

Real World Flash: Social Sight Vocabulary as Motivator.

I shall here describe ‘social sight vocabulary’ used as a ‘flash reading’ technique in ABE classrooms. I have found it very much more positive than it ought to be, superficially considered, precisely because of the flash presentation I think. I will outline my own method, make some observations & try some explanations as to why I think its effects are so positive, and appeal for your thoughts and reactions, perhaps once you have explored it for yourself.

The technique:

For years I carried a camera wherever I went. (This is much simpler now I have ‘gone digital’.) Over this time I have built a collection of several hundred pictures of signs taken in the real world (‘social sight’ vocabulary). This plethora of signage ranges from work sites, hospitals, streets, supermarkets, stations, airports, hotels and more. Some signs are simple (IN, EXIT, STOP etc), some are long and polysyllabic (NO PEDESTRIAN ACCESS, ALL VEHICLES TO REPORT TO RECEPTION etc) and some are ridiculous (B3454 CLOSED - OTHER LOCAL ROADS OPEN). Each sign will usually include some context, just like it does in reality. For example PLEASE RING is photographed in situ, right alongside a bell on a reception desk, AUTOMATIC DOOR includes some of the door.

A ‘show’ might take 10-15 minutes – this is intended to be a light, short interlude generating an easy atmosphere, with positive results, taking ‘literacy’ out of the academic and into the real world. It might comprise, say, 50 slides which will vary in complexity. Examples might include IN, OUT, WAY IN, WAY OUT, ENTRANCE, EXIT, EXIT ONLY, EMERGENCY EXIT, NO ENTRY, CAR PARK, PLEASE PAY HERE, HAVE YOU PAID AND DISPLAYED?, PARKING AT REAR, NO PARKING and so on and so on. I usually start simple and work towards complexity (STAFF ONLY to begin with but NO UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL TO PROCEED BEYOND THIS POINT by the end, perhaps). I have found that students warm up as the show goes along, and will have small difficulty with that last one after exercising their visual muscles with maybe 49 other signs beforehand.

So far so simple. However, I present this show as a ‘flash’ exercise. In other words, between each slide I insert a blank (black) slide. Each picture of a sign will be shown for a short time, sometimes a very short time, before being replaced by a blank. The students are therefore faced with singing out the word or words on the sign while actually looking at a dark screen. This ‘flash’ technique seems to have a surprising effect on the outcomes of the exercise, of which more later.

In practice, then, I deploy the pictures as follows: I show a slide (e.g. TOILETS) for a very short time (often less than a second), then replace it with a dark screen. This remains until the group has sung out “toilets!” and is satisfied with its conclusion. Then I briefly present the next slide (LADIES or GENTLEMEN, or even OUT OF ORDER perhaps), followed by the blank screen again and so on. The show will tend be themed - this one might be about the streets, shops etc. Some of the signs excite comment,

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even ribaldry, and this is to be welcomed I think. Most groups seem to find the event entertaining; I guess we all like a slide show. I think this very informal aspect of the technique is also important to outcome, of which, again, more later.

With very long, or polysyllabic, signs I accept the gist from students. Reading NO UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL TO PROCEED BEYOND THIS POINT as "no unauthorised people beyond this point" or similar seems to me perfectly satisfactory, for example. In the real world the job has been done.

Some advice: If you take to photographing signs, the world will look at you sideways at best. It is a strange habit, collecting signage on film. Even your nearest & dearest may begin to suspect an obsession. (The time I found myself excitedly snapping a sign on a toilet door in New York , for example – it said simply NO GOOD. How cool is that?) If you seek to photograph in institutions like hospitals, workplaces or supermarkets you would be well advised to explain in advance who you are and why you are doing this. People are pleased to allow it, once they understand. (At least that has been my experience.)

Outcomes:

I originally intended this exercise to be a reasonably useful, entertaining sideline of no particular importance – just some moderately pointful fun. It has, though, entirely accidentally, proved to be rather more than this. In the first place it is immediately striking how much faster and more confident students are with the last slides than they were with the first, despite their usually very much greater complexity. This is not a cognitive matter, I think, but an affective one. (Nobody's cognition improves that fast!)

Students have subjectively noticed that this method has made a more or less instant difference in their ability to "see words", even phrases, as whole entities and at high speed. They are plainly not reading these signs word by word but often as whole meanings. This is also, I believe, mainly an affective matter, not a cognitive one. They are often, in fact, not 'reading' the signs at all at the time of declaring their content, as they are already gone from the screen leaving the students considering them entirely in the dark. This is perhaps a mind behaviour-training issue - teaching the mind to look at different aspects of text, or look differently at text, in certain circumstances at least; to look holistically at text rather than fixate only on its detail.

Students have claimed improvement in confidence and 'sign attack', a positive effect on their attitude to signs and their interest in them. They describe, and show, much more willingness to engage with, and more confident perception of, literacy encountered out in the real world. The technique seems, in other words, to induce several different improvements, in different domains, not least the affective domain, and to generalise these improvements. Why?

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Possible explanations:

Perhaps part of the answer is a ‘horses for courses’ neurological issue. Our brain only ever uses the minimum of effort to get from A to B, nature being maximally economical at all times. It has perhaps an inbuilt tendency to use the most rough and ready neurological criteria which will nonetheless get any particular work completed. The particular means it will use probably depend on the purpose for which it thinks we want the particular job done. Our brain may perceive, or behave, only as acutely as it feels is necessary for the task in hand. (Damasio 2000, Norretranders 1998, Rumelhart & McClelland 1986, Smith 1994)

I think that we can, though, deliberately ‘re-calibrate’ our brain’s perceptual behaviours in particular contexts – make them more appropriate for that context. Phonemic awareness is a good example. In conversational circumstances the brain can get away with, and so employs, a far coarser awareness of phonemes (many of which are not pronounced, in fact, and many more of which are extraordinarily fuzzy in speech (& see Adams 1990). If we are looking for candidate spellings, however, the brain must use much finer-grained perceptual criteria. It is perfectly capable of doing this, but it has to break its conversational habits and learn to deploy more demanding criteria in more demanding circumstances. This is what phonemic awareness training does.

What is sauce for the ears may be sauce for the eyes, too. The slides are visual stimuli, briefly presented. Success is based on instant, unthinking, visual recognition, by whole word or phrase as far as possible. This is how fluent readers actually do it (Adams 1990, Coltheart et al 2001, Ellis 1993, Rayner & Pollatsek 1989, Taft 1991, Smith 1994). It is therefore how our brains should be encouraged to practise doing it. The slides seem to do this. Perhaps they do this, in part, by their emphasis on speed – the slide, it is known in advance, will be here and gone in a fragment of time. A plodding approach to reading it is out of the question.

I also wonder if the speed of presentation of each slide helps the mind to learn to rely more on the good, old, misunderstood and scandalously underestimated unconscious rather than assuming that ‘reading’ must entail scrabbling frantically around after details in the shockingly overestimated conscious. (And see my article elsewhere on this site on this important new subject.)

The unexpectedly positive effect may also be something to do with the almost instant replacement of every slide by a blank screen, at which point the student is reduced to exercising visual recall. Is this also training the mind to use its vast interconnectedness to garner clues and find meaningful relationships? Does the mind, while the screen is actually blank, take to finding help from other parts of itself to solve the problem in the absence of visual cues?

Context cueing is also a crucial part of the fluent reading process (Adams 1990, Ellis 1993, Rayner & Pollatsek 1989, Smith 1994). Fluent readers use prediction from context, in a broad sense, to variable but often considerable degree. The fact that most of the slides are words and phrases presented in a context (ROAD CLOSED with

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roadworks in the background, for example) makes it more or less mandatory. This use, and success, of context cueing may tend to generalise; making it more likely to become part of habitual visual reading attack.

The most important effect of a session of real world flash, however, may simply be the improvement in confidence and motivation which is so manifest, the technique being light and entertaining and yet delivering success in an obviously relevant field. Affect, in all its forms, is increasingly recognised as of central importance to learning. Positive affect in the classroom is crucial. Real world flash seems to deliver it.

I would be interested to hear your views, or share slides.

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