WAITING FOR GODOT IN THE EFL CLASSROOM*

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Abstract

This article is the result of observations carried out in a small number of EFL classrooms in Japan. It reports that there is a lot of what might be called 'time-passing' going on, and little meaningful communication. In this respect it tends to confirm the reports of other researchers in the area. The article shows how a teacher can become a researcher and thus gain valuable insights into processes of teaching and learning. It also makes a strong plea for teachers and others actually to observe what is going on in classrooms, as a first step towards a more professional approach to the teaching of EFL/ESL.

In a purposeless world that has lost its ultimate objectives, dialogue, like all action, becomes a mere game to pass the time. (Esslin 1968:86)

Many critics have noted that the structure of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is one of bursts of pseudo-activity, punctuated by awkward silences where the characters search for something else to pass the time. The following exchange

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is typical:[2]

Estragon: That wasn't such a bad little canter.
Vladimir: Yes, but now we'll have to find something else.

As I taught and watched others teach, and read the literature on classroom research, I became aware that lessons also often seemed to pass from meaningless activity to silence, as teachers and students worked at passing the time. In this article I will analyse some examples of classroom inter- action from my data, and show how they resemble the world of Vladimir and Estragon.

Method

I observed and audio-recorded three classes (with the consent of the teachers concerned). The classes were selected purely on the grounds of convenience: they happened to be taking place in the institution where I was working at times when I was free. I normally sat at the back of the room, out of sight of the students, but visible to the teacher. The microphone and recorder were kept as far out of sight as possible. Air-conditioning noise and reflective walls caused problems on some tapes, but very little was indecipherable. The microphone was aimed at the teacher during periods of teacher talking time (TTT), but if students were working in groups or pairs I focused on the most accessible of these. Even when pointed at the teacher, however, the microphone picked up most of what was said by the students also, as the rooms were small and class numbers low. Before each lesson I spoke to the teacher and made a note of what was planned. I also noted numbers, approximate ages and levels of the students, as well as their sex, occupations, and any other relevant information, such as textbook or other materials in use. In my observation notes I recorded such features as seating arrangements, use of the blackboard or

other visual material, break times, any clearly defined boundaries (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982) within the lesson, and any non-verbal behaviour which seemed important. Later I transcribed the tapes and analysed extracts, mainly using the system first developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and set out more recently in Sinclair and Brazil (1982). My analysis uses mainly their terms, as well as some taken from Fanselow's FOCUS (1977). I refer the reader to the cited works for a fuller explanation of the terms used.

Data

The data comprise six hours of audio-recordings and the accompanying observation notes. This represents three lessons taught by three teachers, all native speakers of English, who were classified by their employer as 'experienced'. They all had EFL teaching experience in several countries and situations. One had the RSA Diploma in TEFL and was a teacher supervisor, one had a postgraduate certificate in education and a short-course TEFL qualification, while the third had the ITTI Cert. TEFL. In addition they had all attended compulsory in-service training during their employment with the company.[3] The students were all Japanese, with two classes of male businessmen in their late twenties and early thirties, and one class of seven females and one male, mostly college students in their late teens to early twenties. They were all classified as 'intermediate', although there was quite a range of ability throughout the group. The businessmen were preparing for an examination which would determine their prospects of an overseas posting, while the others were following a 'General English' course, mostly for social reasons, as far as I could ascertain. All three classes were using the same textbook, *Exchanges* (Prowse *et al.*, 1980). The authors of this book state their belief that 'language use should be chosen *first*, and the linguistic content, the forms, should be finalised at the *second stage*'

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(1980):1; emphasis in original). I refer the reader to the intro-
duction to the Teacher's Book for a fuller description of
the aims of this book. In my opinion, however, it bears a
very close resemblance to more 'traditional', structurally
based coursebooks, despite its claims to a more 'functional'
approach. I believe this has a bearing on the data which
will become evident in the discussion which follows.

Discussion and analysis

The following is a discussion based on analysis of extracts
from the data. Sinclair & Coulthard's (1975) data are from
primary-school mother-tongue content (not language) classes,
so I had predicted that the basic exchange structure they
found (Teacher Initiation—Pupil Response—Teacher Follow-
up) would not be so prevalent in the adult EFL classes I
observed. However, in all three classes this was the main
structure occurring in Teacher—Student (T—S) interactions.
For Teacher C this could perhaps be explained by the fact
that he had worked as a secondary school teacher before
moving into EFL. Teachers A and B, however, had only
EFL experience, yet both exhibit the structure to a similar
extent in their classes. Perhaps this is an example of something
learnt (or acquired) during our own school days which auto-
matically takes over when we adopt the role of teacher.
This is an area where further research is necessary, as it may
have an important bearing on teacher training. Here are
some examples, drawn from all three lessons:[4]

TB: ahm when did this happen + when did this happen + last year
    + tomorrow
S: a short time ago
TB: yes. a short time ago   (1)

TC: what other kinds of hotels are there
S: business
TC: business yes   (2)

TC: what can she speak

S: Italian

TC: she can speak Italian. yes   (3)

TA: ok. what's the preposition

S: in January

TA: ok. in January   (4)

Sinclair and Coulthard (among others) have suggested that one reason for the prevalence of this sequence is the unequal power distribution in the classroom. Only the teacher has the power to initiate discourse and to judge the correctness of the other participants' contributions. This hardly seems compatible with a 'communicative' EFL teaching methodology. (Long and Sato (1983) have shown that differences in question patters used by teachers in and out of the classroom would also seem to be at odds with a 'communicative' approach.)

Another feature of Sinclair and Coulthard's data which, contrary to expectation, I also found prevalent in mine is the relatively large amount of TTT devoted to setting-up activities ('structuring' in FOCUS). In all three classes the teacher remains firmly in control of the discourse for most of the time, either directly or indirectly. He uses this virtual monopoly of talk to take elaborate structuring turns, such as the following, from Teacher C's class:

TC: I want you to listen for two things + ahm + what kind of place + what kind of place does each person + want to go to + + + + and. when they get there + what do they want to do + ok so. what kind of place. what + do. they want to do + + so we've got the mother + father + daughter + + and let's listen carefully + three people talking but they also. talk about the two boys + the two boys are not speaking + but we hear + what they want to do + ok + + two boys. the twins ⌐ + the twins + + + + right. first time + just

S: two boys ⌐

TC: + listen all right. don't write any notes + first time just listen + you've got these things + we're listening out for. don't write anything first time + only listen + + (plays tape)   (5)

Although it does not show up well in the transcript (notice the pauses, however), the speed of this utterance was much slower than normal speech and also contained many of the features which have been characterized as 'foreigner talk', such as unnatural stress, aspiration of final stops and much repetition (cf. Long and Sato 1983). This is a class of adult businessmen, preparing for a test of their communicative ability and possible posting abroad. This type of speech would not seem to be of much help in achieving this aim.

The next extract, from Teacher B's class of college students, shows similar characteristics:

TB: uh huh. ok right + ahm + right look back at the dialogue that we were doing on Tuesday +page thirty three ok + + I want you to write + two questions about the dialogue + any two questions. who what + when. why. where any two questions. do does + + + + write two questions about the dialogue + any two questions   (6)

Again notice the number of pauses and the frequent repetition. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, the students' non-verbal behaviour during and after this utterance indicated that they did not clearly understand what they were being asked to do. Later the teacher had to go round students individually to check they were at the correct page and to reiterate the 'two questions' instruction. Note that he never gives any clue to why they should write two questions, and only two. Thus, the students are confused. Chaudron (1983) gives copious examples of students being confused by well-meaning teacher. He makes the point that:

The difficulty with the employment of specific procedural questions or of obliquely logical questions is that, while they may conform to the teacher's notion of a simplified structuring of knowledge, they may not be the simplest logical steps for a learner of ESL. They presuppose a

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sophistication in the learner's ability to acquire knowledge that may not match his or her classroom skills in ESL (Chaudron1983:135).

Another extract from Teacher B's class, later in the lesson:

1 TB: right + ahm. find a sentence with criticize in. in the dialogue + find a sentence with criticize + sorry criticized
2 S1: (non-verbal response: bid)
3 TB: Midori + criticized
4 S1: (non-verbal response: points)
5 TB: ok + Chino
6 S2: (non-verbal response: points)
7 TB: yes. sentence
8 S2: you've been criticized a lot recently for your own behaviour
9 TB: yes + Zed you've been criticized a lot recently for your own behaviour. ahm. ok. second one + exaggerated + ah + Ichiro
10 S3: that's all been exaggerated
11 TB: good. yes that's all been exaggerated + what did that do
12 S4: (non-verbal response: bid)
13 TB: Akiko
14 S4: he had a mid-air party
15 TB: uhm. what did that do + in the sentence that's all been criticized + + + + Ichiro
16 S3: (inaudible)
17 TB: correct + louder
18 S3: nothing
19 TB: correct. yes. nothing⌐ ok nothing. here's some more sentences
20   (laughter)⌐
21 Ss: (non-verbal response: comply)   (7)

At (1) the teacher marks the boundary quite lightly but still clearly, and then 'plane changes' (moves from 'saying something' to 'talking about saying something': Sinclair and Brazil 1982:32) to issue a directive. Notice again that he says it twice. Even here he makes a slight mistake which, though corrected, sets the tone for what is to follow. The

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students eventually find what is required and are rewarded by a teacher repetition (9). He then sets a second task. Note the nature of these tasks: merely to find two (random?) words from among the many present. At (11) the 'real' purpose behind these strange directives emerges. 'what did that do' represents a plane change of a rather bizarre nature. The students' grasp of his meaning and of the cohesive devices of English is limited, as is well demonstrated by the reply at (14). They think the referent is Zed, the pop star being interviewed in this lesson (*Exchanges* A, Unit 3, Lesson 13), perhaps with some justification. Here, as in Chaudron's examples, the teacher's 'logical steps' seem to be at variance with the students'. His solution is to repeat the question, louder and more slowly (foreigner talk again). When he gets his answer at (18), he enthusiastically 'proclaims' it (falling tone: see Sinclair and Brazil 1982 for a full description of tones), and then makes another logical leap to 'some more sentences like that'. Like what? All of this has been a prelude to a particularly stultifying and 'use'-less (in Widdowson's sense) drill (*Exchanges* A, Unit 3, Language Study 3.5, p.40). A drill on what? Readers must have guessed by now, unless, like these students, they have had problems with the 'logical steps'. As a further exercise in 'beguiling the hours', the students are forced to go through this exercise not once but twice, the teacher not being satisfied with their level of enthusiasm the first time. They do not even do it as a purely aural/oral activity, there eyes remaining firmly anchored to the textbook, their sole source of language. Extracts such as (7) hardly seem congruent with communicative language teaching, which is what this school, its teachers, and the textbook all lay claim to. Nor does the following, from Teacher A's class of businessmen:

1 TA: fine. ok. right. mister Kato. I will interview you ok. ok so + fine.
    so + excuse me now. could you. could you please tell me ahm
    what your present job is

2 S1: I am a buyer and salesman
3 TA: ah ha. I see. and. ah. please can you give me your. ahm. full
      name
4 S1: my name is Kazuhiro Kato
5 TA: Kazuhiro Kato + h. how do you spell Kazuhiro please
6 S1: ahm K.A.Z.U.H.I.R.O.
7 TA: uh huh I see. when were you born
8 S1: I was born in six. in January. ah. six of January in 195. 54
9 TA: ok. what's the preposition. I was born +
10 S1: I was born in January
11 TA: I was born in January. and what's the day
12 S1: I was born in January sixth
13 TA: ok look. wrong preposition
14 S1: six
15 TA: on
16 S1: on + on. I was born on six + January. six of January
17 TA: ok on
18 S1: on + I was in the six
19 TA: ok on. what's this next word
20 S1: erm. the
21 TA: good
22 S1: on
23 TA: on
24 S1: the the
25 S2: the in
26 TA: [siks θ]
27 S1: [sik θ]
28 S3: aah
29 S1: on the. on the sixth
30 TA: next word
31 S3: of
32 TA: uh huh
33 S1: I was born on the sixth of January in 1954
34 TA: good. ok. say it again + whe. so when were you born
35 S1: I was born in the sixth ⌐ of January
36 Ss: on on ⌐

37 S1: I was. I was born on the sixth + of January + 1954
38 TA: good   (8)

Here the teacher is 'role-playing', pretending to 'interview' a student in order to fill in a form. At first sight a reasonable procedure. He is demonstrating what he wants the class to do later in pairs. Notice how easily the pretence is dropped, and note the strange discourse that develops. Thus, at (1) the teacher announces his intention to interview Mr Kato, addressing him by name (again note the uncontracted form as a further example of foreigner talk). In mid-turn the teacher then dons the mask of 'interviewer', but because he has already used the student's name, he unnaturally asks for his present job first, postponing until second the more normal opening question about name. Of course the teacher already knows all the information he is about to ask for anyway, making this excercise of dubious communicative value.

On several other counts the discourse is also aberrant. Examples of foreigner talk were noted above. Also indicative of the classroom is the use of 'full-sentence' replies by the student. The use of 'excuse me' and other polite forms in the opening question (1) is also at odds with the initial directive. Even odder is the sequence after (8), where the teacher suddenly drops the 'interviewer's' mask and steps in to 'treat' an error. (Notice that had the student given a normal native-speaker reply, there would have been no error to treat.) The teacher signals the transition from interview to classroom by his tone choice on 'ok', the familiar 'yes, but' pattern which Sinclair and Brazil (1982:122-9) say is used to signal that the response is not actually wrong but is none the less unacceptable to the teacher. (They designate this as the dominant version of referring tone.) The 'treatment' sequence is initiated by an evaluation and plane change, where the teacher uses metalanguage to point out the error and then prompts another attempt. The student produces an acceptable

utterance at (10) which is repeated and accepted (11), but at (12) the student again gets it wrong. The teacher again gives the 'yes, but' evaluation and again uses metalanguage to point out the error. Unfortunately the metalanguage is beyond this student's grasp, so the teacher has to spell it out. In (16) the student tries to cope with increasing problems, in the process becoming even less fluent. Also, the error 'six' for 'sixth' persists, since by ignoring the student's attempt to check it at (14) the teacher has implicitly given it his approval. The teacher finds it necessary to repeat the preposition a further three times. The student's response (18) is meaningless, but the teacher merely repeats 'on' and moves on to the 'six' problem. Having 'treated' that one, he proceeds to another preposition and finally elicits a full-sentence response which is deemed acceptable. Presumably to 're-inforce' this (in the Behaviourist sense), he makes the student repeat it, but first switches back to the role of 'interviewer'. I know I was confused. The student too seems to be having problems, as he gets it wrong again, only to be corrected by the others. The 'correct' answer finally comes at (37) and is suitably rewarded. What would these students do if faced with a 'real' question, one which required them to answer from their own experience or knowledge? The data contain only one example of such a question during a lesson, and an analysis of the students' reaction to it is enlightening. This extract is from Teacher B's class:

1 TB: ok + fine + good + thank you Reiko + ahm + (clears throat), was Japan in the First World War
2 Ss: Ø
3 TB: I don't know + can somebody tell me
4 Ss: Ø (some discussion in Japanese)
5 TB: can you decide in English
6 Ss: Ø (laughter, more whispered Japanese)
7 S1: I. I don't think so
8 TB: no + ok + is that true. do you know David
9 Ss: (laughter)

10 O: there was the erm Rush. Russo-Japanese War just before + the
First World War

11 TB: uh huh ok + right + + ahm + right. look back at the dialogue
that we were doing on Tuesday + page 33 +   **(9)**

At (1) the teacher marks the end of one activity and the
start ·of another by using a framing move to indicate the
boundary (this teacher favours rather elaborate boundary
markers). Tone and key choice further emphasize the transi-
tion. (High key and 'proclaiming'–that is, falling-tone–
Sinclair and Brazil 1982:148-51.) His 'solicit' (opening move
of the sequence, requiring a 'response'–Fanselow 1977)
refers somewhat obscurely back to the previous activity
(see Extract 10 below). He employs a positive polar inter-
rogative elicitation which under the normal rules of class-
rooom discourse requires a *yes/no* answer, based on guessing
which one the teacher wants (Sinclair and Brazil 1982:60-63).
The students' silence seems to indicate that they interpret
it in this way but cannot answer as they have no idea what
it refers to. It took me some time to work out the connection,
familiar though I am with 'logical' steps. The teacher has
clearly marked a boundary and the students are waiting
for him to proceed, when he suddenly jumps back to the
previous activity (which was particularly meaningless, as
discussed below) and asks a question referring to the real
world. The teacher's avowal that he really does not know
produces a predictable response, especially since he follows
it up with a nominating move (directing a named student to re-
spond). In an attempt to resolve their problem, the students
switch to Japanese. The teacher curtails this 'exploratory talk'
(Barnes 1975) with a positive polar interrogative functioning
as a directive, again a typical classroom move. Talk, in this
classroom, is firmly under the control of the teacher. When
a spokeswoman finally gives the group's answer, the teacher
evaluates it as unsatisfactory, again applying classroom rules
to what is meant to be 'real world' discourse. He tries again

with me, the observer (8), and in fact evaluates my attempt negatively before suddenly switching to a 'safer' activity (i.e. back to the textbook), leaving the students with blank faces and me wondering what was going on.

Extract **10** is another example of an activity which may at first sight seem reasonable:

1 TB: right. ahm have a look at the homework again + page 42 + ok. right ahm do it in pairs + you two. you two. and you three. ok so ah. ask the question. you answer + I think that there are two main reasons + I think that there are three main reasons + firstly. secondly + ok. ahm + Reiko + ok number one. you ask Chino. number two Chino you ask Midori ah Midori number three you ask Reiko. ok go

2 S1: wh. why. why are house prices going up

3 S2: I think that there are ah two main reasons + first of all ah first of all because. erm because. erm because ah. ah there are ah first of all because more and more people want homes of their own er sec. secondly because the rate of in. inf. inflation is high

4 S1: why. why did Hitler lose the Second World War

5 S2: I think there are two main reasons + + first of all because. ah he invaded the ah Soviet Union ah and secondly [biːkɒs] the Americans entered the war

6 TB: ok [biˈkʌz]

7 S2: [biːˈkɒs]

8 TB: [biˈkʌz]

9 S2: [bik.biˈkɒs.biˈkɒs]

10 TB: ok

11 S1: why. why. why. ah people smoke cigarette + why do people smoke cigarettes

12 S2: I think that there are three main reasons + first of all + [biˈkɒs.biˈkɒs] they like the taste of tobacco + secondly because smoking is a habit and ahm thirdly because it helps them to. relax

13 Ss: (long pause: they look at each other questioningly)

14 S2: why are house prices going up

15 S1: I think th. there are two main reasons   **(10)**

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Again, this sequence begins with a long series of Structuring utterances (Fanselow 1977) by the teacher, after he has marked the boundary of the activity (1). That the teacher is very firmly in control can be seen from the explicit nature of the directives, which leave the students little leeway (once again limiting possibilities for exploratory talk). The first student utterance could, outside the classroom, be the opening of a conversation or an interview. It seems to be a genuine question and there is potential for real communication. S2 prepares the ground for an extended reply, a gambit typical of a radio or television interview. He cites 'two main reasons', which he then proceeds to give (3), albeit somewhat hesitantly. The register employed is rather formal perhaps, considering the backgrounds and ages of these students. Normally we would expect some sort of 'follow-up' move. In this exchange, however, there is another initiation on a completely different topic. A possible discussion of history (a rather sensitive issue in Japan) is precluded when the teacher intervenes to 'treat' an error. (This was not the most serious pronunciation error made. I have transcribed only this one, however, as it was the only one singled out for 'treatment'.) Treatment dispensed, the teacher withdraws and the questioning continues with an initiation on smoking (11). Given attitudes to smoking in Japan, this could have led to an interesting discussion. But not in this EFL classroom. Once more we have a claim-staking responding move, followed by three trite reasons. Notice too that S2 has been made aware of some problem with 'because', but does not seem to know what it is.

The long pause which follows is pure Beckett. What the students come up with to beguile the hours is hardly very daring. Off they go again, with S2 asking the questions and S1 giving the same old answers. And they continue in the same manner until mid-way through the third recital, when the teacher calls a halt. At no time does the real world enter the picture. The students are actually reading this exchange

from their textbooks and have done it in written form for homework. They are thus merely parroting someone else's meaningless words. The elaborate claim-staking is unnecessary, since there are only two of them and they can both see how many reasons there are. This kind of exchange, consisting merely of the rehearsal of pre-fed words, is disturbingly frequent in the data. Some might seek to justify it by classifying it as the 'controlled practice' stage of a communicative lesson, where the forms are practised before moving on to a 'less-controlled' or 'free' stage. In my data, however, there is no such stage. The sessons remain frozen in a highly controlled form.

Conclusion

It may be argued that the data from this study are insufficient, and that they are therefore unrepresentative. We may laugh (or cry) at these extracts and say, 'Yes, but in my lessons . . . '. I would ask the reader to consider the following:

> *Vladimir:* All I know is that the hours are long, under such conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which — how shall I say — which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit.

I have looked at evidence from just three classrooms and come to the same conclusions as Long and Sato (1983):

> From the evidence here . . . ESL teachers continue to emphasize form over meaning, accuracy over communication . . . Indeed, on this evidence, NS–NNS (native speaker–non-native speaker) conversation during second language instruction is a greatly distorted version of its equivalent in the real world. (Long and Sato 1983:283)

Perhaps more teachers should actually examine what is going

on 'inside the "black box" ' (Long 1980), and ask themselves if their activities in it are indeed merely beguiling the hours. There is a need for teachers and teacher trainers alike to question the basis of habits which may have seemed reasonable at first sight. Otherwise we shall never attain a truly professional status for EFL/ESL teaching, and instead condemn our students to passing the time in meaningless· discourse. I leave the final word to Vladimir:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (Pause, Vehemently.) Let us do something, while we have the chance!

Notes

[1]This is a much-revised version of a paper given at the Japan Association of Language Teachers Seminar on *Discourse Analysis in Second Language Instruction*, Kyoto, Japan, 11-12 February 1984. I wish to thank Michael Long for his comments on the original paper and for his detailed criticisms of a later draft, many of which have been incorporated in this version, much to its improvement. I would also like to thank Patrick Buckheister for reading an earlier draft and making many helpful comments. Where 1 have chosen to ignore their advice, I am sure the work has suffered. I also owe a large debt to my wife, Aine Sharkey, whose close questioning at every stage of the work has forced me to clarify my thinking and expression in numerous instances. The errors, of course, remain solely my responsibility.

[2]All quotations form the play are from the Faber paperback edition.

[3]I wish to make it clear that this paper is in no way an attack either on the teachers concerned or on the institution for which they worked. The company concerned has a reputation for good teaching, based on many years of international experience. The teachers are, to the best of my knowledge and belief, sincere and dedicated professional teachers who devote much time and effort to their work.

[4]Transciption conventions: in an attempt to represent natural speech as closely as possible, I have dispensed with conventional punctuation in these transcriptions (except for the use of capitals for proper names to avoid confusion). The symbols used are as follows:

. + + + + + + indicate pauses of increasing length
(   ) enclose comments on the exchanges, or descriptions of non-verbal activity
[   ] enclose phonemic transcriptions
ah ahm erm uh uh huh represent various hesitation phenomena
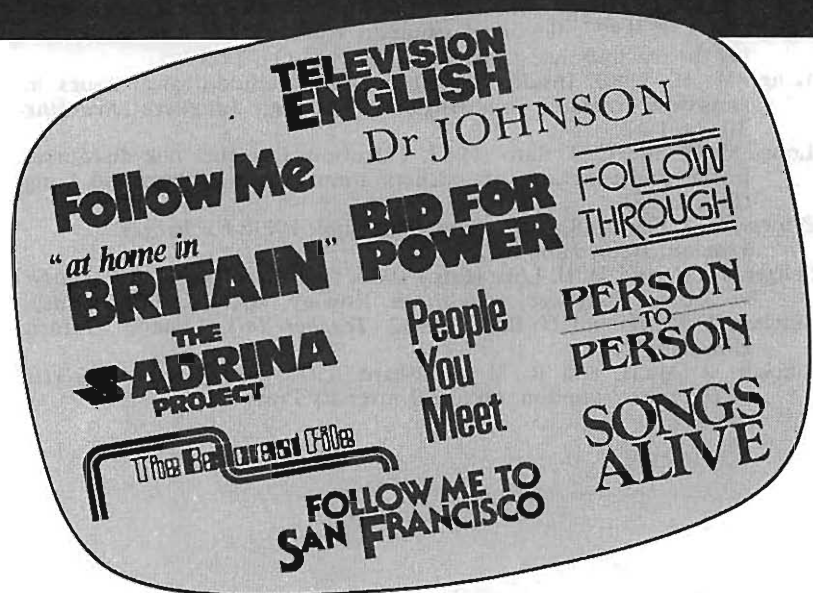
⌐   indicates simultaneous utterances
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