

"OUT OF THE CAGE"  
or  
"WHO CAN PUT HUMPTY TOGETHER AGAIN"

Peter Botsman  
Lae Institute of Technology

Revised version of paper read at the Third Annual Congress of the  
Linguistic Society of Papua and New Guinea.

Writing, speaking and using a language is an art - not merely a skill. Challenge me on this point and you may safely tune out for the next fifty minutes. But reflecting on the art of language led me to think that perhaps some of the great theorists about art might have something pertinent to say about the problem of teaching language as an art. Forgive me then if I appear to digress, but I want to begin by drawing your attention to the work of one Aristotle, as I for one count myself quite willingly a mere sophist with all that it implies.

"The instinct for imitation is implanted in man from childhood. One difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures and through imitation learns his earliest lessons."

Aristotle, the Poetics.

The instinct for imitation as Aristotle terms it lay at the very base of Greek aesthetics, or, expressed in a different way, Classicism, defined as the principles and values that characterised the art and thought of the ancient Greeks, rested on the fundamental premise that art was an imitation of nature.

Now, clearly if art was to imitate nature, it is important that we understand what the Greeks meant by nature. So at the risk of bringing down the wrath of the Helenophiles, I will over-simplify considerably and assert that Nature was understood as a rationally ordered and harmonious universe working according to fixed laws, principles and forms: the universe was a meaningful process.

Secondly, we need to understand what was meant by imitation. Today the word imitation has a rather limiting connotation. A rather more liberal interpretation is needed if we are to understand the Aristotelian sense of it. In essence, what Aristotle meant by imitation was not mere copying but an attempt to offer or render an active counterpart of the model being imitated. In other words art was the translation of the object being rendered into a new media and employing forms appropriate to the material and substance of the model.

Unfortunately, certain so-called classical qualities in art such as decorum and balance, rhythm and symmetry have come to obscure the basic meaning of Classicism. It is therefore perhaps necessary to stress the fact that Classicism in origin was not synonymous with formalism. Indeed, it is true to assert that the revival of Classicism in the 16th and 17th century foundered on this false assumption, for neo-classicism was something of a classic case of means being mistaken for ends.

Now at this point it may well be that the relevance of all this to the teaching of English as a foreign language on the primitive island of New Guinea and in the third quarter of the 20th century might have escaped you. Small wonder if it has, but should that be so I will now try to convince you otherwise.

In the first place T.E.F.L. uses imitation as one of its basic techniques. Think about the meaning of terms such as - language habits, drills, sentence patterns, pattern practice, cueing and a host of others, and you will realise at bottom all these terms assume an imitative method. This imitation is invariably of a model, usually the teacher's voice, or a taped semblance of it. (In which case by the way we are asking students to imitate an imitation, a situation which the purist, Aristotle, roundly condemned). Generally then it might be claimed, I think, that modern theorists about English as a foreign language would agree with the theorists of Ancient Greece, that imitation is of the essence.

Now given this one point of parallelism it is worth pursuing the analogy a little further. It would also be agreed, I hope, that the purpose of teaching English as a foreign language is the acquisition of knowledge, awareness or insight. Interestingly enough the Greeks also considered this to be the function of art. Finally the imitative method used in T.E.F.L. presupposes a rationally ordered and harmonious universe working according to fixed laws, principles and forms - in this case the universe being the most basic of all - for the universe of discourse here is language itself.

It might well be therefore that there may be something to be learned from the history of art. It is certainly worth looking at it a little more closely. Earlier I mentioned that neo-classicism foundered because the accidentals, the external properties or qualities associated with classical art were wrongly supposed to be the essence. Moreover, the decline of classic art itself can probably be attributed to this very same error. Both Classical and Neo-classical art came to be so imprisoned by formalism and prescriptive injunctions that they became barren and lifeless.

It is my fear that too many prescriptive injunctions about the language may have

the same effect. Some of you may recall Alexander Pope's often quoted couplet in which he refers to the self-imposed fetters that we human beings live with -

"Most souls 'tis true but peep out once an age  
Dull sullen prisoners in the body's cage."

So alarmed am I about the dangers of formalised methods and their effects, that I have been moved to sully Pope's famous couplet - for in New Guinea today most of us could well say of our classes:

"Most students true can eke out half a page  
Of conditioned reflexes from their structured cage".

and I am sure that those of you who have taught classes in the preliminary years of the University will doubtless agree that this is too true to be funny.

Looked at quite dispassionately it seems that all the way through our English courses in the Territory teachers are busily supplying props to support an essentially shaky structure and believe me I use the latter term advisedly. In short I am convinced after 18 months of trial and error and diligent efforts to follow strictures about structures and the rest that some of my more learned friends profess, I am not at all sure we know too much about teaching English as a foreign language to the level where a student in a tertiary institution can express his or her ideas with reasonable fluency, a modicum of accuracy, some intelligence and just a soupcon of personal style. Put another way, we may know quite a bit about teaching some language skills, but it is, in my view, all too clear that we know little enough about teaching language as an art.

As I see it, the difference between the skills of language and the art of language is basically this. Using various kinds of linguistic analysis we can isolate recurrent structures that a language user must needs master. The key words here are "analysis" and "isolate" and perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that analysis implies partition, and isolation involves the separation of the particles or elements from the rest of the universe of discourse. Having isolated the discrete elements we then teach the skills allied to them for associated with each discrete element in the language there are certain potential applications. These we teach as language skills and I believe we do this very well. But I wish to insist we are still not teaching our students to use language as an art.

The art of language is being exercised when the user of the language is able to consider if not all, at least a vast range of all potential applications of the language elements and so manipulate them that they express or contain in a way that is uniquely his own exactly what he wants them to express or contain. Now, given these two notions, the

art of language use, which I have suggested is quite distinct from the skills associated with various elements of the language, it seems to me to be patently obvious that the practice of the art is infinitely more difficult than the exercising of the various skills, or, if you will, that in this context synthesis is far more difficult and more demanding than analysis. It ought to follow then that a great deal more time and attention should be given to the study of "How to Put Humpty Together Again". How can we synthesise the language skills that our students have - this is the question, for if we do not find an answer to this question then I suggest that each so called tertiary institution in the Territory is going to wallow in a mire of self-deception. The facts are these.

Students come to our tertiary institutions in the Territory after four years of secondary schooling where they have been taught the basic skills of the language English, usually in fairly carefully controlled language teaching situations. In the University they meet and must cope with completely uncontrolled language situations. It is therefore clear that if we cannot train them and help them "To Put Humpty Together Again" in our preliminary courses in English, then I believe that the academic standards that we profess to be leading our students towards must be very seriously demeaned.

Now, I am conscious of having spent a good deal of time in defining the problem, but I hope that implicit in what I have been saying there are some hints as to the sort of thing I believe we ought to be doing in T.E.F.L. at the preliminary level, and indeed for well into the students' undergraduate years. In brief it is this. At the stage in language learning that our students have reached when they come to us, we should be concerned with synthesis, or "How to Put Humpty Together again". In the rest of this paper I want to suggest the way we are trying to do just that at the Institute of Technology in Lae.

One of the most important aspects of "Putting Humpty Together Again", and certainly one of the most vital for university scholarship, is in training students to express their own ideas lucidly and cogently in written form. In the last few months we have been experimenting with a method which we have found to offer some prospect of success in this enterprise.

This method which I am about to describe is frankly imitative, but since as I have suggested, an imitative foundation underlies most accepted methods of T.E.F.L., I am not really suggesting anything new. But though imitative, the method we have used is not narrowly so. In fact, I want to claim for it a flexibility and spirit which if I understand him correctly Aristotle himself would have approved. I will now outline how we initiated

this method of approach. My aim was to induce students to write in reasonably coherent English and to sustain continuity and relevance over a reasonable span of words. This is a modest enough aim, but I think you will find that students entering our tertiary institutions have never before been asked to write more than 300 to 500 words.

Moreover, often enough when asked to write even at this length, they lapse into incoherence. An error analysis of their efforts will always show certain recurrent syntactic errors. These we treat with drills and skill practice, but in addition the reader is struck by such things as the absence of continuity, awkwardness in transition from one point to another and an almost complete failure to organise and present material systematically. In short I would argue that there are just as many stylistic and rhetorical weaknesses in students' work as there are syntactic errors. Clearly these need treatment too.

A short story was used to introduce this method. I began with Doris Lessing's story "The Nuisance". It was selected because it satisfied three main criteria -

- (a) it was not too long,
- (b) it dealt with a theme that was potentially close enough to the students' experience for them to be able to identify with it, and,
- (c) it was in reasonably simple English.

I began by reading the story into a microphone in the Language Laboratory. My students listened to it in their booths and recorded my reading at the same time. After the first reading I distributed printed copies of the script and the students played back their recording while following the script at their own rate. This took a full lecture period. In the following session I went through the story again dealing incidentally with unfamiliar vocabulary items, idiom and other barriers to comprehension. However, the main focus of the discussion was on whether the story had any relevance to New Guinea. Could such a thing happen here? How and under what circumstances? (Incidentally, the story dealt with a universal theme - how to finally silence a nagging wife). We discussed various ways and means, (so much so in fact that my better half has been looking askance at me ever since). Then, we began a paragraph by paragraph analysis of the way the story was put together. At this stage students were frequently asked to supply orally, parallel versions of some of the sentences in the original, changing odd words or ideas so as to translate the events into a New Guinean context.

Finally, each member of the class chose a paragraph to serve as a model and wrote a parallel paragraph. These were read and discussed on completion and the cross-fertilisation of ideas between the various members of the class provoked a great deal of interest and animated discussion. Given this enthusiasm I then asked the class to write a

story based on the original model. This they did with most encouraging results and more genuine interest in their own personal expression than they had previously exhibited towards any assigned task. On completion the best stories were printed and issued to students.

At this point I should stress that the introduction of this sort of approach was avowedly experimental but it was so successful that I felt that some reflection and analysis was opportune. This led me to realise that there were certain advantages that I had stumbled across. As I saw them they were -

1. It was self-motivating. Students enjoyed this sort of work and were keen to demonstrate their perception of the parallelism between the plot of the selected story and a hypothetical situation in the New Guinean context.
2. It enabled comparative freedom but it did not demand originality. Students could and did substitute only words and phrases but the interesting and encouraging thing was that as the germ of their own story grew there was more and more deviation from the original model.
3. I could see that the method lent itself to suit a number of purposes. It could for instance be modified to demand a predetermined amount of structural reinforcement. If, for instance, some revision had been done on the use of the past perfect tense, it would not be difficult to select a model which employed this tense and demanded its use in the parallel version required of the students.
4. It was educational in the broad sense because it provoked independent thought and comparison. In a word it forced the student to realise and appreciate the essential commonality of human experience.
5. Students picked up the method very quickly, perhaps because most of them had been trained for years to be alive to structural patterns through the more normal E.F.L. methods in use in the Territory.
6. It might also be claimed I think that this method allows an effective integration of language and literature and I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that too often one is barren without the other.
7. Finally, it appeared to me to make the students more conscious of things such as sequence, style, paragraph form etc, than any other of the methods that I had attempted.

So for all these reasons I have persisted and attempted to develop this method of proximate imitation. Other short stories have been read and studied, extracts from them have been used as the model for imitative writing, but more and more I have demanded of my students that they rely on the original only for such things as paragraph coherence and sequence rather than on structure or vocabulary content. The results have been encouraging (see Appendix I).

Realising at this stage that what I was teaching was not related so much to linguistically based analysis as it was to semantic and stylistic synthesis, I thereupon happily disregarded the sermonising on syntax and the strictures about structures that are so current, and turned for guidance to the methods of that long forgotten but lately resurrected subject called rhetoric. (As suggested earlier, Aristotle would have approved). In the texts, mainly from the U.S.A., that are available on this subject I found much of value, and far fetched though it may seem, I now believe that teaching rhetoric to our students is filling an urgent need. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Paragraph organisation can be achieved in a variety of ways, through exemplification, comparison and contrast, classification, partition, chronological order, spatial order, analysis of a symbol, definition and in many other ways. Now always bearing in mind that we are dealing with an art, and therefore keeping the approach as flexible and creative as possible, it is possible to show students that the dominant organisational factor in a particular paragraph can usually be identified at least accurately enough to enable "imitation" in the sense the Greeks meant it. Consider for example the following:

"The enterprising spirit of the English people and their fondness for travel and colonisation as well as the great development of their commerce, have brought in words from every corner of the earth. No language is as hospitable as our own to these newcomers perhaps because no other language already contains so many foreign elements. None of these borrowings, however, have affected the structure of our speech since they have been for the most part simply the adoption of names for particular things. Thus we have 'binnacle' from Portuguese; 'landscape', 'loiter', 'stove' and 'yacht' from Dutch or Low German; 'bazaar' and 'caravan' from Persian; 'squaw' and 'wigwam' from North American Indian, 'tea' from Chinese; 'taboo' from Polonesia; 'boomerang' from native Australian, and so on. Such words enrich and diversify our vocabulary without essentially changing its character".

This paragraph was taken from a workbook on rhetoric which asserts that the principle of organisation in it is exemplification. Whether you agree with the nomenclature or not, however, is not important. What is important is that students can be taught to see that the paragraph printed above consists of a topic sentence, a supporting sentence which briefly corroborates the assertion made in the topic sentence; a third sentence which suggests the effect of a and b, then a long sentence which supplies the prima facie evidence for the initial assertion by means of examples. The paragraph is concluded by restating the point that the paragraph seeks to make. Moreover, not only can students be taught to perceive the pattern of coherence and sequence in the paragraph, they can be induced to emulate the example provided by the model. Here is a student's work based on the paragraph above. The topic sentence was supplied.

"All small towns from Vanimo to Samarai, from Rigo to Daru are beginning to look alike. This is because the old established towns that once consisted of thatched buildings are now giving way to modern structures. The effect of this has been to modernise traditional ways of living. Common sights in all Territory centres are the shops of the Steamships Trading Company and/or Burns Philp, a large petrol and gas yard; the double storey match box like buildings of the administrative centres and rows and rows of the corrugated iron buildings of the Chinese traders. All serve a useful purpose but there is a sameness and an ugliness about them all."

In order to alert students to the sequence and structure of the paragraph, a useful method is to supply them with a similar paragraph composed of the same number and sort of sentences rearranged in jumbled order. By rewriting the sentences so as to coincide with the model, students realise the internal relationship of sentence to sentence and the transitions between them. Moreover, as the students become more proficient at following the drift of the argument or exposition they become more alive to nuance and to subtlety and though I have as yet no data to support my contention, I am quite convinced that their comprehension improves as a result. Possibly this is because they become more aware of the function of lexical items such as -"although", "moreover", "furthermore" and a host of other signalling words that point towards a particular kind of semantic development in the message. In fact, they have to decode and then emulate the style and form of the model by encoding a parallel version, and probably for this reason their grasp of the total organisation of the passage seems to improve steadily.



I could go on to indicate how this method can be extended in various ways, but I have covered the basic approach and I would like to think that those who are interested might develop their own techniques to suit their own purpose.

In conclusion I think that all of you who have taught New Guinean students will agree that they need guidance in planning their written work. As they become more proficient I hope the need for a model of any kind will disappear. But for the moment the method I have described appears to me to provide a way out of the structural cage. It leads the student to integrate the language skills he has acquired and I firmly believe that it enables him to practice the art of language as well as the skills. But let me stress that I firmly believe that there must be, despite the abortive efforts of all the King's Horses and all the King's Men in the original rhyme, more than one way of putting Humpty together again. I hope therefore that others will experiment in this particular field.

I want to come back to this point for the task is urgent and the time short. John Locke, the English philosopher once said -

"God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination and indeed a necessity to have fellowship with those of his kind, but furnished him also with language which was to be the great instrument and common tie of all societies."

If English is to be the common tie in this emerging society, there can be no question, we must set our students free from their language cage.

#### Appendix I

Students work based on Paragraph I of Vance Palmer's "Home"

I. Tom had a recurring dream which sent cold icy feelings down his spine. The wind was building up and the swell too was gradually getting higher. He had to get back to his people and warn them of the danger. He was all wet to the bones with cold and hunger kept on taunting him. His eyes were sore from the salt spray.

The little canoe was no match for the rough weather. He was there trying to paddle but when each stroke was taken the pain hit him like lightning. Every ounce of muscle was used but the canoe seemed not to be moving at all. His head was spinning and his mind went dark. He was in the water trying to fight his way in those high waves. He was sucked under by some force; his breath short he had to come up for some air. His lungs were bursting for oxygen, fighting blindly at the water he finally surfaced gasping for breath. When he awoke Tom found the blankets covering his face.

2. Eileen, an orphan was adopted by a rich family at the age of two. Since she lived with her new parents, she usually dreamt of strange happenings which usually woke her up trembling and fearing for the rest of the night. She was feeding the pigs at her old home with the dogs wagging their tails and looking up and down for their share. The early morning fog formed the background of these dreams. She saw her dead mother walking past her in her usual way without a smile on her face. As she walked towards her home, it seemed further away each time she got nearer. She was in a strange place she hadn't known before. She tried to think where she was and where she had come from but the situation seemed gloomy. She thought of the bush track and followed it toward the plantation. The thought of seeing the shiny corrugated iron roof which was outstanding among the other buildings which were roofed with kunai. To her surprise all the buildings were gone. She was standing in a bit of a clearing surrounded with thick forest. There was no road leading out so she sat down and started to think when suddenly darkness fell over the place. Figures in dark garments came and carried her away. She shouted but no sound came out.

3. The dream made me wake weeping. On a cold moonless night my dead brother came to me, he knocked on the door of my room at the Hall of Residence. While knocking he was quietly and sadly calling my name. He was asking me to open the door for him. After some moments I recognised his voice - my brother's calm and hungry voice. I opened the door and asked him to enter. When he had entered he clung to my neck and gave me a brotherly kiss. His tears were falling and when I asked him why he had come to see me he made no attempt to answer. I tried to make him comfortable. I told him that it was my home and he was not to worry. I was beginning to cry, when he, through his sobbing asked me to look after our parents, brothers and sisters. He fell into my arms and I called for my father and mother. After some seconds the whole village was mourning for that dead brother of mine. I was trying to stand up to get some clothes to put onto him when my eyes opened and I realised that I was not at the village. I rubbed off my tears. I tried to forget it but the death of my brother and the faces of my family made me think back to the very day of his death- my tears continued falling until daybreak.

4. I dreamt one night I was in a lonely, empty land where thought itself might echo - a new, old, wide-flung solitary country whitened by the cold moonlight. Around me things were quiet except for the howling of the dogs and some strange, ghostly figures seemed to watch me silently. The night was so cold that I thought every bone of me was

frozen but nowhere could I escape from it. I found myself wandering all over the place. A thought came into my mind, I must get back to the campus-homestead again, back to my well prepared bed, where I would not feel cold anymore. I remembered that the river ran between the Campus and my position. I saw the stream; across it I could see the 3-storey building but somehow it disappeared out of my sight. I was lost again but somebody led me home.

5. Mathew shuddered from a dream, one from which he got mixed sensations. He was making his way around the buttress roots of the tree, his friends close behind, with bows and spears at hand. The vegetation with its blooming flowers responded to the penetrating rays from the peeping sun beyond the greenish hills. Hanging mist chilled him to the bones, but the thought of the game they approached thrilled him even more. He hated to return to school, back to where he was pushed around, his freedom minimized. The plentiful game gave him and his friends a sporting experience in contrast to the monotonous school life. How happy and alive it was to be among these game-chasing people mingling with the wilderness. The distant bell's ding-dong gave away the scene to his clearing and disappointed mind.