

FACE TO FACE

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How Natural is Natural?

FACE TO FACE is a book of 40 dialogues, graded from elementary to intermediate, in which various structures are offered, singly or in combination, for the student to practice. The author states his aim as "to provide you and your students with material with which to bridge the gap between what Wilga Rivers describes as "skill-getting" and "skill-using activities". In other words, the student is being prepared for the stage when he can freely and appropriately use the language which has been presented to him. The dialogues are intended "to offer models of everyday English of the sort used in conversation by native speakers". The dialogues are short and thus readily memorized and are furnished with two or three transfer situations. From these, the students should create their own little dialogue using what structures and vocabulary they are able to use.

Each dialogue is illustrated. The illustrations are attractive but they do not give the students any help in producing further dialogues in the transfer situation; they merely give the artist's (Graham Round) impression of the two speakers in the original dialogue.

The introduction provides a "suggested classroom procedure" for the dialogues which gives a very usable and complete picture of the methodological possibilities (including the use of the tape which accompanies the book). There is also a structural index so that teachers working from a structural index can easily find a dialogue or dialogues suitable for the grammatical item they want to practice.

Of course, none of these features is new or unusual. Jerrom and Szkutnik's "Conversational Exercises in Everyday English" (Longman) does at least as much and was published in 1965. What takes this book beyond Jerrom and Szkutnik and others is what Mr. Long calls Paralinguage. This is taken to include verbal items ("Ouch", "Tut-tut", "Uh, uh", etc. - described as the "grunts and groans of the target language") and visual items. The latter are described in detailed notes for each dialogue. Here (for dialogue 21) is an example:

"Joyce Williams jerks her head and shoulders back as she says

"Well I never ! " The movement shows surprise and disbelief in English, whether accompanied by a verbal exclamation or not. "

Or (dialogue 23):

"Mavis punctuates her next utterance with rhythmic chopping movements".

An assessment of this book depends very much on the teaching situation from which one is working. Differences in objectives, approach and circumstances can make the same language teaching materials useless to one teacher and indispensable to another. It is with this very much in mind that the following comments are offered.

The writer offering materials for use mid-way between presentation and free practice has an invaluable contribution to make; this contribution will be acknowledged by teachers if all or most of the following points are observed:

- 1) the materials can be incorporated into the syllabus in use;
- 2) the English is reasonably natural;
- 3) the materials are usable and reasonably flexible;
- 4) students find the materials stimulating and interesting;
- 5) students can feel that they are using language realistically and in situations which are as close to life as classrooms and textbooks ever can be;
- 6) the teacher is not pushed too far beyond his knowledge of the way the language is used by native speakers (assuming, here, the position of the non-native speaker as teacher, as in Mexico).

With regard to the first point, Mr. Long's experience as a teacher working from a structural syllabus has not let him down. The selection of structures and their combinations is comprehensive and efficient. However, a workpersonlike approach to grammar does not guarantee naturalness.

With regard to individual sentences, Mr. Long is hard to fault. The earlier, simpler dialogues contain one or two infelicities (in dialogue 2, for example: Is that your car?/ Yes, it is. Why?/ My bicycle's under it.) but the language is very simple here and there is no doubt that the use of individual structures is reasonably natural.

Certain combinations, however, stray from native speaker usage. All of a handful of native speakers tested shied away from the following as a natural exchange:

What are you doing tonight?/ If I've got some work, I 'll do that.

What'll you do if you haven't got any work?/ I'll watch television or read a book.

What about if I invite you out?/ I'll think about it. (28)

In general, however, the non-native speaker teacher can be satisfied that this book will help to give students a fair idea of the way English is used.

An experienced teacher, moving to point 3, will find no difficulty in using this book either with a single copy for himself or with the students having their own. The author's suggestions include practical ideas for using the blackboard and the tape recorder. The book is clearly laid out and the transfer situations normally require little explanation.

The author admits to getting away from "boring" textbook characters and to adding an element of humour ("of the situational as opposed to the verbal kind, given that we are dealing with foreign language students") to some of the dialogues. As a result some dialogues are interesting and entertaining. The stated objective is not always met, however; the humour of dialogue 36, for example, depends on the words "herbivore" and "vegetarian"; that of number 26 on "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". But this is not serious. What mars this book is that there are too many situations where the author's search for the humorous leads to a bizarre setting which the student will not find relevant to himself and which will thus not encourage successful transfer. After reading through this book, I find myself coming back to arguments that stimulus material should be as general and realistic as possible so that students are given the fullest opportunities to apply the language to themselves or to role-play situations which appeal to them.

Finally, we come back to the paralanguage. Many of the verbal items are clearly useful and valuable. I can see strong arguments for expressions (incidental language, I think we often call them) like "Oh!", "Oh dear!", "Well really!" or "Well I never!". They give the exchanges a natural flavour and give the opportunity to use new intonation patterns. I am less convinced about the grunts and groans. Undeniably, students enjoy producing them. On the other hand, I do not think it is over pessimistic to suggest that unless a native speaker spends a lot of time with a class, the production of these sounds will be extremely un-native speakerlike. Further, with the exception of examples like "Sssh", these sounds can usually be replaced by a word or expression which will do more to increase the students' communicative competence. Lastly, how much confidence will the non-native speaker teacher need to reproduce the chopping, jerking and hand-clasping described in the notes on visual Paralanguage?

Too much, I feel, for most to attempt it, although it would be very encouraging to find that I was wrong.

In summary, this little book is, at least, a valuable source of suggestions for the way structures may be combined with each other and with little occasional expressions to give a reasonably natural exchange in English. How much further a teacher can go with it will depend on his objectives, his own communicative competence in English (and his confidence in it) and his estimation of his students' willingness to role-play in the kinds of situations provided. Certainly, there are far worse books to have by your elbow when planning further practice activities.