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Communicative language teaching materials: A critical language perspective

Abstract

This paper presents a view of language as socially shaped and socially shaping, and contributing to the construction of social identities, subject positions and types of self. The key to understanding how language has this shaping power is the notion of 'Discourse'. Discourses are patterns of language use, both socially and linguistically organised, which are both multiple and pervasive and have the effect of organising 'reality' and persuading users of the discourse to see the world and themselves in certain ways. An analysis of language learning activities from some popular adult ESL/EFL coursebooks shows how language can serve to position students outside dominant discourses, and points to some of the contradictions and assumptions inherent in the search for authentic communicative language learning activities.

Introduction

Many ESL learning and teaching materials focus on students' development of functional language and communicative competence by providing opportunities for 'genuine discourse' and 'useful practice in the kinds of language the learners may eventually need to use in similar situations outside the classroom' (Ur 1993: 9). Role plays and other forms of simulated communicative contexts form the basis of many interactive tasks in the second language classroom along with extensive use of 'authentic' learning materials which enable classroom language to be 'referenced against the types of language learners will encounter outside the classroom' (Nunan 1995: 216). Teachers are increasingly challenged to provide learners with opportunities for verbal interaction to assist them to use language for real communicative purposes rather than to learn about language.

This emphasis on 'the functional and communicative potential of language ... focusing on language teaching of communicative proficiency rather than mastery of structures' (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 8) has occurred in response to a move away from regarding language as having fixed grammatical patterns and a core of basic vocabulary, to a much broader and more functional view of language. Most teachers acknowledge that the most competent communicator in a second language is not necessarily the student with a thorough grasp of language structures but that:

it is most often the person who is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving himself and his hearer, taking account of what knowledge is already shared between them (eg. from the situation or from the preceding conversation) and selecting items which will communicate his message effectively. (Littlewood 1994: 4)

This shift in thinking about language and its purpose has given rise to communicative language teaching methodology (CLT) and is well known to any ESL or EFL teacher who has gained teacher qualifications or participated in professional development activities in the last 15 years.

There has been much debate over the meaning of CLT and what it means to be a teacher who engages in communicative methodology. Researchers in the field refer to strong and weak versions of CLT (Nunan 1988: 26). The weak version 'stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their language for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language learning' (Howatt 1984: 279 in Nunan 1988: 25). The strong version focuses on language activities which do not just lead towards communicative competence but 'simulate target performance' and 'require learners to do in class what they will have to do outside' (Nunan 1988: 26). Regardless of which version or combination of versions of CLT teachers follow, language teaching in most classrooms today focuses on learners coming to know language through doing, and through using language for meaningful interactive purposes.

However, many ESL learning and teaching materials which may be thought of as providing models of language for real communicative purposes have been criticised by some researchers for not being representative enough of *real* language. Wajnryb (1997: 16) talks of the interactive examples of language in ESOL materials as being notable for their absence of negotiation, context and face threat.

... what is on offer is a hyper restricted view of the social world and the roles language plays in this world, to the point of being desocialising. If we send our learners out into a world where the rules in fact are very different from those rehearsed in the classroom, then it must come as no surprise to uncover instances of interactional dysfunction ... it is time textbook writers were truer to the function and purpose of language in the real social world. It is time they broadened the slice of life to which they expose learners between the covers of their book so as to include a kind of social reality and the kinds of language uses that would constitute and promote empowerment.

Language as social practice

In the interests of providing better examples of authentic language for communicative purposes, authors of ESL/EFL course books have increasingly recognised the need to relate language tasks to learners' backgrounds and personal characteristics so that they are more representative of the sorts of interactive situations in which learners are likely to find themselves outside the classroom.

However, language does much more than provide simply a means to a message, a representation. Language is social practice. It 'does not merely "reflect" reality which is independent of it' but '... is in an active relationship with reality and it changes reality' (Fairclough 1994: 37). This view foregrounds the concept that both the uses and users of language are shaped by the social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur, and that in turn they work to shape these contexts.

To take the view that meanings are embedded in social practice is to see language as having real effects in the world, *as well* as being a mode of representation. This view highlights the ways in which language — speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing — works to construct or create meaning rather than simply to communicate it in some pre-existent form. Gee argues (1994) that meaning is learnt in context, through specific patterns or 'situated assemblies', whereby users learn not just the generalised concept, but the meaning of the word in use. 'A word "X" has no unified meaning, rather it has various possible assemblies associated with it, each indexed to a context' (Gee 1994: 7). In other words, meanings are assembled in terms of the context within which they are being used. Different contexts trigger different assemblies. Gee's notion of 'situated assemblies' (1994) supports the argument for the use of 'authentic' (Nunan 1989) materials for real communicative purposes in the CLT classroom.

The use of the words 'text' and 'discourse' often have different meanings in the fields of second language research/teaching and critical literacy and social theory. In TESOL practice, the word *text* generally refers to an example of a written text, or the textbook or coursebook which have an important place in many adult ESL or EFL programs. However, texts are much more than this. Texts are 'any instance of written and spoken language that has coherence and coded meanings' (Luke 1995: 11). 'All texts are made up of recurrent statements: claims, propositions and wordings. Taken together, these wordings, statements, references and themes make up available discourse ...' (Luke 1995: 12).

Fairclough uses the term 'discourse' to refer to the 'whole process of interaction of which a text is just a part' (1994: 24) or a 'discursive event' (1995: 71). Gee defines discourse as 'a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network' (Gee 1996: 131). He describes the centrality of language to social organisation and identity:

Discourses are ways in which people coordinate and are coordinated by language, other people, objects, times and places so as to take on particularly socially recognisable identities ... Operating within Discourses we align ourselves and get aligned by words, deeds, values, thoughts, beliefs, things, places and times, so as to recognize and get recognized as a person of a certain type. (Gee 1994: 4)

This perspective has an important implication for the ways we think about language teaching and learning in the ESL adult context in that we need to be more alert to the discourses operating in the texts and in the exercises set for students, and to be conscious of their constitutive powers.

Clarke and Clarke (1990) refer to stereotyping which often occurs in TESOL texts in relation to the gender, race and class of dominant group members (English-speaking community) and minority group members (ESL/EFL students) and warns of the dangers of portraying these groups as homogenous and representative of social reality. Furthermore, they claim that generalised representations of English speaking culture in TESOL texts will result in learners gaining inaccurate understandings of the culture which is likely to:

affect detrimentally their personal and general educational growth, as well as their capacity for successful language acquisition. At worst, learners may suffer from misinformation and ignorance leading to prejudice in their relationship with a culture which they meet partly, or uniquely, in the illustrations and texts of a TESOL textbook. (Clarke and Clarke 1990: 31)

As coursebook authors become increasingly conscious of the constitutive nature of the language used for learning and teaching purposes, many recently published books contain language activities based on increased reference to members of minority cultures in positions of influence and power and women in roles other than those of traditional home makers (Richards 1993; Learmonth 1994).

What follows is an analysis of activities selected from two course books which are commonly used in ESL/EFL courses for adult students in Victoria. It is not my intention to suggest that these are representative examples of the materials used in all classrooms; rather the analysis highlights the problems that may arise when learning and teaching texts are chosen mainly on the basis of their potential to replicate the sorts of communicative contexts encountered outside the classroom.

An analysis of ESL teaching materials

The first text chosen for analysis (Appendix 1) is an activity requiring students to match the written descriptions of homes with written descriptions of residents. This is done by identifying key features of the homes and key characteristics of the families concerned and making judgments about the home most likely to belong to them (Bradley et al 1996). The descriptions of the homes focus on size, location, condition and architectural features and are the sorts of texts likely to be found within the discourses of the real estate business. Many ESL students, especially those recently arrived in Australia, may be in the real estate market either seeking homes for sale or rent, and are likely to come across advertisements of this nature. In this sense,

the text might be seen to qualify as authentic (Nunan 1989) and be used to foster the development of language for real communicative purposes. However, this text in part reflects the stereotyping Wajnryb (1997) and Clarke and Clarke (1990) criticise. The residents in the exercise are constructed as middle class, of Anglo-Australian background and falling into one of the following categories: social fun-loving singles; members of a nuclear family; home focused retirees; or childless professional couple who engage in pursuits and hobbies such as sailing, renovating or entertaining — and the homes with which they are to be matched reflect a relatively affluent lifestyle.

The descriptions omit characters who are not Anglo-Australian and whose work practices and interests might not be regarded as representative of the middle classes. In so doing the text fails to relate to the students' backgrounds and interests, and privileges the discourses of middle-class Anglo-Australians. The meaning of 'home' portrayed in this text is reflective of a cultural model 'as seen from the perspective of a particular discourse' (Gee 1994: 7). 'Cultural models are nearly always ideologically laden' (Gee 1994: 10), and over periods of time they gain acceptance and define what is normal 'natural, obvious, just the ways things are, inevitable, even appropriate' (Gee 1990: 88) — they reflect society's values. Even though such cultural models:

may have quite drastic impact on people's lives and self-images, they appear to us to be 'trivial', not worth study or serious concern. This, of course, simply protects them from change and privileges those who are not marginalized by the cultural model, as does the fact that questioning the model, or refusing to behave in terms of it, opens one up to being marginalized by it and thus dismissed. (Gee 1992: 10)

In the case of the above text, Anglo-Australian-middle-classness is portrayed as the dominant discourse. The identities of students not aligned with this discourse and its cultural models are constructed as outside its parameters and on the margins.

The second text chosen for analysis (Appendix 2) is a unit of work focusing on car repair 'talk' and consists of four sub-units titled, *Overheating*, *Changing a Flat*, *Oil Change*, and *Alignment*. These sub-units contain written descriptions, pictures which match the written texts, a series of comprehension questions and dialogues intended for role play (Bray 1990). The subjects of the text are three male drivers and one female driver whose cars have mechanical problems. This text positions and constructs the identities of the men, both drivers and mechanics, much more powerfully than the woman. In each case the men recognise the nature of their car's problem and take action either to direct a mechanic to fix the problem, or to fix it themselves. The woman, in comparison, is told by the mechanic what needs to be done. Her involvement in the repair process does not go beyond signing the work agreement and waiting to be told the work on her car is complete — the men, on the other hand, are much more in control. They

'tell', by implication, she listens; they 'tighten', 'align', 'take', she 'sits' and waits. The accompanying line drawings depict her in sitting positions while the mechanic is always standing. She appears confused when she realises there is something wrong with her car whereas the men appear confident of their diagnosis. She signs the work order after having being *told* what needs to be done but the men sign the work order after telling the mechanic what is to be done.

The positioning of the woman driver as relatively powerless may be regarded by many teachers and students as representative of reality. Some teachers may argue that activities based on texts reflective of gendered practices are the ones with which students of language background other than English feel most comfortable because they are most aligned with their cultural practices. Implicit in the selection of such examples, however, are unwarranted assumptions on the teacher's part about the student and his or her background — assumptions that perhaps seem justified by the 'authentic language' argument that materials 'must engage the interests of the learner by relating to his interests, background knowledge and experience and through these stimulate genuine communication' (Nunan 1988: 102). However, ESL/EFL students are not a homogeneous group — they come from a vast range of cultural and class backgrounds. The roles women and men play within their families, ethnic communities and the wider Australian community will be just as vast. The ways in which the only female in this text is positioned may alienate some female students.

... if female learners are conscious of the female characters in their course books as relatively few, with limited roles and are offended, alienated or made to feel marginalized by this and subsequently demotivated, this is more likely to hinder than facilitate their learning. (Sunderland 1996: 94)

Justifying the use of gendered language learning activities through the argument that ESL/EFL women students are locked into gendered stereotypes not only imposes a subjective interpretation of students' cultures on pedagogical practice but helps to construct and reconstruct positionings and identities for women which *reinforce* those interpretations.

... social institutions (like schools) and elite groups in society often privilege their own version of meaning as though it were natural, inevitable and incontestable. (Gee 1990: 112)

An activity such as this can also be seen to be dictating classroom practice to some degree (Sunderland 1996: 94). There are more males than females represented in the text and because of this there are fewer opportunities for women to 'perform' the pair-work dialogues provided as role-play activities in each of the sub-units. This means that women students either take on the role of a male in the dialogues or receive less speaking practice — either situation is problematic. In the role play where a woman has a part, it is the man who initiates the interaction and therefore receives

greater practice at conversational openings. Activities such as these provide a model of conversation characterised by what Sunderland has called 'male firstness' (1996: 94).

Conclusion

The representations of gender roles, relationships and social practice in language models and activities and the discourses running through them highlight the complex relationships between language and meaning. In their search for authentic and communicative language learning tasks, it is easy for teachers to overlook the role language plays in constructing expectations and subjectivity, and the ways in which learners who may be non-members of the discourses represented are positioned by the language and texts they are required to use in the ESL classroom. Furthermore, teachers may not be the best judges of what language and learning tasks are most representative of their students' identities and their life realities. The work of Hall (1996), Giddens (1991) and Weedon (1997) show how identity is complex, multiple, diverse and continually emerging. One's opinion of how an individual acts or behaves is often formed on the basis of limited observations and/or is shaped by other factors such as *our* individuality or prior experiences and knowledge. According to Gee (1992: 110):

... the individual is not really a unified creature, but rather the centre (agent/actor) of varied and sometimes conflicting acts (performances). Thus even our 'story' about who we are is a performance that varies with the stage on which we carry it out.

Ideally, what is needed are ways to *assist* ESL students to understand how language works to *construct* rather than just *reflect* realities. By 'unpacking' texts and focusing on the ways in which characters are portrayed through illustrations and the words which are used to describe them and their actions, teachers can help even students with less than advanced levels of English language competence to move towards developing critical perspectives on language use. Texts can be used not only to foster interaction and communicative competence but also to assist students to critique and respond powerfully to texts which recruit them into a variety of specific modes of seeing themselves and the world.

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Appendix 1

Bradley, S, W Dyer, J Hayman with J and L Soars 1996. *Headway Australasia, Intermediate teacher's book* p 50

Unit 9

Writing

Read the descriptions of the houses and the people.

- A Lovely 1920s villa with three bedrooms, a formal lounge room and a large living/dining area. Sunny deck. Large section with mature trees. Off-street parking. Close to shops and buses.
- B New two-bedroom townhouse with all the modern conveniences. Spectacular sea and city views from the balcony. Small private garden. Double garage. Very close to buses and the city.
- C Large three-bedroom 1930s bungalow with fireplaces and verandah. Some renovation work needed. Small garden and double garage. Close to buses and schools.
- D Four-bedroom home with basement and double garage. Large kitchen-dining area and lounge room. Two bathrooms. Close to main roads and school.
- E Two-bedroom apartment on the beach. Roomy living areas opening onto large balcony. Swimming pool and barbeque area. Garage. 30 minutes to the city.

Jennifer, Kate and Roger share a flat. Kate and Roger are students and Jennifer works in a café. They all like to go out a lot in the evenings. On the weekends they visit friends, go to the beach or invite friends around to their place. They are not often all home at the same time. None of them has got a car.

Mike and Robin have got two children aged 5 and 3. Mike catches the bus to and from work and leaves the car at home for Robin. Robin stays home to look after the youngest child. The family enjoys doing things together at home and Mike and Robin are both keen gardeners, although Mike doesn't have much time for such pursuits. They both prefer older style houses.

Pete and Carey both have busy, well-paid jobs in the city. Carey has a company car and Pete takes their own car to work. They like outdoor living and entertaining friends at home but neither of them is very keen on gardening. Pete has recently bought a small sailing boat to use on the weekends.

Jim and Carol are retired. Jim loves fishing and owns an 18-foot boat. He is also a keen home handyman. Carol's hobbies are gardening and painting. Their grandchildren often come to stay so they are glad they have plenty of room.

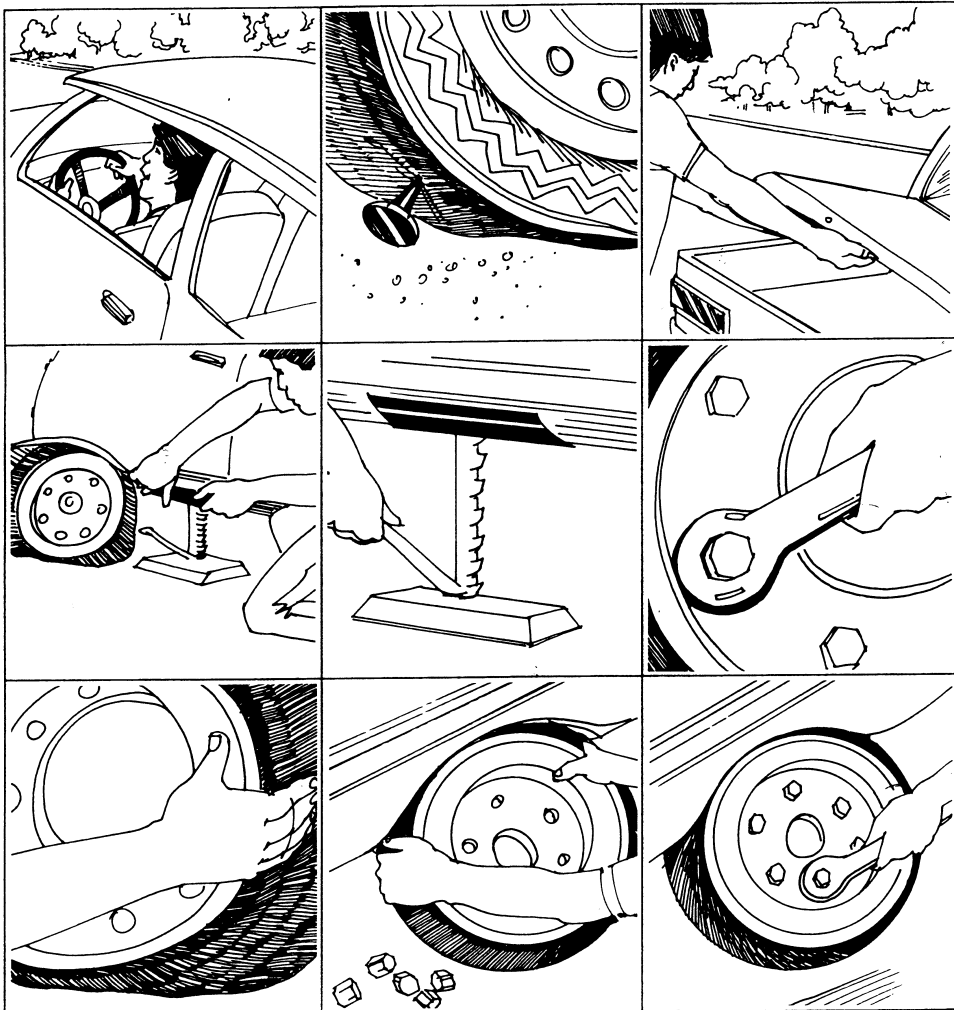
Write a paragraph about each house saying whom you think it does/doesn't belong to and why.

Appendix 2

Bray, T 1990. *English for life through pictures* pp 49–60

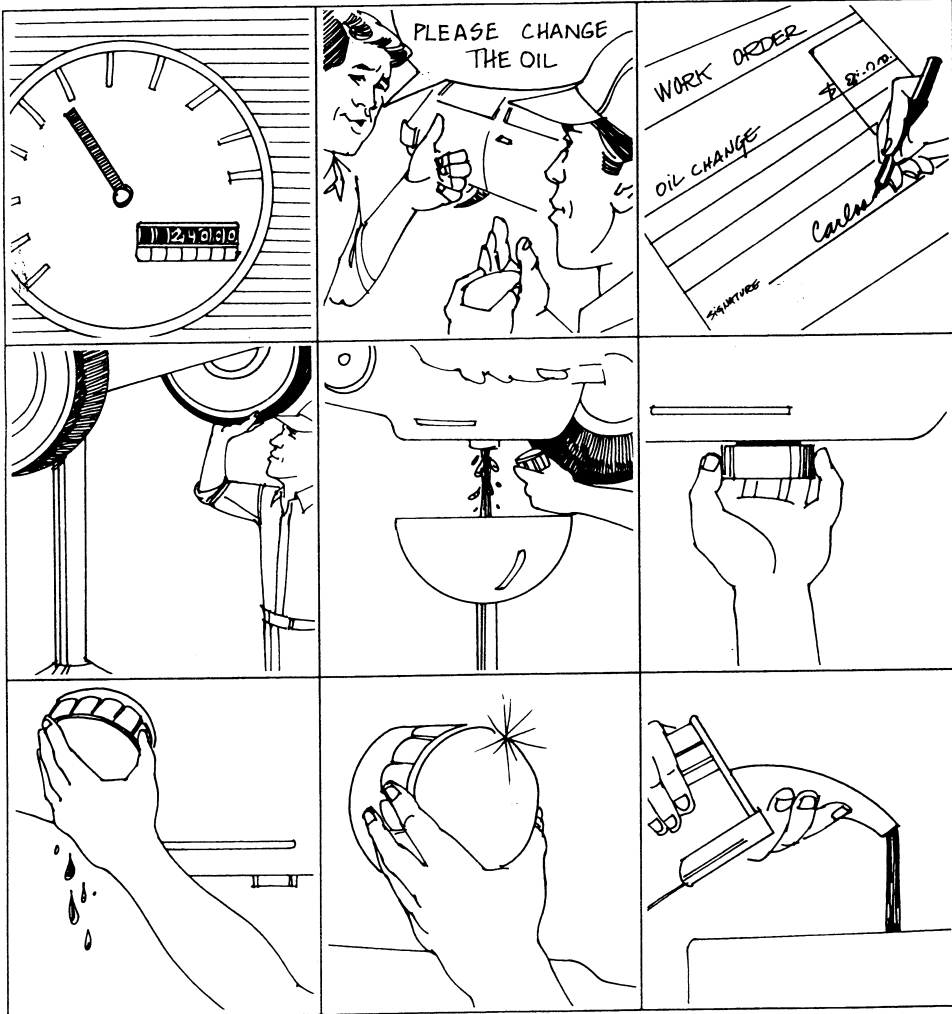
Changing a Flat

Look at the illustrations. Listen carefully to your teacher.



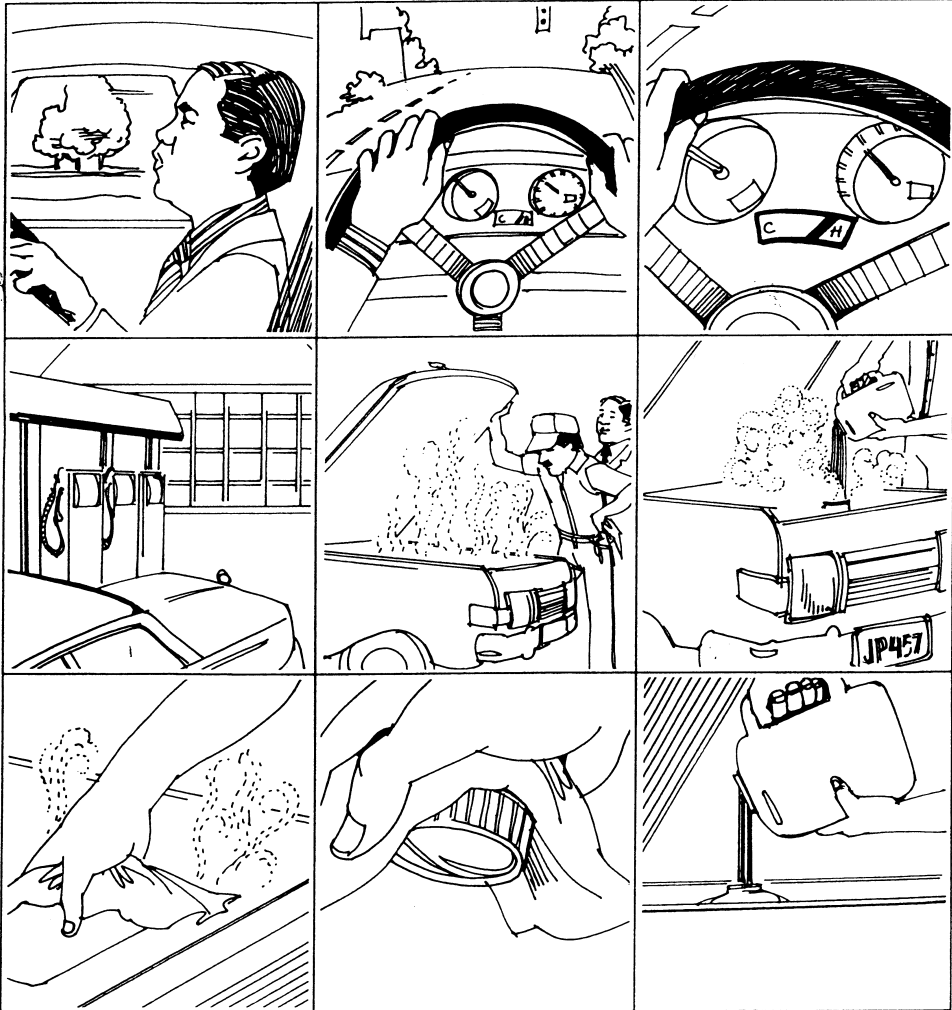
Oil Change

Look at the illustrations. Listen carefully to your teacher.



Overheating

Look at the illustrations. Listen carefully to your teacher.



Alignment

Look at the illustrations. Listen carefully to your teacher.



Changing a flat

Presentation

Read the following sentences.

1. Toshi and his friend are driving to the park.
2. Toshi runs over a nail and his tire goes flat.
3. He stops and opens the trunk.
4. He puts the jack under the car.
5. He jacks up the car.
6. He unscrews the lug bolts with a lug wrench.
7. He takes off the flat tire.
8. He puts on the spare tire.
9. He tightens the lug bolts.

Oil change

Presentation

Read the following sentences.

1. Every 6,000 miles, Carlos takes his car to the mechanic.
2. He asks the mechanic to change the oil.
3. Carlos signs the work order.
4. The mechanic jacks up the car.
5. The mechanic unscrews the bolt and the oil drains out.
6. He screws the bolt back on the pan.
7. He unscrews the old oil filter.
8. He screws on the new oil filter.
9. He pours some new oil into the engine.

Overheating

Presentation

Read the following sentences.

1. Mr. Tomayo is driving to work.
2. He looks at the temperature gauge on the dashboard.

3. His car is running very hot.
4. He pulls into a service station.
5. The station attendant opens the hood.
6. The station attendant puts cold water on the radiator.
7. He puts a rag on the radiator cap.
8. He unscrews the cap and takes it off.
9. He pours water into the radiator.

Alignment

Presentation

Read the following sentences.

1. Mrs. Reyes' car is shaking a lot.
2. She takes her car to a tyre shop.
3. The mechanic puts her car up on a rack.
4. The front tyres aren't straight.
5. The mechanic tells her she needs a front-end alignment.
6. She signs the work order.
7. She sits in the waiting room.
8. The mechanic aligns her front tyres.
9. He tells her the car is ready.