

Zooming in and Zooming out

by Nick Bilbrough

A while back I saw a pretty impressive video on Youtube and since then the images from it keep popping up in my head. It begins with a camera shot from space showing earth as a distant object and then gradually moves closer and closer, zooming in on the world, the continent of Europe, the UK, London and then, eventually streets, houses and finally people become visible. Once it's zoomed in as far as it can go, it slowly zooms back out again until the world is once more just a distant blob.

Being able to look at our world from afar is an entirely modern phenomenon of course and very few people have experienced it for real. For those who have, it has often affected them deeply. Here's what astrophysicist, John-David Bartoe, wrote on leaving the earth in the Space shuttle in 1985.

"As I looked down, I saw a large river meandering slowly along for miles, passing from one country to another without stopping. I also saw huge forests, extending along several borders. And I watched the extent of one ocean touch the shores of separate continents. Two words leaped to mind as I looked down on all this: commonality and interdependence. We are one world."

(Accessed from <http://www.spacequotations.com/index.html>)

If we truly view the world as a single entity, it's almost inconceivable that we could also view the people who live there with feelings of prejudice and hatred, and that we could fail to acknowledge the injustices that are inflicted by those with power on those who are powerless. But seeing things from the outside is not enough of course if we really want to bring about change; we also need to zoom in and look at what's actually going on. We need to get our hands dirty and we need to look people in the eye!



The analogy of the camera zooming in and zooming out can be connected to how we approach global issues, but it can also usefully be related to a far less pressing, but not unrelated area: the processes involved in the learning of a foreign language. We need moments where we see the language as a whole, without worrying too much about language form. But we also need to stop sometimes and examine the pieces which make up the whole. We need to both zoom in, and to zoom out on language.

If our lens is always thinking globally and looking at the bigger picture, the intricate detail of how the language works; the new vocabulary, the verb endings, the article system, the features of pronunciation, and the spellings, may pass us by. Similarly if we're always looking in close up mode, we'll fail to see the wood for the trees, and we'll miss out on the role of language as a tool for communication; as a medium for understanding the people we connect to.

Some examples of zooming in and zooming out language learning activities can be seen in the table below.

Skill	Zooming in....	Zooming out.....
Listening	eavesdropping on a conversation in the target language on a bus, and trying to process what was said into individual words	Listening to the news on the radio and trying to understand what the stories are.
Reading	Identifying new words in a newspaper article, and looking them up in a dictionary.	Reading a short story for pleasure and getting lost in the 'secondary world' created by the author.
Speaking	Singing the words of a song which have been learnt off by heart.	Using the target language to introduce yourself, and find out about others at a party.
Writing	Writing down some new vocabulary to create some flash cards for self study.	Writing a quick email to a friend.

The form that an activity will take is, of course, more to do with the learner's attitude towards it, rather than the activity itself. For instance, I could write an email in a language that I'm learning in quite a zoomed in way where I'm checking every word I write for spelling, appropriacy, and grammatical accuracy, or in a more zoomed out style, where I'm less concerned with form and more interested in just making myself understood.

But which of these processes are most needed by language learners in classrooms around the world? It's impossible to say for sure, but my hunch is that for young learners in most classrooms in the places I have worked, it's probably the zooming out stages that they don't get enough of. They may do plenty of grammar and vocabulary exercises but how much do they watch films or read for

pleasure in the language they are learning? Consequently they may be able to pass their exams but still lack the ability to understand fluent speech or communicate effectively.

I try to keep these ideas in mind when conducting the Hands up Project's online sessions with Syrian refugee children in Jordan and children in refugee camps in Gaza (using a simple video-conferencing tool which is conveniently called **Zoom!**). We tend to do more zooming out because our feeling is that they have plenty of zooming in activities in their regular English classes. But particularly with older kids, since they may be starting to prepare for the very accuracy focussed Tawjihi exam, we also think it's important that we do things which help them focus on detail sometimes.

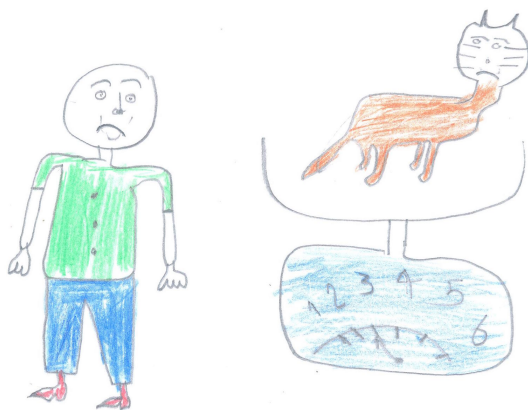
Storytelling is perhaps the ultimate zooming out activity; the language is fully contextualized and the focus is entirely on communication and establishing relationships. For these reasons it still forms the backbone of what the Hands up Project is about. Here's an example with quite a large group in a library in Gaza city. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06MMbBgqRTQ>)

I'm using English extensively and naturally when I tell the story but there's no pressure for anyone to use the words that I use or even to understand them, since the teacher in the room, at least in the beginning, is translating what I'm saying into Arabic.

But we can also make a story easier to follow by doing certain zoomed in activities beforehand. Before I told the class the story mentioned above, I'd first asked them to guess what was in my fridge. I'd written down the words that they came up with and then we opened the fridge to check how many of their predictions were true. Then some of them come up to the front and talked about what might be in their own fridges at home.

Storytelling can also be a springboard for other zoomed in activities. With this class in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bieq0TdJzYE>) the children have listened to me telling a story and are now taking it in turns to come up to the webcam and mime some of the events. I'm trying to guess what they are doing.

Another neat way to follow up storytelling is for the children to draw a picture of any element from the story which interested them. They then take it in turns to come up and talk about their images with me. Here's one such image, drawn by Tawfeeq, in Jabalia refugee camp, Gaza, of an event from the traditional Palestinian story, Juha and the meat.



You can see the video of this activity in practice here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShYktwSfkiY>

I think that trying to keep an appropriate balance between zooming in and zooming out is something that is always in the back of my mind as a teacher, whether I'm working face to face or online. It's not easy to get it right, and I'm not sure that I ever really do! How much of each process is needed will depend of course on the needs and interests of each group that we work with, and on our own particular teaching style.

So far I've been looking at some examples of how zooming in and zooming out can relate to the activities a teacher does with a group of students, but the analogy can also apply to the way students interact with each other of course. In this online meeting between children in Russia and Gaza, the children perform plays and chants to each other, find out about food in their respective countries and generally chat. Even though there are thousands of miles between them, there are opportunities for genuine communication as well as a focus on form, just as there would be in a face-to-face meeting. A highlight for me is when someone asks, 'What do you hope for the children in Gaza'. The responses from the children in Russia show sensitivity, empathy and above all an awareness of global issues, sadly lacking in many of the decision makers in the world.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iophkubvxbM>

Author biodata



Nick Bilbrough has taught and trained teachers in many diverse contexts in Africa, the Middle East, South America and Europe. He is particularly interested in classroom interaction, and in materials light approaches to teaching such as storytelling, drama and dogme ELT. He is the author of two resource books in the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series; Dialogue Activities (2007) and Memory Activities for Language Learning (2011) and more recently Stories Alive (2016), published by the British Council. He is now devoting all his energy to <https://handsupproject.org/> , telling stories and teaching language online for young learners in refugee camps.