

# Using Creative Thinking to Find New Uses for Realia

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The use of realia is well known to teachers. However, this article suggests different ways of using realia. By thinking creatively we can find new teaching uses for the everyday objects that surround us, by relating them to language and looking at them in new ways.

## Introduction

We like using realia, i.e. objects in the class because it adds interest and relates language to the real world. I have found my use of realia fall into three main areas, first for descriptions, and second as props in drama and another type of activity is a creative thinking exercise, finding different uses for an object, e.g. a ruler could be a weapon, musical instrument, a symbol of authority and so on. However, there is another possibility suggested by this last use. If we ask our students to find other uses for everyday objects, why shouldn't teachers find uses for objects for teaching? This means making a connection between objects and language. Here are some ideas, looking at specific grammar points, drills, and free speaking.

## 1. Specific Grammar Points

### Scissors and the Present Perfect Tense

Write three sentences representing different uses of the present perfect tense on the board. Hold the scissors pointing up, so the class can see, with one hand on each handle. Open the blades by moving the left hand up, keeping the right hand still. Now say the first sentence, 'I have lived in London all my life', slowly closing the blades with your right hand. Open the scissors as before, read the second sentence: 'I have seen that film three times', but this time stop the blade three times on the way, to represent the three times. For the last sentence, 'I have just had lunch', open the scissors slightly then snap them shut. Note: The upright blade represents the present and the moving blade represents time moving between the past and present. By moving the blades you can show that all three sentences have the connection between past and present in common, even though the last sentence is dealing with a very short time ago. As you are facing the class, you should move your left hand, not right, so that the students will see the 'past' blade moving toward the present, from their left to right.

### A Corkscrew, a Bottle Opener, Action and State Verbs

The different ways of opening wine and beer bottles can be related to state and action verbs. Explain that when you open a beer bottle the bottle is either open or closed, i.e. it is in one state or the other. Compare this to the opening of a wine bottle. This is a process which you can see, as the screw is pushed in and pulled out. Hold a corkscrew in one hand and a bottle opener in the other. Say a verb and hold up the appropriate instrument (bottle opener for state verb, corkscrew for action verb). Get volunteer students to do the same. (NB some verbs e.g. 'think' can be both, so you may need a tool that does both!)

### A Pencil Sharpener and Reduced Relatives Clauses

Again, metaphor can make the unfamiliar more familiar. Students may not be familiar with reduced relatives such as 'The man (who was) killed in the accident was my neighbour' where the words in brackets can be omitted. Explain that by taking out the two words, you make the sentence better, more economical, and sharper, as a native speaker would. The metaphor of a

pencil sharpener works like this: you cut off something to make the pencil sharper and more efficient.

## **A Tie and Prepositions.**

Show the students how to tie a tie. 'Put the tie round your neck. Cross the ends in front of you, then pull the smaller end under, then over, then under again, over again, then up, behind the knot, through the knot, then down. Pull the knot up.' Get the students to tie the tie, (real or imaginary) with you, chanting the prepositions as they do so.

## **A Stapler and Relative Clauses**

Write two sentences on the board, an object and a subject relative clause, as follows: 'The man that I saw was crying.' 'The man that cried was taken to the police station.' Point out that the first sentence has two pronouns (personal and relative), 'that' and 'I', and the second has one, 'that'. Now take two pieces of paper and staple them together twice. This represents the first sentence. Staple two more pieces of paper, just once. This represents the second sentence. Remove one staple from the first two pieces of paper and they will still be joined together. However, if you remove the staple from the second pair of pieces of paper, they will come apart. The conclusion? The relative pronoun is unnecessary in the first sentence.

## **2. Drills**

### **A Whistle and a Pronunciation Drill**

Write the vocabulary that you want to practise on the board. Mark the stressed syllable(s). Now use the whistle to demonstrate which word you want the students to repeat by blowing the syllable pattern, e.g. blow 'long short short' to elicit 'confident' and 'short short long short' for 'population'. You need a variety of word lengths and syllable patterns for this.

### **A Ruler and a Drill**

Use a ruler or any similar object to 'conduct' a drill as follows: Write a sentence on the board. Practise the sentence, marking the stressed syllables. When the students can remember it, go to the back of the class, and ask them to turn and face you. Now conduct the drill, using the ruler as a baton. Looking at the board, beat the stressed syllables with the ruler while the students take their cue from you.

### **An Empty Bottle and a Drill**

Say a sentence into a bottle. Screw the lid on and tell the class that the sentence is in the bottle. Now open the bottle and let the sentence out one word at a time, that is, students repeat the sentence one word at a time. Put another sentence in the bottle, and tell students to pass the bottle round the class, letting one word out at a time, one word per student. Then let students fill the bottle in the same way. The point here is to get students to listen and focus on word order.

## **3. Free Speaking Activities**

### **Discussion and a Microphone**

This is suggested by television programme hosts, who control conversations by the use of the microphone. Put students in groups, and give one student the microphone (imaginary, or a real microphone, disconnected, or something to represent a microphone). Say a group of six students are talking about 'holidays', the person with the microphone can move around the group giving different people the chance to speak, ensuring everyone gets an equal chance to contribute.

### **Tennis Balls and Conversation**

A tennis match can be a metaphor for a conversation. Put students in pairs facing each other, as in doubles tennis. They should be about 1 meter apart. Give one student a tennis ball. He starts talking about a subject then throws the ball to someone on the

other team, who should continue on the same subject, before returning the ball to someone on the other team. They should keep the conversation moving swiftly. You can have a referee to penalise slow turns, 'foul' throws and dropped balls, and keep the score as in tennis, e.g. 15 love.

## Conclusion

Classroom aids are all around us, but sometimes we need to think about the best ways to use an object. 'Mapping' the use of an object onto a language point, or finding a language related use of an object are two ways of using realia in class. Have look around the staffroom. The teaching aids you need may be closer than you think.

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