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Uncommitted materials: support for spontaneous interaction in class

Piers Messum and Roslyn Young discuss what charts and pointing bring to the classroom

Committed and uncommitted materials

Most language learning materials are *committed*: they support the teaching or learning of particular points, or prompt discussion on particular topics. Coursebooks are good examples. In contrast, a few tools and materials are *uncommitted*: they provide support for the teacher whatever the point, whatever the topic. The whiteboard, dictionaries and Cuisenaire rods are examples.

Uncommitted materials don't look impressive at first sight. No one enters a classroom and enthuses over the whiteboard, but who would want to teach without one? The whiteboard is indispensable as soon as the teacher wants to present a grammar point or work on an underlying problem that has led to a mistake.

Uncommitted materials as support for spontaneous interaction

No lesson ever completely follows the script. There is always much that is improvised, the parts where 'the students' learning unfolds in front of us, the unpredictable starts to happen, and we depart from the plan to attend to what is needed' (Underhill, 2014).

Many people have suggested that it is during such spontaneous interactions, when a student's immediate needs become the focus of the lesson, that much of the real learning occurs. Indeed, in some human-centred approaches—Community Language Learning, Silent Way, Dogme—the whole lesson may be improvised for this reason.

Piers Messum has taught in Japan, France and the UK. He has a PhD in Phonetics from UCL about how children learn to pronounce L1. He and Roslyn work for Pronunciation Science Ltd.

To her surprise, **Roslyn Young** has become competent in teaching online. She previously taught at the University of Franche Comté. Her PhD in Applied Linguistics was about the pedagogy underlying the Silent Way.

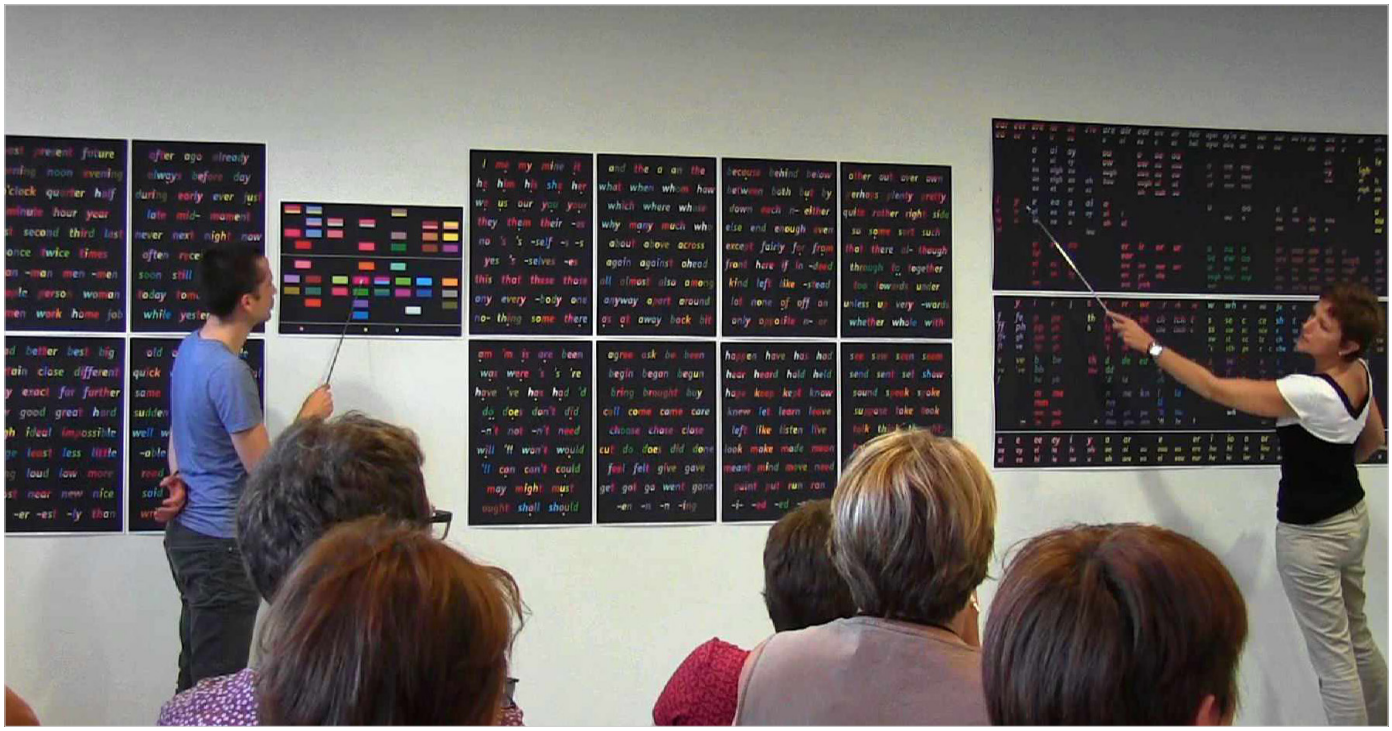
But many teachers (for whom we use female pronouns in this article) hesitate to take up these opportunities, perhaps because their training has given them limited ways to deal with the unexpected. The textbook, 'committed' by design, doesn't help at such moments.

The uncommitted PronSci (/prɒnsaɪ/) charts and the pedagogy they enable were designed to help teachers when they 'depart from the plan'. By using them, teachers can improvise more readily, better, with greater confidence and with students at any level.

The PronSci charts

The PronSci charts are hung on the classroom wall. There are three types: a chart showing the sounds of the language; a set of Word charts containing all the function words of English—about 55 per cent of words spoken (Pennebaker, 2011)—and some other common words; and a chart showing sound/spelling relationships. They were inspired by Gattegno's Silent Way charts and were designed for use with students who are non-beginners.

At first sight, these charts look like no more than a colourful display



Students working together on a problem.

Chart 10: Time words.

of basic words. However, just as a whiteboard starts to be useful when you write on it, what animates the PronSci charts is the activity of pointing. The teacher and students interact with the charts using telescopic pointers, producing sequences of sounds, spellings and words, as needed.

When following pointing, students see the words of the sentence in a written form but hold them in their minds in an aural form until the pointing is complete, and then they try to say the sentence at normal speed. The process draws them into being attentive: they have to hold the emerging sentence from the beginning to the end, knowing that they can't glance back.

What pointing brings

Shared attention

The starting point for a spontaneous interaction is often a mistake made by a student. But there is a danger that the other students are not involved. Working on the problem using charts at the front of the classroom presents it to everyone and draws them in. Students have to watch to follow what is being pointed, generating a high level of shared attention in the class. Furthermore, during the pointing, many students will be saying the sentence under their breath and developing an opinion on the problem. As soon as the pointing is finished, the class is ready to contribute.

> *"Uncommitted materials don't look impressive at first sight. No one enters a classroom and enthuses over the whiteboard, but who would want to teach without one?"*

A third modality

To work on a problem, students must examine what has been said. Language classes generally work on problems in two modalities: (1) speech and (2) writing on the whiteboard. Speech is fast, writing is slow. Each has its place, but speech is often too ephemeral to allow students to examine the language, while the permanence of writing reduces a speaking task to a reading one and as a consequence the work loses intensity.

Pointing a sequence of words on charts, whether done by the teacher or the students, gives us a third modality, midway between speech and writing:

- Pointing takes place more slowly than speech for those times when speech is too fast for its details to be followed; but faster than writing, saving time because words need only be touched.
- Pointing is not as ephemeral as speech because the students do see the words; but it is not as permanent as writing because each word is left behind when the pointer moves on.

For many problems which come up in class, this third modality is better adapted than either of the others. On the one hand, it gives speech enough permanence to be examined in detail; on the other hand, it gives the students a written version of a spoken sentence without the permanence of writing.

Diagnosing problems

Pointing on charts is also a sensitive diagnostic tool. In a simple example, a student might say something that you hear as, 'They are thirty days in June.' What did he mean to say? Is his problem grammar or pronunciation? If he now points incorrect words, the problem relates to grammar. If he points the words correctly, then his problem is pronunciation. The teacher knows how to begin correcting.

When the teacher gets a student to point, she discovers to what extent he controls his sentence and exactly where his problems lie. He doesn't have to spell, write or pronounce his sentence as he points, so grammatical problems are more clearly revealed. When he has finished pointing, he says the sentence,

> *"The teacher and students interact with the charts using telescopic pointers, producing sequences of sounds, spellings and words, as needed."*

and pronunciation problems become apparent.

As importantly, as a student points, the teacher also discovers something about his inner state: his doubts and certainties are revealed by his demeanour and the way he moves the pointer—smoothly or chaotically, in a well-thought-out sequence or in a series of tentative taps, etc.

Getting a student to point a sentence with a problem unpacks it for everyone. It gives the student a better chance to self-correct, and gives the teacher greater insight into his difficulty. We know of no other diagnostic technique which approaches its sensitivity.

Words on display

All the function words and some other high-frequency words of English appear on the charts, which are themed so that words with grammatical or other affinities are found together (see Chart 10).

The grammar of English contains numerous systems. Examples of these include the various uses of 'some' and 'any'; 'use' (n.), 'use' (v.) and 'used to'; 'have' (aux.), 'have' (v.) and 'have to'; 'already', 'always', 'still', 'yet' and 'not yet'. As in the first three of these examples, different pronunciations of the function words involved often identify different meanings.

These systems cause many of the problems that emerge in spontaneous interactions in class. Having all the elements of the systems on show, including the meaning/pronunciation variants, allows the teacher to work on the complexity of a system exactly when it is most meaningful to the students.

Having words on display has another advantage. When a student knows a word but it doesn't come to him in the moment, he has the opportunity to find it on the charts rather than being told. The teacher may narrow the choice down by saying, 'The word you need is on this chart.'

Often the student will find several plausible alternatives, and considering

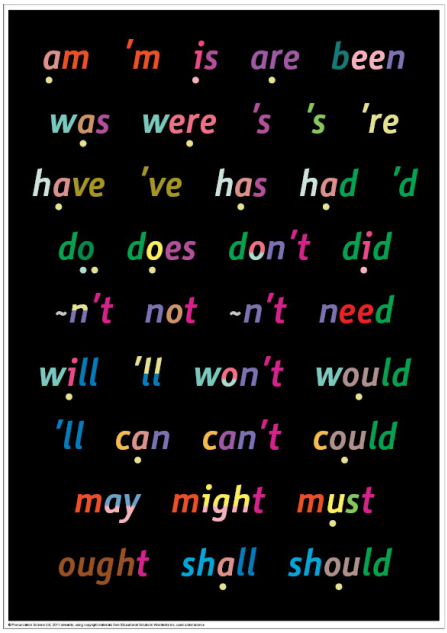


Chart 5: Auxiliaries.

each word in turn forces him to compare them. An inner dialogue develops: 'No, I don't think it's *during*, could it be *while*?' Because the student is working on his own question, the act of choosing helps him to sharpen his criteria for using one word rather than another. Without charts, it is impractical for the teacher to regularly offer students choices of this type, but it is very natural if the function words are on display.

PronSci charts as pronunciation support

Students benefit from being shown the pronunciation of words, but phonetic script divorces the spoken form from the written form and is off-putting to many. Colour (or the shades seen by the colour blind) superimposes the pronunciation on the normal written form and visually breaks the word up into its sounds. It also acts as a key for them: from the colour of the first vowel in 'Sunday', students can see how to pronounce the vowel in 'Monday', and then 'come', 'does', 'among' and 'enough'.

The use of reduced forms for about 50 function words is an important feature of English pronunciation. On the charts, the full form is colour coded, while the reduced form is shown with a colour-coded dot beneath the relevant vowel. Thus the chart that contains all the verb auxiliaries (Chart 5) also contains all their pronunciation variants. Students can see that the teacher is right: the reduced forms are indeed legitimate. Here, too, they are presented with choices to be made and they can explore the circumstances in which the full forms appear.

With charts on the wall, pronunciation is always in play and easy to integrate into the rest of the lesson. We've written at more length about why and how to use charts and a pointer to teach pronunciation in Messum (2018) and Young (2018).

There is a design principle for all three types of charts, that they should contain a complete inventory of their field: all the sounds, all the spellings (for vocabulary items) and all the function words of English. So with charts on the wall, the whole language is available to be pointed.

Conclusion

Underhill (2014) argued that teachers should develop their skills for dealing with spontaneous interactions. It is already, for many teachers, the part of the lesson they find the most satisfying: it requires them to be creative, they sense that their students learn something, and it is the time in class where the personal side of their students is most apparent. As uncommitted materials, PronSci charts give teachers many ways to deal elegantly and effectively with the unexpected.

> *"Reduced forms are an important feature of English pronunciation. The full form is colour coded, while the reduced form is shown with a coloured dot."*

Students like the various challenges of working with charts: they enjoy following the teacher pointing, they enjoy pointing themselves, and they enjoy pointing vicariously when fellow students are working with the charts. Teachers who have charts soon use them more than they use the whiteboard.

References

The PronSci charts and guides to their use can be seen at www.pronsci.com/materials

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p.messum@pronsci.com

roslynyoung@gmail.com