5 How the learner discovers meaning

5.1 Traditional approaches and techniques used in the presentation of new vocabulary items

We will now examine the most common ways in which meaning of new items is conveyed in a normal teaching situation. Although 'traditional approaches and techniques' may sound pejorative, it is not intended to be; indeed, a teacher who was not able to make use of the following techniques might feel severely handicapped. Most of these are means which tend to be associated with a more teacher-centred approach and consequently the items taught through these means are usually selected by the teacher rather than the learner. They may be used for teaching incidental items or in a 'vocabulary lesson'.

5.1.1 VISUAL TECHNIQUES

Visuals

These include flashcards, photographs, blackboard drawings, wallcharts and realia (i.e. objects themselves). They are extensively used for conveying meaning and are particularly useful for teaching concrete items of vocabulary such as food or furniture, and certain areas of vocabulary such as places, professions, descriptions of people, actions and activities (such as sport and verbs of movement). They often lend themselves easily to practice activities involving student interaction. For example, a set of pictures illustrating sporting activities could be used as a means of presenting items such as skiing, sailing, climbing, etc. These visual aids can then be used as the basis for a guided pair work dialogue:

e.g. Have you ever been (skiing)?

Yes, I went to Italy last year.
Did you enjoy it?
etc.

No, I haven't. Have you?
etc.

Mime and gesture

These are often used to supplement other ways of conveying meaning. When teaching an item such as 'to swerve', a teacher might build a

situation to illustrate it, making use of the blackboard and gesture to reinforce the concept.

5.1.2 VERBAL TECHNIQUES

1 *Use of illustrative situations (oral or written)*

This is most helpful when items become more abstract. To ensure that students understand, teachers often make use of more than one situation or context to check that learners have grasped the concept. To illustrate the meaning of 'I don't mind', the following context may be useful:

Ali likes *Dallas* and *Upstairs, Downstairs* equally.

Unfortunately, they are both on television at the same time. It doesn't matter to him which programme he watches. How does he answer this question?

Teacher: Do you want to watch *Dallas* or *Upstairs, Downstairs*?
Ali: I...

The teacher could then follow this with a check question to ensure that the concept has been grasped: 'Does he want to watch one programme more than another?' He may then encourage students to use the idiom in different contexts, for instance: 'Do you want tea or coffee?' in order to elicit 'Tea, please,' or 'Coffee, please' or 'I don't mind'.

2 *Use of synonymy and definition*

Teachers often use synonymy with low level students, where inevitably they have to compromise and restrict the length and complexity of their explanations. It would, for example, be justifiable at low levels to tell students that 'miserable' meant 'very sad'. Secondly, it is commonly used with higher level students and subsequently qualified. 'Bloke', for instance, means the same as 'man', but is colloquial. This qualification is clearly very important.

Definition alone is often inadequate as a means of conveying meaning, and clearly contextualised examples are generally required to clarify the limits of the item. For example, 'to break out' in 'a fire broke out' has the sense of 'to start', but this would be a misleading definition for a learner and might encourage him to think that 'the lesson broke out' was acceptable English.

3 *Contrasts and opposites*

As with synonymy, this is a technique which students themselves use, often asking 'What's the opposite of...?' A new item like 'sour' is easily illustrated by contrasting it with 'sweet' which would already be known by intermediate level students. However, it is vital to illustrate the contexts in which this is true. Sugar is sweet and lemons are sour, but the

opposite of sweet wine isn't sour wine, and the opposite of sweet tea isn't sour tea.

4 *Scales*

Once students have learnt two contrasting or related gradable items, this can be a useful way of revising and feeding in new items. If students know 'hot' and 'cold', for example, a blackboard thermometer can be a framework for feeding in 'warm' and 'cool' and later 'freezing' and 'boiling'. Similarly with adverbs of frequency:

I	never hardly ever occasionally sometimes often always	go to the cinema on Sundays.

These can also be given in a jumbled version for students to put in an appropriate order.

5 *Examples of the type*

To illustrate the meaning of superordinates such as 'furniture', 'vegetables', 'meat' and 'transport', it is a common procedure to exemplify them e.g. table, chair, bed and sofa are all *furniture*. Some of these can of course also be dealt with through visual aids.

5.1.3 TRANSLATION

We have spoken to teachers who have admitted to feeling guilty about the use of translation in the classroom; almost as if they were cheating. This is quite ridiculous, for translation can be a very effective way of conveying meaning. It can save valuable time that might otherwise be spent on a tortuous and largely unsuccessful explanation in English, and it can be a very quick way to dispose of low frequency items that may worry the students but do not warrant significant attention. For monolingual groups it is also a valid approach to highlight the danger of false cognates: for example, the French word *sensible* would be translated as 'sensitive' in English, and not 'sensible'.

Some would argue that translation may be legitimate for items possessing a clear mother-tongue equivalent, but should otherwise be avoided. This is possibly overstating the case. Translation may not always convey the exact sense of an item, but then neither do English synonyms or definitions on many occasions. A more real danger with translation is that if students continue to use the mother tongue as a framework on which to attach L2 items, they will not develop the necessary framework

to take account of sense relations between different items in the new language.

If teachers rely too heavily on the use of translation and deliver most explanations in the mother tongue, their students are surely losing some of the essential spirit and atmosphere of being in a language learning classroom. They are also being denied access to listening practice for which there is usually a high degree of interest and motivation. In our experience students rarely listen so intently than when they are learning new words. Used sensibly though, translation is far too valuable not to be exploited.

READER ACTIVITY

Which of the approaches/techniques so far discussed in this chapter would you choose to convey the meaning of the items below? Clearly these items would be taught at different levels and in different lessons.

1 tools
2 a turkey
3 a cigarette lighter
4 to get rid of something
5 boring
6 plump
7 to choose
8 shrewd
9 appalling
10 to call something off
11 mortgage

5.2 Student-centred learning

There has been a trend in recent years to develop more self-access materials, and in the classroom a desire to shift the focus away from the teacher and concentrate on more student-centred activities. This not only makes the student more responsible for his own learning but also permits greater attention to individual needs.

These developments are very relevant to vocabulary teaching. After elementary level, it becomes increasingly difficult for the teacher to select vocabulary that will be equally useful to all his students. This difficulty is compounded in the case of teachers working in an English-speaking country as their students come from different countries and learning backgrounds. Placement tests may group students in terms of lexical volume (this will be very approximate) but there will still remain significant differences in actual content. Thus time spent teaching new vocabulary may be wasted on some of the group (who already know it), even if as teachers we often justify this by calling it 'revision'. On a general English course, compromise is inevitable, and in the previous chapter we discussed the need for the teacher to take responsibility for the selection of items on the students' behalf, not only because of the teacher's

greater knowledge of the language, but also because of his central role in appreciating and integrating the different needs of the class members. However, from the items the teacher provides, the learner can go on to select even more rigorously in accordance with his own knowledge and needs.

Attention to individual needs is not the only reason for encouraging different approaches to vocabulary teaching. We know from experience that unanticipated lexical items inevitably surface during the course of a lesson, and with the constant clamour for definitions and explanations it is very easy for the focus to shift back almost entirely to the teacher as he produces on-the-spot answers to these questions. Carried to extremes, this leaves the teacher very vulnerable to the criticism of dominating the lesson. If we acknowledge that such intervention on the part of the teacher is both necessary and useful, and that it will probably involve making use of traditional approaches to vocabulary teaching, there is a growing case for designing more student-centred activities for intended lexical input.

Recent developments have emphasised the importance of equipping students with the necessary strategies for dealing with skills activities. In the learning of vocabulary this involves:

1 Asking others.
2 Using a dictionary.
3 Making use of context to deduce meaning and guessing from the item itself.

We are now going to examine these strategies in more detail. In each case we will look at examples of activities which attempt to integrate the presentation of new lexis with a useful learning strategy, and allow the learner some autonomy.

5.2.1 ASKING OTHERS

A student can ask the teacher or another student to explain the meaning of an item which he has just encountered. Conversely, there are occasions when a student finds that he wants to use a particular item but does not know how to say it in English. The best strategy is for the student to make the context sufficiently clear so that the listener can then provide the student with the word he is looking for. For example, 'My hands are very cold so I want to buy some...' (The speaker would probably also use mime to clarify.) A native speaker listening to this could provide the word 'gloves'.

In addition, it would be helpful to equip the students with the expressions below, which would help them to elicit the target items:

e.g. It's where you (e.g. wash dishes).
It's when you (e.g. pass another car on the road).

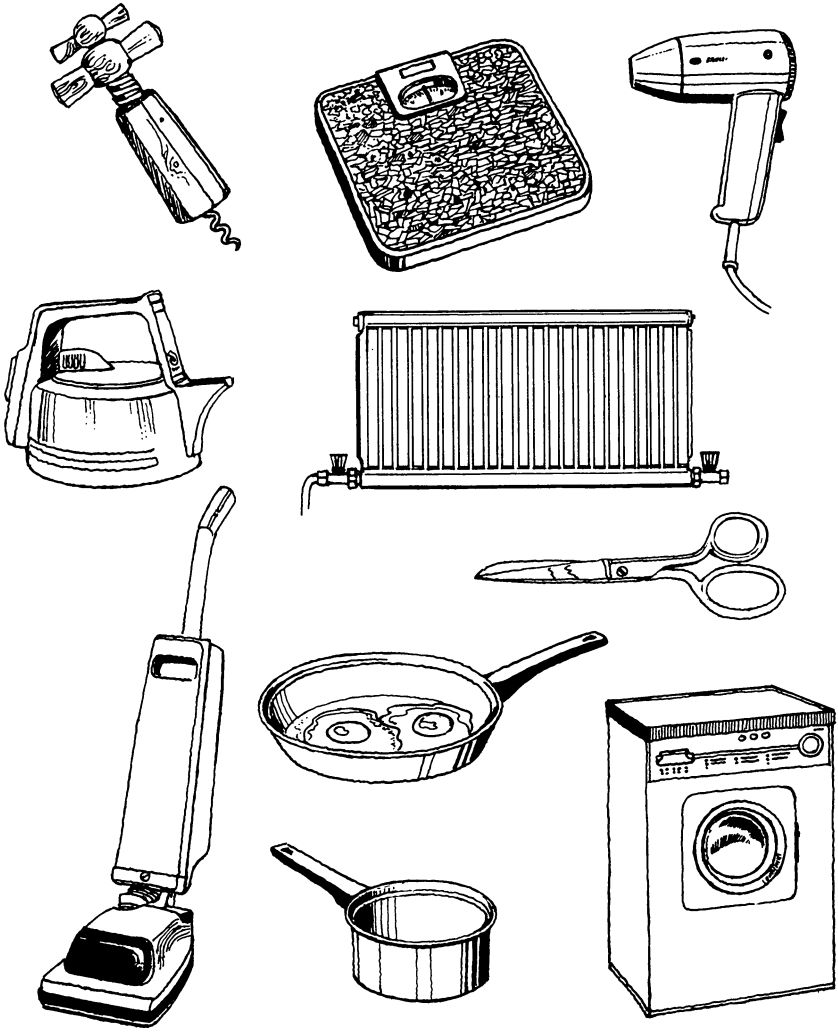
It's the | thing you (e.g. use for cleaning the floor).
stuff

What's this called in English?

What's the opposite of (e.g. beautiful)?

We are including here a classroom activity designed to help students with this type of strategy.

Below you will find a set of pictures of household gadgets. A teacher might proceed by distributing copies of the sheet and asking students to write the names of any items they already know. At this stage, students



will be working individually. It would then be useful to teach the structure, 'What's the thing you use for (+gerund)?' to enable the students to go on to ask each other about any of the items they do not know. The teacher will need to monitor carefully to clarify meaning, check pronunciation and spelling and supply the correct answer where necessary, but otherwise the activity can be entirely student-centred. The amount of intervention by the teacher while monitoring will clearly depend on the teacher himself, the ability of the groups to work well together and the accuracy of the information exchange. The teacher may well decide to have a final feedback session with the class to ensure that the activity has been effective in supplying accurate information. This material lends itself to further practice activities, such as students testing each other, a discussion on the relative usefulness of the gadgets, personalisation, etc. Students can also make use of the 'enabling language' (i.e. 'What's the thing you use for...?') to ask about other items which they do not know in English and which they would like to know.

5.2.2 USING A DICTIONARY

If the student has no teacher or peer to ask, he can still solve a number of problems by using a dictionary. This could be a dictionary specially written for foreign students (recommended dictionaries are on page 101) or a bilingual dictionary. Historically, dictionaries have had a rather varied press according to the current thought on methodology. Bilingual dictionaries were frowned upon, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, when methodology swung away from translation as an approach to language learning. It must also be said that many bilingual dictionaries (and to some extent, EFL dictionaries) tended to be unreliable and at times inaccurate; these criticisms can still be levelled at some of them. Further, in the late 1970s, many teachers were suspicious of the use of dictionaries, feeling that this was synonymous with laziness on the part of the student who was unwilling to use his own resources and guess the meaning for himself.

The criticisms above all have some validity, but it is important at the same time to consider certain advantages in the use of dictionaries. A learner who makes good use of a dictionary will be able to continue learning outside the classroom, and this will give him considerable autonomy about the decisions he makes about his own learning. In the very early stages of learning, even an inadequate bilingual dictionary in a foreign country is better than nothing at all; it can provide important support and be a quick way of finding information.

Another way in which the dictionary is a valuable support is as a backup to contextual guesswork. It is not uncommon for an item in a particular context to appear ambiguous, and in such cases, the

EFL DICTIONARIES – Some useful features to highlight for students

Pronunciation

Teach students to recognise *phonemic script* and illustrate *stress marking* in the dictionary to enable them to become self-sufficient in finding out how to pronounce items. This can be done gradually. The dictionary will also give guidance on stress on two-word compounds and idioms and the pronunciation of derivatives and inflections.

Grammar

It may be necessary to point out to the students the abbreviations used for the following parts of speech.
Verb patterns: whether verbs are transitive or intransitive, followed by infinitive or gerund, 'that' clause, preposition, etc.
Irregularity: plurality of nouns, comparative/superlative of adjectives, past tense and past participle of verbs.
Separability of phrasal verbs.
Countability of nouns.

Writing

Spelling: plurality of nouns, doubling of consonants on verbs and adjectives, US versus GB spelling.
Word division.
The *OALDCE* has an appendix on punctuation.

Meaning

Definitions are generally listed in order of frequency (but proceed with caution).
The items are contextualised to illustrate usage.
Guidance is given on style (e.g. pejorative, slang) and register (e.g. chemical, engineering).
Meaning of idioms, multi-word verbs and proverbs is given.
The illustrations in the dictionaries are sometimes quite useful in the classroom, though they are often idiosyncratic and specialist material.

Recommended dictionaries are on page 101.
Use Your Dictionary (Underhill, 1980), is an extremely useful and well-organised book designed to train learners to use dictionaries effectively.

dictionary is an important resource to clarify the uncertainty. Consider the following example:

He went to a school where the policy was to allow students to make their own decisions about whether or not to attend lessons. They were

actively encouraged to consider this carefully. In his particular case, he *loafed* for three years before he made up his mind to go to the car maintenance class.

In the example, 'loafed' might mean 'to do nothing' or perhaps 'to consider' if looked at from the learner's point of view. The dictionary would allow him to solve the ambiguity. There are of course occasions when contextual guesswork is impossible, and a dictionary may be the only study aid available.

It is also worth pointing out two further considerations which are characteristic of many teaching and learning situations. A lot of students (whether prompted to do so by their teachers or not) are likely to have recourse to dictionaries, and in many cases these are tiny bilingual dictionaries which do little more than give one word equivalents and are often very inaccurate. It seems worth tapping this innate desire for a reference work by showing students how, in effect, a well-designed dictionary can be of greater benefit to them. Secondly, while no one would claim that EFL dictionaries are perfect, (see ch. 1, activity 3) a student is just as likely to find an appropriate answer or confirmation of his guesses in a dictionary as elsewhere; in other words, dictionaries seem to be as accurate as peer learners or even teachers, and in many cases, more so.

In a learning situation, therefore, dictionary training should be an integral part of any syllabus and we include here a list of the particular features of a foreign learner's dictionary which make it such a useful aid.

One specific feature of the dictionary which provides a valuable learning tool is the use of phonemic transcription and stress marking, and students who become proficient at recognising these will be even more self-sufficient. Below are two exercises which have two distinct teaching aims in each case. They both have a lexical aim (i.e. they outline an area of vocabulary to be learnt) and they also aim to develop an awareness in the learner of a particular aspect of vocabulary learning which a good dictionary will highlight.

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Multi-word verbs

With some multi-word verbs, the two parts of the verb can be separated, but with others they cannot.

Separable		*Inseparable*	
e.g. I *turned on* the TV.	√	e.g. I *looked after* them.	
I *turned* the TV *on*.	√	I *looked after* the children.	√
I *turned* it *on*.	√	I *looked* the children *after*.	×
		I *looked* them *after*.	×

This difference is indicated in the dictionary by the way the verb is entered:

e.g. to turn *sth.* on e.g. to look after *sb.*
to turn *sth.* off to get over *sb./sth.*
to try *sth.* on to look into *sth.*
(sth. = something sb. = somebody)

Read the following sentences and try to guess the meaning of the verbs. Write your answer next to the sentence.

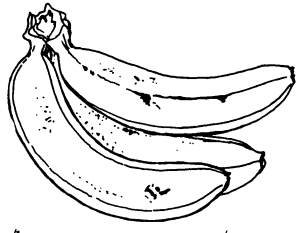
1 It's a difficult exam but I think I'll *get through.*
2 This handwriting is so bad I can't *make out* what it says.
3 You should *look up* a word in the dictionary if you don't know the meaning.
4 You have to write something, so if you don't know the correct answer, you will have to *make up* something.
5 You'd better *note down* that final point or you might forget it.
6 I didn't really understand your lesson on the present perfect, so could we *go over* it again?

Now use your dictionary for two reasons:

a) to check the meaning and see if you were right. Remember, there may be more than one meaning, so look at all the definitions and then at the sentence again before you decide which definition is correct.
b) find out if the verbs are separable or inseparable. Make a note of them as we do at the top of the page (e.g. to turn *sth.* off).

STUDENT ACTIVITY

The following all have one phonemic sound in common. What is it? Write the words in phonemics and in normal English next to the picture (in each case the first *phonemic* symbol has been given to help you).



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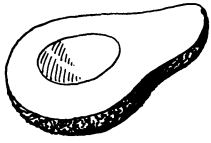

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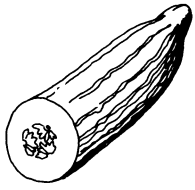

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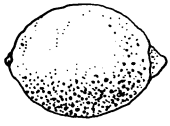

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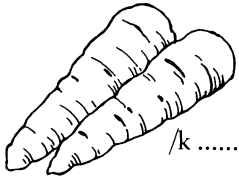

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5.2.3 CONTEXTUAL GUESSWORK

This involves making use of the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning, or in some cases to guess from the word itself. In the case of the latter, speakers of Romance languages and Germanic languages have an obvious advantage as so many words are almost identical, in form if not pronunciation, to words in their own language. There will be occasions when this similarity is very misleading, and in many cases the English meaning will only approximate to the word in the student's mother tongue. Nevertheless it is still a great advantage and one that should be exploited.

Speakers of European and non-European languages alike can also make use of their previous knowledge of English to guess the meaning of new words. Consider the new lexis encountered by an intermediate student in the following examples:

1 I *overslept* this morning.
2 My work *varies* from week to week.

In the first example the new word comprises parts that are already familiar and the student might also have met the same prefix in other words e.g. overtime. This knowledge should enable the student to work out the meaning. In the second example the student's knowledge of the more common noun 'variety' may be sufficient to deduce the meaning of 'varies' and understand the sentence.

Many teachers devise classroom activities to develop the ability to guess from context, one of the most common being the substitution of a nonsense word for a particular item in order to make the students focus on the context to decide exactly what is being substituted:

e.g. Can you turn the *zong* on, it's cold in here?

After the students have guessed that a 'zong' is some form of heater, the exercise could be extended to sensitise students to the importance of the grammar of the item and prefixes/suffixes as a clue to meaning:

e.g. This particular dish cannot be *rezonged.*

Following on from this type of exercise where the target word is clearly isolated, one can approach denser texts in which a wider context needs to be understood before the meaning of a single item surfaces:

e.g. The newspaper has suffered during the past year because advertising money has fallen by ten per cent. However, this fall has been *offset* by increasing the price of the paper from 20 pence to 22 pence.
'Offset' here means: (a) made worse, (b) made better, (c) balanced.

This example illustrates the importance of understanding discourse markers, in this case 'however', to deduce meaning. It should also be possible to guess the meaning even if we distract the students by surrounding the target item with more unknown vocabulary:

e.g. The newspaper has suffered a number of setbacks during the past

year, the most important being the ten per cent fall in advertising revenue. However, the decline has been offset by the pricing policy which raised the profit margin for each newspaper sold.

The ability to guess from context is clearly a valuable skill and one that should play a part in textual exploitation in class. It should be remembered, though, that there are students for whom contextual guesswork is an obvious strategy and one that does not require a lot of time spent on it. Other students may have considerable difficulty with this type of task and would need to have the skill developed more gradually. This leaves the teacher with the problem once again of different skills and needs, and reinforces the need for student-centred activities allowing some flexibility in the nature of the task.

It is also important that contextual guesswork is not introduced into the lesson at a time when other skills are being developed. Classroom cassette recorders permit students to rewind and focus on a particular word or phrase, but this is not a facility that is available in real situations where time spent deciding the meaning of a single item probably results in the listener missing the next three sentences. In these situations attention to detail can reinforce certain students' obsession with understanding every word and have a detrimental effect on global understanding. The same is true of written texts. Lengthy deliberations on a single item will interfere with the development of the skill of 'gist' reading.

Finally it must be emphasised that students should not be asked to guess the meaning from context when the context is wholly inadequate to the task. With hindsight it is all too easy to see how the context illuminates the meaning of the target item; from a position of ignorance it is not always that simple. This is particularly true if the target item is surrounded by additional items which may be unknown or only partially known to the students.

The following activity begins with an exercise to test general understanding of the passage, and then requires the students to make use of the map and text to guide them towards an understanding of the target language. The consolidation exercises permit quite a lot of freedom, and certain steps can be omitted if the students are finding it easy.

STUDENT ACTIVITY

An accident

a) Read the article 'Smash girl in a tizzy', then look at the two maps at the bottom of the page and choose the map which corresponds to the article.

b) Now look at your map again and mark the following:
   a roundabout
   a pedestrian crossing
   a junction

Smash girl in a tizzy

MOTORIST Lesley Aston doesn't remember much about her trip home from work.

But villagers at Studley, Warwicks, will never forget it.

First, her Austin 1300 rammed the back of another car waiting at a junction.

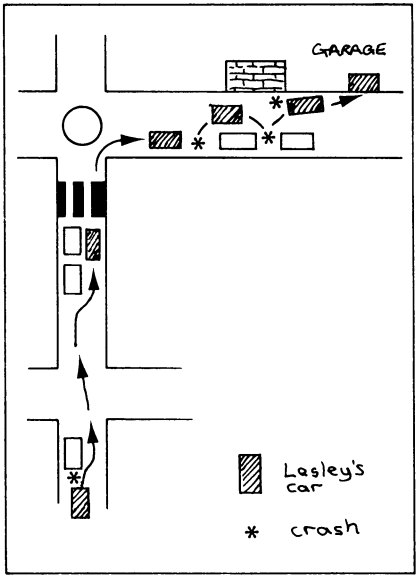
She drove off without stopping, overtook cars waiting at a pedestrian crossing and swung into a roundabout on the wrong side.

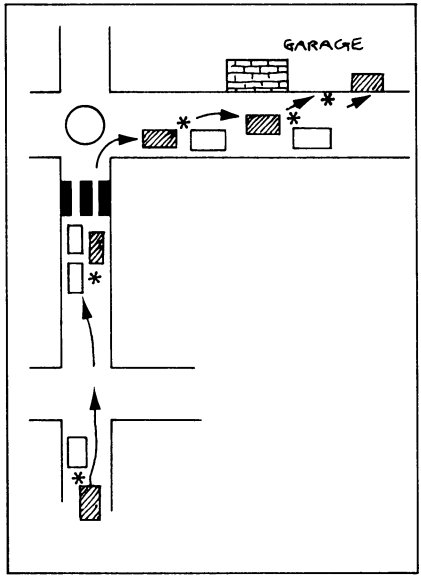
Then 20-year-old Lesley crashed head-on into a second car, swerved into a third and careered into a brick wall before coming to rest on a garage forecourt.

She later told police that she had only vague memories of what had happened, magistrates were told yesterday at Alcester, Warwicks.

Lesley, of Hewell Road, Redditch, Worcs., was fined £150 for reckless driving and failing to stop after an accident or report it.

(from the *Daily Mirror*)





c) Read the following account of an accident and draw what happened.

Car A tried to overtake car B approaching a road junction. Car C which was coming in the opposite direction swerved to avoid car A and crashed into a tree near the corner of the junction.

d) Read the article again and try to guess the meaning of the following:

rammed (para 3)
vague (para 6)
reckless (para 7)

Write an account of an accident yourself. Read it out to your partner while he or she draws it.