

# Ludicrous language

**Chris Payne** irons his platypus.

**A**s far as possible, teachers should try to avoid inventing examples in class. Do you agree? What justification can you offer for inventing examples? (Michael Lewis)

## Sweet memories

The question of whether we should invent language examples is a long-standing talking point in ELT circles.

As long ago as 1899, in his book *The Practical Study of Languages*, the English scholar Henry Sweet mocked the use of invented sentences. His disapproval of ‘insipid, colourless combinations’ had an enduring effect on language teaching. At the time, Sweet was an eminent and influential phonetician, so much so that he was believed by many to be the inspiration for Professor Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, written in 1913.

If we fast-forward to 2000, we can find further opposition to invented sentences from Michael Lewis, who laments the fact that language teaching has a history of inventing examples – and warns that if you invent examples consisting of a one-clause sentence, they are surely very poor examples.

More recently, in Issue 73 of *ETp*, Peter McFarlane questioned the usefulness of example sentences such as ‘I was having a bath when the phone rang’, indicating – correctly – that it is language which you would seldom hear used. Except, of course, in the classroom.

## Sweet’s memory

In his thought-provoking book *Translation in Language Teaching*, Guy Cook uncovers contradictions in Henry Sweet’s criticism of invented sentences. Sweet refers to made-up sentences as unlikely examples of actual language use which, in his view, ‘do not stamp themselves on the memory’. He quotes the following example from one of his former teachers of Greek: ‘*The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.*’

Quite clearly, this outlandish sentence is not representative of idiomatic usage. However, it was imprinted indelibly on Henry Sweet’s memory, as his own words bear witness: ‘*a sentence which I remembered long after I had forgotten all the rest of my Greek.*’

Thus, Sweet’s argument about the lack of memorability of invented sentences does not apply to his own memorable example!

‘*The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen*’ would be a ludicrous example of English. Yet, interestingly, the more absurd the meaning of a sentence is, the more likely it is to be memorised verbatim. This holds true for much bizarre language, whether it is made up or authentic. Now that you have read the example ‘philosopher’ sentence twice, there is a strong possibility that you will remember it.

Recollection of the exact words in an excerpt from a book is a tall order, but anyone who has read Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* will

probably be able to recall the absurd question: ‘*Why is a raven like a writing desk?*’

Adults living in the UK in the 1980s will surely recognise this newspaper headline: ‘*Freddie Starr ate my hamster*’. It was published by the tabloid *The Sun* on March 13th 1986, and the unexpectedness of the last word ensured it stood out – making it one of the most memorable headlines of its decade.

## Memorable words

A brief digression into the field of memory experiments may perhaps provide us with a partial explanation for why ludicrous language is often so memorable.

 Read the following list of words once only. Then cover them up and, on a separate piece of paper, write down as many words as you can remember – in any order.

cat	house	door	bone	hand
shape	pear	back	goat	ball
rain	hill	cut	Von Restorff	
rose	life	wind		

The chances are you were able to recall *Von Restorff* because, as a two-word proper noun, it stands out from the other one-syllable words. The tendency to remember outstanding or surprising items on a list was identified by Hedwig Von Restorff in 1933 during memory experiments that she was conducting.

The effect known as the ‘Von Restorff effect’ has since been found to

be true in other situations in which items stand out in some way from those around them. It has been suggested that the outstanding elements increase a person's attention, which in turn leads to better retention.

## Memorable teaching

What bearing does the observation described have on language teaching?

- Examples of language could be chosen for their memorability.
- Teachers could exploit the fact that learners can often remember the precise words in a bizarre sentence – by embedding useful grammar and chunks of language in their crazy created examples.

Such unexpected examples of English can be presented to learners alongside other more conventional ELT sentences and authentic language, in an attempt to highlight their saliency and activate the Von Restorff effect.

For example, the teacher presents a number of sentences that contain *Would you mind* plus verb with *-ing*, which is used when making polite requests:

- 1 *Would you mind telling me what you're doing?* (authentic)
- 2 *Would you mind ironing my pink platypus?* (invented)
- 3 *Would you mind opening the window, please?* (ELT material)

In these examples, the learners are being exposed to a frequently-found and useful pattern of language, even in the bizarre invented sentence. If the Von Restorff effect does indeed aid retention, then students will remember '*would you mind ironing my ...*', which is a perfectly natural use of English when combined with other words like *shirt*, *skirt*, etc.

The object of the exercise is for students to recall, in the short and long term, that *Would you mind* is commonly followed by a verb with the *-ing* form. If it turns out that Von Restorff has no effect in this instance but, instead, the students remember the authentic or typical ELT example of the target language, the aim of the exercise has still been fulfilled.

## Silly sentences

The notion of using bizarre language for pedagogic purposes is not as contrived and inauthentic as it first appears. The sentence *The banana jumps over the*

*flower* comes not from the L2 classroom, but from the real world of board games that are played by native speakers who are learning English. *Silly Sentences* and *Very Silly Sentences*, sold by DK Games, are board games in which players are encouraged to make sentences – 'the sillier the better'.

The games are fun and they help children to learn about word class and syntax, as well as complementing the National Curriculum. ELT author Nick Bilbrough also espouses making tenses memorable by challenging learners to create silly examples in his activity *Silly Grammar*, in which the students brainstorm words in various categories (such as *animal or person, object, past form of intransitive verb*), complete a table with them and then compete to write down the two silliest sentences they can come up with, using these words.

Teachers who favour real instances of used language but fail to select carefully can unwittingly provide poor examples

## Reality rules!

There is no doubt that learners need to be exposed to examples of real or authentic language, so we should keep a close check on the content of our lessons. But this does not vindicate the assumption that examples of language that are unlikely to occur in a non-instructional setting are always bad examples in the classroom. An analogy may help to illustrate this point.

We all unquestioningly accept the idea that airline pilots need to carry out part of their training in a flight simulator. While we are aware that a flight simulator is not the same as an actual aeroplane, we acknowledge the benefits of using a simulator to help pilots to learn to fly. Similarly, invented sentences that simulate actual language use can serve as a good model for students – if chosen wisely.

In fact, *authentic* is not synonymous with *appropriate*, so teachers who overwhelmingly favour real instances of

used language but fail to select carefully can unwittingly provide poor examples. Also, much everyday 'real' language is so prosaic that it is instantly forgettable, unlike bizarre made-up sentences, which stand out.



A high percentage of the language used in classrooms comes from the teacher – some estimates put the figure at 70 per cent. It is only natural for teachers at the coalface to use 'bespoke' sentences some of the time, especially if we consider that many of us have to teach with coursebooks whose content needs adapting and tailoring for our classes.

A hypothetical teacher who never used invented sentences would be denied the possibility of any kind of spontaneity and would be unable to personalise language for a particular class. In addition to authentic language, typical and bizarre invented sentences can also contribute to the learning process.

As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. **ETp**

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## It really worked for me!

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Did it really work in practice?

Do share it with us ...

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