, and are most of the time reasonably priced. Second, you know that they are teachable because they have been tested. Third, you can choose a text particularly designed for your students' age and interests. And fourth, you can depend on the Teachers' Manuals to tell you how to proceed.

Adapting a general text to the Vietnamese speaker is simply a matter of identifying those lessons which deal with aspects of English that the

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2 The only readily available Vietnamese-specific text is William W. Gage's English for Speakers of Vietnamese, Ithaca, N.Y., Spoken Language Services, 1955. 366 pp. $8.00.

Vietnamese speaker will find difficult, and then spending extra time on them. The National Indochinese Clearinghouse has two bulletins -- "Teaching English Pronunciation to the Vietnamese" and "Teaching the Structures of English to the Vietnamese" -- which show you how to do this. Even if you don't have time to adapt a general text, your Vietnamese students will let you know in no uncertain terms when they have hit an area of English that is difficult for them: you will be able to tell by the way they stumble over a particular grammatical or phonological point that this is an area that needs extra work.

What About Language Materials Developed for Other Problems?

It might seem to you that language materials developed for the deaf, the individual with speech problems, or the illiterate adult might successfully be used with the speaker of Vietnamese, in that all of these people have difficulty with one or the other of the areas of English. A moment's reflection should convince you, however, that although the difficulties encountered by the Vietnamese speaker might appear to be the same as the difficulties encountered by one of the others, the reasons for these difficulties are totally different.

The deaf individual cannot produce any of the sounds of English because he has never heard them; he must be taught to produce them by other than aural means. The Vietnamese speaker, on the other hand, cannot produce some of the sounds of English because they don't occur in Vietnamese; because his hearing is normal, he can be taught to distinguish them from other sounds through aural means, and once he can distinguish them he can fairly easily be taught to pronounce them.

The student with speech problems cannot pronounce some of the sounds of English because he has physiological or psychological difficulties; the difficulties of Vietnamese speakers stem from differences between their language and English.

The adults for whom literacy materials are designed can speak English, but they can't read. Vietnamese speakers, on the other hand, know how to read perfectly well (unless they are very young, they of course read

Vietnamese) but they can't speak English.

Materials developed for the deaf, the illiterate, and the individual with speech problems all deal with the English language, as do EFL materials. Because they all deal with the same basic subject, and sometimes use similar teaching methodology, they can to a certain limited extent be adapted from one area to the other. It requires an extensive background in EFL theory and methods, however, to know which of the materials developed, say, for the deaf can be used successfully with speakers of Vietnamese, and which of the materials developed for the deaf will be useless or even counter-productive. Given that there are masses of EFL materials readily available,[3] the teacher with no EFL background is on far safer ground using them, rather than trying to adapt materials designed to solve completely different problems.

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[3] See A Selected Annotated Bibliography for Teaching English to Speakers of Vietnamese, by Barbara Robson and Kenton Sutherland, Arlington, Va., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975.

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