

Direct Instruction Works

There's an ongoing debate about whether direct instruction or discovery learning works best in ELT. Direct learning is when you give students new information explicitly, such as telling them that we form the plural in English by adding -s to the end of words. By contrast, discovery learning is letting students figure out the rules by themselves. It might seem obvious that each has its own place.

However, when I talk to teachers, most seem to prefer discovery learning and use direct instruction only as a last resort. If your students are really struggling, then you can jump in with the explicit information. But, the other day while teaching my four-year old about magnets, I realized how useful direct instruction can be!

Can a four-year old discover magnets?



What does a magnet tell us about direct instruction?

We were doing an activity about kindness. We read a book about

bullying. Then I brought out some magnets and some paperclips. The idea was to teach what magnets are and how they work, while also talking about how kindness attracts people.

Of course, he loved the magnets and he got very excited about picking up paperclips with them. Then he moved on to trying to pick up other things with them. He couldn't figure out what was magnetic and what wasn't.

Now this seemed like a perfect time for discovery learning. Let him try to pick up a bunch of stuff with the magnet, see what works and what doesn't. However, he quickly got very frustrated. We don't have a lot of small metal things that he has access to. So basically it was him not picking things up and getting upset. After a few minutes, I told him magnets only work on metal things. I could then steer him to the refrigerator and the metal near the fireplace (obviously, there was no fire burning).

Without that explicit explanation, I doubt he would ever have figured out what things were magnetic and what weren't. And the reason for that is that he doesn't really know what metal is. He wouldn't really have been able to put together that paperclips, the fireplace cover, and the refrigerator are all metal are all the same material, particularly as the front of the fridge is actually some kind of burnished metal and not magnetic at all. To make it worse, our bathtub is iron, but covered with a layer of porcelain.

Discovery Learning is Contrived

These exceptions reminded me of how contrived a lot of my discovery learning exercises are. You have to pretend the front of the fridge isn't metal and take that layer off the bathtub to expose the metal. I once made a chart comparing present simple to present progressive to help students discover the difference. It was amazing how many verbs I had to exclude because they didn't quite fit the rule I was teaching.

I found that I was creating a very limited and simplified rule for my students to discover. Arguably that's doing them a serious disservice. It would have been better to lay out the ways present simple and present progressive are used, and to give them lots of good examples.

Now, once you've done the explanation, you can set the students off to discover nuances or exceptions or other examples. But if they lack the necessary background knowledge, discovery learning is going to be far too frustrating for everyone.

Bruce Lee, Bruce Lee, Bruce L-Y?

A more ELT-related moment came up the other day. My son has started learning to read. He is obsessed with how to spell words and constantly asks us, "What words are in *boy*?" Or *cow*. Or *perfectly perfect*.



He knows the basic vowel sounds and names of the letters. Thus, he is often frustrated that the long E sound at the end of words like *baby* is made by a Y. And just as he started to figure that out, he discovered that the terminal Y can also make a long I sound in words like *fly*.

At some point, he will get enough information and know enough words that he will be able to spell words and read words accurately. But in order for him to get to that point, he needs a lot of direct instruction. He needs to be told how words are spelled and he needs to

be told that Y at the end of words makes different sounds.

I love discovery learning. Lessons that involve discovery are often a great deal of fun and very communicative, with lots of talking and guessing and meaning-making. But I love direct instruction, too. Without it, students wouldn't know enough to discover anything.

So You Wanna Be a Materials Writer?

Sandy Millin just put out a post on the MAWSIG blog with some [rules for beginner writers](#). I particularly liked her questions to ask publishers:

Questions to ask the editor/publisher

- *What is the specific brief? For example, can you base your writing on authentic materials or should it be completely self-created?*
- *Is there a single deadline for the whole project, or separate deadlines for different parts of it?*
- *Should you send your work as you complete it, in batches or all together? In my experience, the answer is usually all together; but your editor may want to see one or two documents to make sure you're on track before you proceed.*
- *Can you see completed examples of the kind of document the publisher would like you to produce – for example, from other levels? This can help you get an idea of*

how much work is involved.

- If you're using Word, how many pages should your finished document be? For example, does a one-page Word document correlate to a single page in the finished product?*
- Where should the teacher's notes and answers be? After each exercise, at the end of the document or in a separate document?*
- If you're producing writing tasks, do you need to include a model answer?*
- Should you include worked examples for the first question in each exercise?*
- What are the publisher's codes for design elements, such as gapfill spaces? For example, [GF] would indicate that the designers need to print a gap in this sentence: 'I need [GF] to the supermarket after I finish work.'*
- Can images be included? If they can, where should they be sourced from? Or should you include an image brief for somebody else to find the right picture later? If that's the case, how detailed should the brief be?*

I like to print out every document that has those kinds of details in them, whether it be emails, the brief, the contract, or supporting materials. That way I can have the physical document open on my desk while I'm working on the computer to check things like design codes, annotations on the brief, and example pages.

Sandy also links to [an earlier post by Tamzin Berridge](#) that has some larger principles that are quite useful.

One topic that neither of them broach is compensation and how to negotiate payment. I wonder if any one has any tips on that.

Turkey Day Lessons

Just a subtle reminder that I have the greatest Thanksgiving Day lesson plans on earth!



At least, I like them. The most popular one is a guide to showing [A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving](#), including comprehension questions students fill out as they watch, post-video summary activities, discussion questions and ideas for extensions.

My [Food and Holidays lesson plan](#) introduces American foods, teaches key words and phrases for describing foods, then gets students talking about their traditional foods and holidays that are strongly linked to food. It's a great way to introduce the concept of Thanksgiving to international students.

Guess What's in the Teacher's

Brain

This is a post that has sat in my drafts box for a while now. I can't remember now if the title comes from Penny Ur or Tessa Woodward. However, the essence of the passage was that too often when teachers pose a question, they are asking students to read their minds. That is, we ask a closed question to students and we already know the answer that we want to hear. We will refuse to accept any answer besides the one in our head.

When we are asking students about a grammar point or a vocabulary word, a question that has only one correct answer, this makes a great deal of sense. These kinds of questions are also good for comprehension checks. I think they also help with guiding students to a correct answer and modeling thought processes.

However, if we are trying to start a discussion or encourage critical thinking, then asking an open-ended question which in fact we believe has only one right answer is encouraging the opposite of critical thinking. Instead of reading the source and coming up with their own opinion which they will then defend, such questions ask students to read the teacher and give the kind of answer the teacher agrees with.

Modeling Thought Processes Instead of Feeding Thoughts



For example, I

once taught the story, [Just a Lather, That's All](#), about (spoiler alert) a government general who goes to get a shave from a barber who secretly sympathizes with anti-government rebels. As the general recounts his brutal actions, the barber debates internally whether to slit his throat or not. In the end, he does not. The general gets up and says, "I knew you wanted to kill me and I wanted you to know that it isn't easy to kill someone."

In such a story where the two characters have a number of conflicting and complicated emotions, questions like the following have no right answer:

1. How does the barber feel at the end?
2. What does the general mean by, "...But killing isn't easy. You can take my word for it."?
3. Does the general enjoy killing rebels?
4. Why does the barber decide not to kill the general?

Each reader has to interpret the text as he or she sees fit. Asking

these questions and then guiding (*forcing*) students into a correct answer is destructive to their enjoyment of literature, which they will learn is about reading to find the one true interpretation. And it's destructive to their critical thinking facilities as they learn to interpret the teacher's world view, not the author's.

What we can do is ask guided questions that have varying degrees of right answers to help students come up with their own answers to the above questions such as:

1. What was the general doing before the story began?
2. Is the barber a rebel or pro-government? How do you know?
3. What does the barber think about doing to the general?
4. What does he mean in paragraph 7 when he says, "My destiny depends on the edge of this blade."

We can draw their attention to the way the author talks about the razor-blade and how sharp it is, the fact that the barber is a skilled barber, to show how the author is saying how easy it would be to kill the general but at the same time how proud the barber is of his profession. We can guide them to talk about the different ways honor and doing your job are portrayed in the story. But in the end, what the story is really about, the significance of different symbols or actions, how the characters, let alone the author, feel...all these are open-ended questions and we do our students a disservice to restrict their analytical abilities.



Beyond reading comprehension,

It may not be controversial to say that literary criticism has no one right answer. However, I think we sometimes squash alternative readings of individual sentences in grammar books or on tests. Often that's because a student has discovered a loophole in an example sentence and we feel that if we acknowledge it, we will get completely off-course. And we've all had the student who loves to pick holes at everything we put on the board in class (out of creativity or out of spite).

On the other hand, when we quash student creativity, we are also quashing their intuitive grasp of grammar and language. Too much, "OK look yeah, you're right but common sense says that probably what's going on in this sentence is X." leads students to again rely on what teacher thinks is common sense rather than their own senses. And in some cases we may lead them to believe certain things are impossible to express in language.

One of the loveliest things about teaching the conditional is how subjective it often is. What's the difference between starting a

sentence with *“If I were elected President...”* and *“If I am elected President...”* ? Most of the textbooks on my shelf use this example or one very similar to it. And they all explain that the latter would be spoken by a candidate actively running for President because the first conditional is used only for factual or non-hypothetical situations. When a student begins a sentence with, *“If I win the lottery...”* or *“If I earn a million dollars...”* or *“If I become President...”* who are we to tell them that they are incorrect because they have no chances of achieving those goals?

It’s important to tread carefully when teaching students “correct grammar” or we might be limiting their aspirations, or their understanding of what they can do with words.

All Things Corpus!

The last TESOL Convention in Toronto seemed to be corpus-themed for me. I went to a number of sessions about using corpuses as a materials writer, as a teacher, and even having students use corpuses themselves. And I learned about some new corpus tools, new aspects of old corpus tools and lots of activity ideas.

And, yes, I’m just getting around to writing up things I did at TESOL. Better late than never.

Why Use a Corpus?

There were really three reasons I kept hearing that resonated with me:

1. Our instincts aren't always right. Looking at how language is actually used is important because frankly what we think we know about language usage isn't always correct. I suspect that as teachers, we tend to get a lot of textbook, overly formal input which biases our ear. We also aren't necessarily talking to a broad spectrum of society (no one is in constant communication with speakers from all different regions of the country (or the world) of all socio-economic statuses and cultural backgrounds). We're also aging while language is changing, like it or now. We've all seen those little fun facts about language. My favorite two are: Use of the subjunctive is growing in the US, not shrinking. The subjunctive is almost unheard of in the UK (even though we think the subjunctive is a formal tense and UK English is more formal than US English). If we want to give our students accurate knowledge about vocabulary and grammar use, it's good to consult a source and a corpus is a nice source of language as it is used. We can then temper that with our own instincts and textbooks, but I know every time I look up a word in a corpus I am surprised by what I learn.

2. We discover patterns and rules we never realized existed. My personal favorite was the discovery that "due to" is almost always used with negative causes. We never say, "We are having cake due to Bob's birthday." We say, "We don't have any cake due to shortages." Stumbling on those kinds of collocations and associations helps you teach better and gives your students more of that instinct for language that we often attribute to being a native-speaker, those rules we understand subconsciously, but never really think about. That leads me to my last reason for using corpuses.

3. Students can use corpuses Letting students discover language for themselves is a great way to impart those subconscious rules of language, yes but also to help them build vocabulary (through collocations and word families) and use vocabulary better through real-world examples.

Corpus Tools

1. The biggest find for me was [MICUSP](#), the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (Thanks to [Ashley Hewlett](#)). MICUSP is a collection of academic class essays from undergraduate seniors and graduate students. What makes it stand out are:
 - The search and filter functions let you search or filter by academic subject, type or genre of essay, native vs. non-native speaker, particular features of the paper (abstract, lit review, tables or graphs, etc.) What that means is that you can show students examples of argument essays in their own discipline. Or easily find a specific example paper meeting your requirements. You can have students compare argument essays in Philosophy classes with argument essays in English class, or compare an abstract of a critique with an abstract of a research paper. In this way, they can see how different aspects of the paper affect each other. Students can also see what kinds of papers are written in different fields and what kinds of papers are not written.
 - The corpus provides the full-text of the essay, not just the part where your keyword is.
 - Speaking of key words, you can search with or without a key word, so students can see how a word is used across disciplines or genres.
2. Ashley Hewlett also mentioned the [MICASE](#), the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, which I have used before because there are fewer corpuses of spoken English. Like MICUSP, MICASE has nice search options. You can search by number and identity of speakers (professor, student, post doc fellow, etc.), gender, age, location of the encounter (seminar vs. lecture vs. service encounter), as well as discipline. You can even search by the speakers' L1s and the nature of the interaction—more monologue or more interactive. Again, it's nice because it provides sources (in the form of scripts unfortunately). And the corpus is fascinating because even in an academic environment, the spoken language is still full of grammar mistakes, run-on sentences, fragments, false starts, and non-

sequiturs.

3. In another presentation in the Electronic Village, [Jon Smart](#) introduced me to [AntConc](#), a tool that lets you build and analyze your own corpus. It's not super user-friendly but it's also not terribly difficult. If you collect a series of texts in separate .txt files, you can use AntConc to search them for keywords, much as a traditional corpus tool does. I thought this would be great for collecting student essays in a class you teach year after year. After a few years, or semesters, you would have a nice set of student essays that you could let students search for language use or genre features. I was also playing with it by downloading the top 100 texts on Gutenberg press, which helps students see literary language in action.

In a later post, I'll cover some of the activities that I saw.

Let Your Students Repeat

I think it was Scott Thornbury who brought to my attention the way [repetition can increase grammatical accuracy](#); Actually I the idea from *Uncovering Grammar* but the linked blog post has a nice summary of all the benefits of having students repeat, along with some ways to do it while keeping the lesson interesting. And I recently had a personal experience that really brought it home for me.

I was recently visiting my wife's family, who speak Russian only. I had told a story in Russian to my wife, who is far more used to my brand of pidgin Russian. Later that morning, as I was waiting for lunch, I found myself repeating the story in my head, looking for better words, rethinking grammar choices. Whereas the version I had told my wife a few hours before had been spontaneous and thus full of mistakes, I now had a chance to prepare. And while the communicative

focus of the contemporary classroom holds that students must learn to speak without preparation, “just like in the real world”, I am surprised when I reflect on it, just how often I do prepare what I am going to say and how often I am repeating some version of something I said before whether it be a funny story, an inside joke with a friend, an explanation of how to do something, or a piece of standard social text.

It seems to me that giving our students chances to repeat is giving them chances to prepare, at least on a subconscious level. And giving them a chance to prepare is giving them a chance to repeat, even if only the words in their heads. And both thinking before speaking and saying the same thing twice are perfectly normal things to do outside the classroom. So why not inside the classroom?

ELT Reading Materials Design Class

This looks interesting—an online class on ELT Reading Materials Design by Marcos Benevides. It seems to focus on adapting a work and creating a graded reader, but the website also says it covers creating original materials as well.

It’s a four week course from September 7th to the 28th for \$49 or \$75 if you want a certificate. It’s through iTDi and the teacher is Marcos Benevides, who authored Widgets and Whodunit (a course book that [I have mentioned before](#) as one I wish I had authored myself). Check out the class website [for more information and to register](#).

To Do: Read About Shelly Terrell's Learning Missions

This post is mainly for my own benefit, a little reminder that I want to learn more about learning missions. I missed the Webinar by Shelly Terrell but she put up links to a list of [learning mission links](#) as well as her [slides from her talk](#). Can't wait to look at them. I love anything that brings the real world into the classroom or vice versa.

Making a Template

I mentioned last week that the TESOL Convention had ignited my interest in actual materials design i.e. what the materials look like on the page. Many years ago (about three or four) I stumbled on Jason Renshaw's blog which features quite a bit about materials design. I have always remembered the [3:1 principle](#) which has informed a lot of what I do.

This is a really nice video on how to make a very professional looking template with a header and a footer. I really like the results as they hit that happy medium between overly simple and overly complicated. It looks very professional and finished without going overboard. Now Jason Renshaw tends to teach with online worksheets and presentations so these are designed with an eye to showing them on a screen rather than printing them out. For printing, I would leave the middle bit white personally.

I've also made a template for Word 2010 that you are welcome to use. You can change the text by just clicking on it and typing. And you can easily change the color of the header or footer by clicking on the

center and going to the Format tab. Use Shape Fill, Shape Outline and Shape to change colors or add borders and shadows and stuff. I've been using one color as a header and a lighter version for the footer. Then I use a contrasting color for the name box over on the top right:

[Lesson Template](#).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pd4TURcc2y4>

30Goals: Get Rid of the Unnecessary Weight

Another 30 goals post on [Getting Rid of the Unnecessary Weight](#).

Hana posts a few questions to answer and reflect on how to get rid of literal or metaphorical clutter in our professional lives or teaching. I was thinking of this in terms of my recent post on [the Pareto Principle](#) which states that you can get 80% of your output from 20% of your inputs. In other words, we should be able to dump 80% of our content and still get pretty good results from our students.

Of course, it's debateable if the principle applies to education where results are complex and multiple. But I thought it would be interesting to take a lesson and strip it down as much as possible.

Looking at one of my more popular lessons which I wrote years ago: [At the Restaurant](#), it seems so full of clutter. It's presenting a sample dialogue, some key vocab and some follow-up questions. Yet it's very long and I'm not sure what some parts are aiming at. Here's an example of cutting a lot of weight, and rewriting to make it clearer:

<iframe

src="https://docs.google.com/document/d/17UTEqVJwvSLln_3sD2J-GlJd_wuTWxk-YcDTDmdKpeI/pub?embedded=true"></iframe>

I'm not sure I killed 80% of it, but it's a lot more concise now. I think my students will like it a lot better!