

'Generative Text' and Its Implications*

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Reading

'I followed him to a bar last night. He met a woman there. She was sitting at the back of the bar but I got a picture of her when she came out,' the private detective told her.

He showed her the photo.

'Who is she?', she asked.

'I was hoping you could tell me.'

She looked at the photo again and shook her head.

'That isn't all. I had a spy-mike with me.'

She stared at him.

'What's a spy-mike?'

'It's very small but I can pick up two people talking on the other side of a big room with it, even when they're whispering.'

He put a tape in a cassette-player. There were two voices. She had never heard the woman's before but she knew man's only too well.

'Did you do it?'

'I couldn't. I just couldn't.'

'Then we'll have to have it done.'

'How much will it cost?'

'A lot, but just think how much you'll have when she's dead.'

What do you think?

- 1 Look again at the examples of dialogue in quotation marks (""). Say who you think said each piece of dialogue.
- 2 Who was the man whose voice was on the tape?
- 3 What do you think is the man's relationship with the woman he met in the bar?
- 4 How did the first woman (the one who listened to the tape) probably feel after listening?

*In 1998 Robert O'Neill did a few weeks of guest teaching in one of Bialystok's secondary schools. This paper is part of the teach-in he gave at Global Village.

- 5 If you were best friend of the first woman, what would you advise her to do? What were the man and woman on the tape planning to do, and why?
- 6 Think of two possible ways the story might end.
- 7 Why did the woman decided to hire the private detective? Describe some things that perhaps happened before she heard the tape. For example, what did she perhaps notice? If she became suspicious, what happened that made her suspicious?

Explain the difference

- 1 'I got a picture of her when she left,' he said and showed her a photo.
'I got a picture of her when she left,' he said and showed her the photo.
- 2 'Who is she?,' she asked.
'Who is she?,' she demanded.
- 3 I hope you can tell me.
I was hoping you could tell me.
- 4 'We'll have to do it.'
'We'll have to have it done.'
- 5 I can pick up their voices if they're whispering.
I can pick up their voices even if they're whispering.

Which word doesn't belong?

- 1 follow pursue persecute chase
- 2 whisper shout yell scream
- 3 stare whisper shout talk
- 4 cost value cash price
- 5 rape murder burglar crime
- 6 criminal murderer rapist burglary
- 7 spouse lover boy-friend girl-friend
- 8 husband boy-friend wife spouse

Comments

About this text

This text requires 'top-down' interpretation. The reader needs and has to use 'knowledge of the world' (which in this case includes knowledge of certain forms of popular literature) in order to make sense of the text at all.

None of the eight questions about the text can be answered through 'bottom-up' (atomistic processing only of the language of the text) interpretation.

The text and exercises are deliberately 'minimalist'. They are meant to provide only the skeleton of the lesson. Instructions like 'Talk to your partner' or specific instructions for a group work are not given.

The other exercises are 'jumping off points' for further work on structures or vocabulary. These exercises are only starting points. Nothing more.

Texts and exercises like this work best with good intermediate or advanced learners. A teacher who understands how to use such material is likely to be fairly imaginative and experienced.

Why use such texts at all

- 1 They encourage learners to go beyond the text itself.
- 2 In business and in life generally, we constantly do this to make sense of what people say to us or what we read.
- 3 They allow the teacher and the class considerable freedom of interpretation and extension, but still provide some kind of 'hard core' for the lesson.
- 4 They are a simple way of combining 'atomistic' and 'holistic' learning.

Surface and depth processing

In 'surface processing' the teacher gets the class to engage in the text simply as language. 'Depth processing' involves looking below the surface of the text and has different possible forms and outcomes.

- 1 Reading between the lines (interpreting and making explicit what is only implicit in the text)
- 2 Reading behind the lines (speculating about motives of the characters, how they feel, what they might be thinking)
- 3 Filling narrative gaps (imagining what might happen next, or what might have happened in the story before the text begins).

Other general points

- 1 I do not accept that there is an unbridgable dichotomy between 'holistic' and 'atomistic' learning. It is fashionable to reject atomistic learning. Many learners (including myself) want to be aware of what they are supposed to be learning and want to focus at times on specific language structures. Only very arrogant ideologues argue that this is wrong. Only people who have never learned a foreign language themselves dismiss conscious study of discrete aspects of structure and syntax as worthless.
- 2 The implication behind the text and exercises here is not that 'top-down' processing is better than 'bottom-up'. Most reading and listening involves both. However, at times it is useful to focus on one rather than the other.
- 3 If we look at the way many learners actually learn, we find a constant interplay between, on the one hand, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processing and, on the other hand, 'atomistic' and 'holistic' learning. Some (not all) learners seem to learn best through deductive process and others learn inductively. If you seriously accept that good teaching involves meeting primary (not all) needs of most learners, you cannot argue that teachers should try to develop only those teaching skills that encourage inductive rather than deductive processes. This is an ideological rather than methodological position.
- 4 If you also seriously believe that what we do *not* know about how people actually learn foreign languages far exceeds what we *know*, then you ought at least to consider the idea that it is unwise to reject any tool, however simple, that you as a teacher or your learners as learners can use. One of the worst excesses of the last twenty or thirty years, especially among native-speaker teachers of English, has been the rejection of simple but useful techniques of learning and teaching because of the labels ('teacher-centred', 'mechanical', 'structuralist') that some ideologue who rarely or never teaches learners below advanced level has put on those techniques and modest tools.