



Breaking Rules: Generating and exploring alternatives in language teaching

Dr. John F. Fanselow

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“In a groundbreaking work, *Breaking Rules* (1987), John F. Fanselow suggested that one way of developing is to break our own rules and see what happens. If we normally teach one way, in other words, we should try teaching in the opposite way and see what effect it has. If we normally move around the class all the time, perhaps we should see what happens if we spend the whole lesson sitting in the same place. The results may be surprising but will never be less than interesting. . . . We need to have confidence and enthusiasm for investigation and discovery.” (Jeremy Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, 4th Edition, 2007, Longman) “As John Fanselow observes in his undeservedly little-known book, *Breaking Rules*, we tend to operate within a rather narrow range most of the time. The rules of the classroom game are remarkably stable. (9) In this paper, I shall argue that our teaching can benefit from a greater measure of diversity. . . . Yet, despite this rich array of human diversity (reflected by recent research in multiple intelligences, learning styles, right-left brain dominance, etc.) Fanselow’s observation remains all too often true: we do operate within a rather range, and the rules (overt or covert) are remarkably stable. . . . For teachers, diversity has the potential to . . . enable them to discover things about themselves, their students and the process, which would otherwise remain unnoticed. ‘ . . . each rule we break provides us with another alternative rule that is self-generated and tests the validity of our preconceived notions.’ (Fanselow, 6) If we never try anything different, however small, we never find out how it might have changed things. [Those who believe diversity is] a constantly self-renewing source of opportunity can find support [in] the already-mentioned, little-known, but hugely influential *Breaking Rules*, which advocates ‘doing the opposite’ as a heuristic for finding ways of doing old things. This has been more recently followed up by his *Contrasting Conversations* (Fanselow, 1992). A heuristic is a ‘rule of thumb’ (If I do this, what will happen?) [Fanselow’s idea of trying the opposite] . . . is highly generative of new ideas. . . . Fanselow’s point, which is worth thinking about, is that if we never try an alternative way of doing things, we never know what might have happened! Heuristics are a handy way of trying new ways of doing things. Fanselow argues that it is only by systematically breaking the unwritten rules (or habits) in our classrooms that we can discover new and possibly better ways of doing things. This is indeed a powerful heuristic, and highly generative of new ideas—some of them worth holding on to. It is interesting to note that the ‘Designer Methods’ of the 1970’s and 80’s derived much of their power and innovative thrust from the application of this heuristic. I do not, of course, wish to suggest that they all read Fanselow and consciously applied this heuristic, but retrospectively we can see that their procedures derive from the ‘do the opposite’ injunction [from Fanselow’s *Breaking Rules*.]” (Alan Maley, “Where do new ideas come from?”, 2005 & 2010) 2005/2010

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