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## **Social Psychology and ELT - FRAMING**

**Tom Sawyer's discovery:** Do you remember the story with Tom Sawyer and the fence? Well, for those who haven't read the book, here is what happens: Tom Sawyer is a rather naughty little boy who is made to whitewash a big fence as a punishment (on a Sunday too!). He has been painting for a few minutes and is contemplating shooting himself, when he sees a friend of his approaching in the distance and he has a brainwave! Suddenly he starts painting carefully and with deliberation as if he is enjoying every second of the experience. The friend, who had meant to tease Tom, is intrigued despite himself and asks Tom to let him have a go. Tom is sorely tempted but he manages to resist, shrewdly calculating that this will make his friend all the more eager. To cut a long story short, Tom eventually 'yields' but not before he has extracted some payment from his friend! More friends happen to stroll by and drawn by curiosity initially, they eventually find themselves slaving away at the fence *and* being made to pay for the privilege! How did Tom pull this off? The answer is that he managed to frame this particular task in a positive light! But surely, such things only happen in works of fiction?!?

**Ariely's experiment:** Dan Ariely (Professor of Behavioural Economics at MIT) one day surprised his students by reciting a poem to them. He then told them that he would be holding another recitation later that week, but the ones to attend would be selected by means of an auction. Before that however, he asked half his students whether (hypothetically) they would be willing to pay \$ 10 in order to attend the recitation. He asked the rest the opposite question, namely whether they would be prepared to attend the recitation if they were paid \$ 10. The students simply had to answer 'Yes' or 'No'. Following that, he asked them all to bid for a place at the poetry reading. Here are the results: The first group of students offered to pay on average about \$ 1 for a short poetry session. This in itself is hardly startling – after all, Ariely himself confesses that poetry reading is not really his forte! Amazingly however, the other group actually demanded payment in order to attend!! (About \$ 1.30 on average - I shudder to think what they would have demanded if I had been the one giving the recitation!) The principle here is the same: Faced with an ambiguous situation, the way we perceive it (i.e. positively or negatively) depends crucially on how it is framed; when you are asked whether you would be prepared to pay for something, you automatically tend to see it in a positive light and vice versa (Ariely 2008).

**Implications for ELT:** I believe there is a lot to be learned from both the experiment and the Tom Sawyer story.

**Framing:** It was vital for the success of Tom's ploy that his friend would not perceive what he was doing as 'work' – so he refused to class it as such (in the book Tom says 'Work? – I suppose it depends what you mean by work..') – [*Moral:* Labeling does matter – a lot! If you are to introduce a new activity to ss make sure you present it in as exciting a way as possible – e.g. as a game. If you start by saying 'Now this may hurt a little...' you are simply asking for trouble!]

**Packaging:** Simply casting a task in a positive rather than a negative light is not enough. Packaging is also important. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) give the following brilliant example: Imagine that a doctor tells you 'You have to have an operation. Out of 100 patients who do, 90 are alive after 5 years'. That sounds ok. But what if the doctor tells you 'Out of 100 patients 10 are dead after 5 years?' The information is the same, but what a difference!! [*Moral:* The language you use to 'wrap up' the activities you want ss to do should be as positive as possible. Always stress the desired outcome rather than the effort they are expected to make.]

**Demonstrating:** Notice how Tom's attitude changed as soon as he saw his friend approaching. It was Tom's concentration which first intrigued the latter. [*Moral:* The T's enthusiasm is contagious (Dornyei 2001). Whenever possible, demonstrate new activities. If ss see that you enjoy doing a particular task or reading a certain text yourself, they are much more likely to be motivated].

**Scarcity:** Tom deliberately made the 'prize' appear difficult to attain; he pointed out that 'it is not everyday that one can whitewash a fence' and he refused to yield the brush without a 'struggle'! This is called 'the Scarcity Principle' (Cialdini 2001) and it can be extremely potent. Notice however that in the end all his friends got a turn! [*Moral 1:* Instead of asking for volunteers for a project, you may want to consider taking a leaf out of Ariely's book and stage an auction! *Moral 2:* When students/parents ask you whether you have time for private lessons, let them wait for a couple of days before replying. *Moral 3:* If a man asks you for a date on Saturday never say 'Yes' immediately! 😊 ]

**Social Proof:** Once the first two friends could be seen working away, Tom did not need to do any more 'advertising' – because of the power of 'Social Proof' (Aronson 1999) the fact that their peers found something enjoyable (and were even prepared to part with some of their most treasured possessions) virtually guaranteed that any boy who approached later would also want to have a go at that fence! [*Moral:* Show ss samples of former ss' work (Dornyei 2001) – e.g. essays or speeches/sketches on video where the former ss really made an effort. They are bound to be influenced!]

**Choice:** Twain again points out that work is what you are obliged to do, whereas play is what you are not. In our examples, neither Tom's friends, nor Ariely's ss were made to do anything –

which is precisely why they were prepared to pay! [*Moral:* For ss to really enjoy a particular learning experience, they have to choose to do it. Wherever possible, give them that choice.]

**Rewards:** Crucially, Tom did not offer his friends any rewards – quite the opposite in fact, he made *them* pay! Sutherland (1992) stresses that time and again offering rewards can backfire (more on that in another article). [*Moral:* If you want ss to enjoy something do not offer a reward. The reward ‘frames’ the whole process as a transaction and detracts from the intrinsic pleasure the ss can derive from it.]

**Away from ELT:** For those of you who are still not convinced here is a story from Cialdini’s excellent book ‘Influence’ (2001): The owner of a souvenir store had been trying to sell some turquoise jewelry but without much luck as tourists were unfamiliar with the material and they shunned it even when the rings and necklaces were put in prominent places in the shop window and energetically plugged by the staff. Frustrated, the store owner left a note to her head saleswoman ‘turquoise: x 1/2’ – meaning that they were to be sold at half price. When she arrived at the store the next day, she was happy to see that they were all gone. Nothing surprising so far – people had responded well to a substantial discount. Only they hadn’t. Because her handwriting was poor, her employee had misread her note as ‘turquoise: x 2’ and had raised the price twofold!! What had happened? Quite simply, for people who knew little about precious materials, the high price easily set those items apart and ‘framed’ them as valuable!! And, naturally, nothing but the best would be good enough for a male tourist’s girlfriend back home (esp. if he had been away on a ‘business’ trip with his secretary! ☺)

## References

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