

Have You Read.....?

John Fanselow set out the background to his book 'Breaking Rules' in our 'Author's Corner' series (Volume 3, Number 2). Below Mario Rinvoluceri gives a reader's point of view. This system of author explanation followed by reader reaction gives, we feel, a balanced and fair picture of an author's work.

Breaking Rules

Generating and Exploring Alternatives in Language Teaching

by John F. Fanselow, Longman, 1987

I was lucky to first meet the breaking rules ideas in the form of an inspired lecture given by John Fanselow at one of the European TESOL conferences. He happens to be an excellent, flamboyant, plenary speaker and the hall hummed with excitement. Many of us agreed that teaching is a routinising job and that most of us slump into ruts we are sometimes not even aware of.

The ways he suggested we break rules were simple:

- If you normally ask students to underline words they don't know, reverse the procedure and ask them to blank out such words and ignore them. Notice your normal practice and do the opposite.
- Notice the difference between the way people do an activity in a classroom and outside in ordinary life. In classrooms people sit at desks to read – there is silence. At home people sometimes lounge on cushions and listen to music while reading. Have reading happen this way in class.
- Take a traditional practice like reading aloud in class and change some detail about the way it is done. Ask the student to read silently, to look up from the page and then to say what she has read to somebody in the room. The change in detail radically changes the whole.

Fanselow's message in that lecture was "For goodness sake do something different next Monday morning". Instinctively many of us knew that this was brilliant advice.

The book under review carries the same message but sadly it is a hard read if you work through it the way he suggests you do. He sets out to provide the reader with a system for analyzing classroom and other communication. Part of his system is a framework for identifying the rules that govern a particular classroom situation. The table below gives you a brief and unfair glimpse of what he is proposing:

Table 2 – 4 Five Characteristics of Communications ¹				
What is Being Done?		How is it Being Done?		
SOURCE/TARGET	MOVE TYPE	MEDIUM	USE	CONTENT
Teacher/*		Linguistic	Attend -----	Life
	Structure		Characterize	
	Solicit	Nonlinguistic	Present	
Student (sgc) ² /*	Respond	Paralinguistic	Relate	Procedure
	React		Reproduce	
Other/*		Silence	----- Set	Study

¹ The target in each case indicated by an asterix can be any one of the sources
² s = individual student; g = group of students; c = class

The table quoted above is unfair because it is out of context and in fact summarises 20 pages of fairly dense explanation.

My problem as a reader of the book is that I do not feel motivated to learn the language of the communication description he is proposing. This is not just because of its length and complexity but because these things are good, clear and simple in themselves and do not need such glossing or translating.

They do not really need all the conceptual framework that Fanselow has found helpful for himself. Fanselow is capable not only of being an inspiring lecturer but can also translate concepts dressed up in the jargon of his system into clear language. In the chapter on feedback and mistakes, the author presents six major ways a teacher can respond to learner error. Here are the six ways in "Fanselowese" and "Clear".

<p><u>Fanselowese</u></p> <p>you can <u>attend</u> (see table above)</p> <p>you can <u>relate</u></p> <p>you can <u>reproduce</u></p> <p>you can <u>characterize-evaluate</u></p> <p>you can <u>set or reproduce</u></p>

Clear

You listen, you say nothing, you give the student time to think

you give the student the grammar etc. rule

you comment on the error, maybe making a comparison

you imitate the error

you praise or blame the student

you model the correct utterance

I suspect I will not be the only reader unmotivated to learn the Fanselowese. Can I get juice from Breaking Rules while side-stepping its intellectual framework?

The book is 450 pages long and packed with exciting ways of questioning what you do with your students. It is therefore well worth getting hold of and hopping about in. Let me share two practical ideas I could immediately use:

The class dictionary

When new words are met, the students pop them on cards with a definition, a mother tongue translation, a contextualising sentence, a feeling-about-the-word sentence etc. The cards are filed in a class box and are available for later consultation. Simple, do-able, useable tomorrow. A computerized version of this idea is now being tested in Danish schools.

Substituting observation for testing

In the author's own words: "During the five to twenty minutes needed to develop one multiple choice item – without pre-testing it – five to twenty student communications can be written on note cards. If the communications are made during a break by students to each other, or are made as students are actually engaged in the solution of a real problem, such as putting together a jigsaw puzzle, or in a conversation of their own, the communication is likely to be more similar to those they ordinarily make than responses to questions in tests. They may be less inhibited as well, and as a result a more valid picture of capability may result."

My regret is that the thinking in this book has had to be presented via the jargon of a system that has clearly been inspirational for the author but which is too much of a mouthful for any but the most passionate reader to digest in the few hours one normally gives to this type of reading. It annoys me to have to read with my head bent forward battling in the teeth of a jargonistic wind. Oh, that this book were as joyful a read as the first part of Stevick's Images and Options: the two books in their messages are cousins if not sisters.

It is right that the last words of a review should be the author's:

"Both during and after the reading of a novel, a newspaper, or a textbook, often all that is required is memory work or thinking. Both during and after the reading of Breaking Rules, I ask you for much more than memory and thinking. Generating and exploring alternatives requires activity-writing comments, transcribing and recording communications – and also action – substituting alternatives in communications you control..... This book is ready to be your companion for life."