

# Communicative Use of Newspaper Texts in Classroom Reading: The Read-Ask-and-Tell Approach

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This article describes and deals with a method of harnessing newspaper articles in the English language teaching classroom. The method is called Read-Ask-and-Tell. The article begins with a discussion of the place of authentic materials in the classroom, including a mention of some of the pitfalls involved. The method is then outlined through a chronological breakdown of the various phases it entails: namely, the Reading, Asking and Telling components. Following this, suggested activities for consolidation and reinforcement are explored.

## INTRODUCTION

### Authentic Materials

The trend towards the use of authentic materials in English Language Teaching in recent years is indisputably a good thing. It has meant the beginning of the end of the doctored, pristine prose of “EFL-ese” – that strange tongue that used to be taught, in the name of English. It has meant, too, the breaking down of some of the barriers between classroom and real world, as teaching materials more and more resemble real life rather than “greenhouse” conditions. In addition, the popular use of authentic materials has had an educative effect on the profession, as teachers become increasingly aware of language as it *really* is, rather than language as they *think* it is – or, worse, as they think it *ought* to be.

### Some Pitfalls

One of the most popular sources of authentic materials these days is the newspaper, an apparently never-ending, daily-renewable supply of authentic reading matter. Using newspapers, however, is not without its concomitant hazards. Sometimes we give our learners to read articles that are too long, convoluted and specialised to serve much pedagogic value, obliging them to read in detail and depth what realistically they may have only ever wished to skim or scan. Sometimes we give them articles that are so characteristic of the genre of journalism as to have little transferable potential as language teaching samples. Likewise, too, we sometimes expose them to lexis chosen more for its space-saving, titillating, alliterative impact than any other function. So we have to be careful, both in the material we choose for the classroom and in the tasks we set for our learners, remembering that while “authentic” is indisputably a “good” word, discretion and intelligence need to apply as well.

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## READ-ASK-AND-TELL

This article will describe a method of using newspapers in the classroom – the Read-Ask-and-Tell method – that effectively by-passes some of the pitfalls outlined above while serving a valid pedagogic function in the language learning classroom. (The method bears some similarity to the “jigsaw reading” approach of Geddes and Sturtridge’s *Reading Links*, 1982). The main components of the method are the use of short newspaper articles, groupwork and communicative tasks that successfully integrate the skills of reading, speaking and listening. The procedure, as the name would suggest, falls into three basic stages – Reading, Asking and Telling – which, while clearly discernible, to a small degree overlap.

### Reading

We begin with a number of short newspaper articles, as many as you require for your class groupings. Let us imagine the class has 15 students whom you will group into 3 groups of 5 students each. In this case you will need three newspaper articles, one per group.

The articles should be reasonably short and manageable, on topical or human-interest subjects, containing lexis that will extend and challenge your learners without obstructing them. The three articles should be of approximately the same length and level of difficulty. They may all be topic-related (Appendix 1) – such as medicine or education, or unconnected thematically (Appendix 2). It helps if each article has a heading (which works as an anchor and predictor) but this is not absolutely necessary.

The lesson should begin with the class seated in their groups (see Fig 1) which we will call groups A, B and C. An article is allocated per group, and each member of the group receives a copy of their group’s article. As individuals, the students then closely read their article. This is a “quiet phase”, as learners are engrossed in their own private reading.

Fig. 1: Original Seating – Three closed circles of five students each

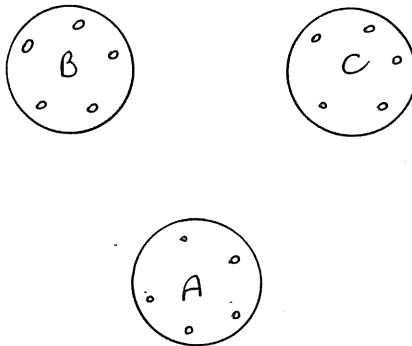


Fig. 2: Examples of Newspaper Text and Questions

## Babies at risk

- ① What kinds of post-partum depression are there?
- ② How do depressed mothers behave?
- ③ What do children need for normal development?
- ④ How are the children of depressed mothers affected?
- ⑤ What other factors are involved?

### Babies at risk when mother depressed

By MARGARET HARRIS,  
Medical Reporter

Children of women who suffer depression after giving birth may have significant intellectual deficits, according to a study in a recent edition of the *British Medical Journal*.

The study, by psychiatrists and psychologists from University College Hospital and the Institute of Psychiatry, London, looked at 94 women and their first-born children.

Twenty-two of the women suffered post-natal depression during the first year after delivery and the

children of these women were significantly more likely to do poorly when given intellectual tests at the age of four. Other factors which helped lower the childrens' intellectual performance were a history of marital conflict, fathers with psychiatric problems and a working class home background.

According to the study, "about one in every 10 women becomes clinically depressed in the months after childbirth ... Childbirth is one of the times when women are most prone to develop psychiatric disturbance but little is known of

possible long-term sequelae in the children of mothers who experience post-partum psychotic or neurotic depression."

The authors say other studies have shown that mothers with post-partum depression are "virtually immobilised in their maternal role" and that some of the important influences on a child's intellectual development are "provision by parents of a variety of opportunities for play and conversation, responsiveness to the child's signals, and the teaching of specific skills".

## Asking

The next stage is the Asking stage. This actually falls into 3 phases:

### *unstructured informal Asking*

As the students emerge from their Reading stage they begin to ask each other's help to clarify any difficulty they may have experienced, perhaps with individual lexis or with the gist or concepts involved. The teacher's role at this point is to "hover" unobtrusively, on the outskirts of the groups, being available to answer queries as they arise. Where possible, the teacher should avoid spoon-feeding answers directly, but should aim more towards encouraging inferencing, perhaps by pointing out context-embedded semantic clues. Where obstruction is occurring, however, the teacher should help resolve the problem rather than remain consistently and mysteriously unforthcoming. It is of course up to the teacher, and how well she knows the class, to gauge students' threshold of tolerance for delayed reward or gratification. Some learners are inspired by such strategies, others easily frustrated or angered.

### *structured, formal Asking*

After the initial Asking and seeking clarification as described above, each group is given a short list of questions pertaining to their article (for an example, see Fig 2). The aim of this is to steer learners on to the right direction and consolidate their understanding. The group should discuss the answers, trying to reach a consensus of opinion. (The discussion should remain oral; there is no reason to write answers down.)

the *last Asking aspect* will be discussed below, as it falls into the *Telling* stage of the method.

## Telling

Each group should now have a spokesperson appointed (or elected). The teacher should avoid always having the same spokesperson, or always having the stronger students in this role. The spokesperson will shortly become the group's representative and will become the "rotating" member moving from group to group. The Telling now falls into three phases, as described below.

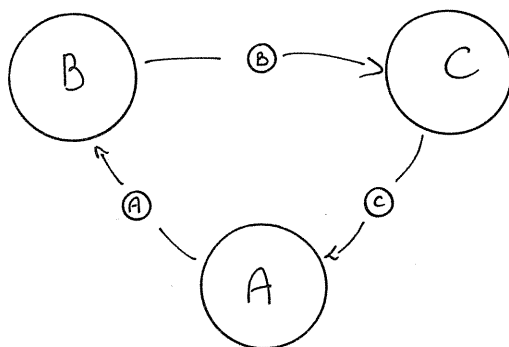
### *Rehearsal*

After the spokesperson is decided upon, she practises (or rehearses) telling the group's article in summary form. Note that this should be a telling, *not* a reading, so while the spokesperson may have visual access to the article for the purpose of the telling, she should not be reading it but word for word. At this point, then, the spokesperson rehearses what will be said, and the group helps her along, coaching her wherever needed.

### Rotating

At the teacher's signal, the spokesperson gets up and moves to the next group (see Fig 3): thus, spokesperson A goes to group B; spokesperson B goes to group C; spokesperson C goes to group A. Having arrived at the new group, the spokesperson is seated in the vacant chair (made available by that group's departing spokesperson) and proceeds to tell the group the gist or main idea of the article that her base group have read and discussed.

Fig. 3: Rotating Spokespersons



### Asking

During and/or after the Telling by the visiting spokesperson, the listening group members are free to ask whatever questions they may wish to ask to clarify their understanding of what has just been told them. This, then, is the third Asking phase, mentioned earlier, which overlaps into the Telling stage of the procedure.

### TIMING

As the articles are each of the same length and level of difficulty, and as each group should have a more or less similar sum total of language competence, as well as having had approximately the same amount of time and help to understand their own article, factors are weighed logistically to allow the tellings of the rotating spokespersons to each take approximately the *same* time. Thus, after the first telling, following a signal from the teacher, the visiting spokespersons *move on* to the next group where they will once again tell and answer questions on their article. Thus the rotating procedure continues until the spokespersons ultimately return "home" to their base group.

## REFORMATION OF THE BASE GROUP – INTERACTION AND EXCHANGE

Ultimately, then, the group's rotating spokesperson will return to her base group. At this point her "experiential reserve" will differ from her group's: she will have had the opportunity to refine her telling of the group's article, as well as her understanding of it because of all the question-answer interaction with which she will have dealt; her group, on the other hand, have not told their article, but have listened to and interacted with the tellings of the various visiting spokespersons who have temporarily joined their group.

What happens now is that the base group's members tell their spokesperson about the articles *they* have heard – so, for example, group A's members tell their spokesperson about group B's and group C's articles. (How the tellings are shared can be left to the group or structured by the teacher if preferred). Interaction within the base group follows inevitably as the spokesperson checks her understanding by asking for further information or clarification.

## FOLLOW-UP AND CONSOLIDATION

The Read-Ask-and-Tell method can stop at this point, or it can be further pursued to consolidate understanding and learning. Some suggestions for consolidation are outlined briefly below. They can be used individually, or in some cases combined for greater reinforcement effect.

### *Student Interaction and Clarification*

Each student is given a copy of the articles about which she has heard (but which to this point, she has not read). A period of silent reading follows, which itself can be followed by some intensive questioning. Thus for example, group A's article can be dealt with first, and group B and C are encouraged to clarify any queries or doubts they may have about it. At this point, all of group A should be encouraged to respond, not merely the member who has acted as the spokesperson. This technique allows for quite vigorous student-student interaction, during which time the teacher's role should be low-key and facilitative, rather than obtrusively controlling.

### *Vocabulary Reinforcement*

Each group prepares a list of the key words (no more than ten) that pertain to and emerge from their article. They then, within their group, confirm their understanding of these key words by writing glosses or paraphrases for them. The teacher can help out here when called upon. Then, group by group, the key words are written up on the blackboard (or on to an OHP transparency) for the remainder of the class to see. Queries or doubts about word meanings should on the whole be

handled by the group whose key words are being discussed, with the teacher serving as a final or “last resort” consultant. A variation on this vocabulary reinforcement procedure is for the groups to prepare a list of *collocations* (rather than key words) that feature in their article. These can be written up for all the class and discussed, perhaps with consideration given to other potential collocational possibilities. (See Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1980) for further ideas of this sort.)

### *Summary Writing*

For classes whose needs include writing or study skills, the Read-Ask-and-Tell method can be consolidated by a summary-writing exercise. After the home groups are re-formed, each group is asked to select one of the articles they have heard (it may or may not be their own). They then proceed to write a summary of that article. This can be done as a co-operative group endeavour, in pairs, or on an individual basis, depending on what groupings the teacher feels will best suit her class. It would help, possibly, if this exercise followed the vocabulary reinforcement activity described above, as it would assist learners to focus on and actually incorporate the key words pertaining to the article of their choice. The summaries could be collected and examined subsequently by the teacher, or alternatively, a more conference-like approach (involving self-correcting or peer-correcting) could be organised. Clearly, teachers will select a procedure that best suits their classes and the logistics of their teaching programme (cp. Brumfit 1980).

### *Retelling with Key Words and Prompts*

In this consolidation exercise, each group selects one of the articles they have heard (excluding their own one) and then prepares to re-tell it to the class. Time is allowed for rehearsal within the group, before a more “public” telling occurs. The re-telling is assisted by a list of key words pertaining to each article having been written up for all to see and consult. The tellers are encouraged to incorporate all (or most) of these key words in their re-telling. When the telling occurs, the group whose article is the one being told have the “right to veto” in the event that miscomprehension has occurred, and also are encouraged to prompt the re-tellers when help is required. This exercise is excellent for encouraging inter-group peer exchange, with the teacher’s role, once again, being monitorial and managerial rather than centre-stage.

### *Topic-based Discussion*

Sometimes one of the articles is particularly interesting, topical or controversial and (with or without active teacher direction) it becomes the subject of further discussion as students “thrash out” their opinions on the matter. This type of follow-up discussion often occurs spontaneously when the articles chosen are all topic-related, and especially when a divergence of viewpoint is contained among

the articles. The discussion becomes an effective way for learners to actively incorporate the lexis to which they have been exposed through the Reading and Telling stages. When such discussions occur, part of the teacher's role can be to actively steer learners towards using such key words by, for example, highlighting them on the blackboard as they emerge in the discussion.

## VARIATIONS

We have in this article focussed on a description of the Read-Ask-and-Tell method, including a number of possibilities for consolidation and reinforcement. It is, of course, expected that teachers interested in using the method will adapt it to suit their classes – whose levels, needs, interests and goals would all have to be considered. One possible variation, for example, is to have 4 groups but only 2 articles. The initial Reading and Asking can be group-based, but the Telling could work on a *pair-basis*, with cross-matched pairs, each telling their partner about their article. This variation allows for greater “intimacy” and reduces the difficulty of “pace logistics” involved in having rotating spokespersons.

Another variation is to have the base group itself prepare a list of key questions pertaining to their article (rather than answering the teacher-prepared questions, as described earlier). These questions could subsequently be put to the other groups who have been exposed to a telling (but not a reading) of the article, so as to confirm or gauge the degree of their comprehension.

## CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF THE READ-ASK-AND-TELL METHOD

I have found this method of using authentic reading materials to be extremely effective as a classroom language teaching procedure. Because the articles are small and prone to be “punchy” and impactful, they tend to be more manageable and less unwieldy than other newspaper-based material that is used in language teaching. Students feel confident about “getting their teeth” into the article, as its size is not daunting and the level of unfamiliar lexis does not exceed saturation point. Such factors positively affect levels of motivation and self-confidence, which encourage and facilitate learning.

Because the method is group-based, learners have the comfort of peer solidarity and co-operation as well as a certain degree of personal anonymity, as individual performance is less important an ingredient than group co-operation. The advantages of group work over teacher-controlled “lock-step” procedures have been well documented in the literature (see, for example, Chamberlain 1985, and Long and Porter 1985), and there is no need to reiterate them here. What is immediately apparent, however, is that the quality of learner-interaction is enormously increased in a method such as this, compared to a teacher-controlled, whole-class approach to methodology.

Clearly, in this method, language is the means of communication as much as, if not more than, the subject of study. In all the various group encounters and exchanges that the method generates, students are using language for genuine communicative purpose – such as asking for clarification, confirming understanding, repairing miscomprehension, etc. This is a thankful and far cry from the display-based “Is – this – a – pencil?” syndrome of by-gone days.

It is now well-accepted that there is no automatic correspondence between what a teacher sets out to teach and what a learner actually learns. Learners learn by the act of learning, that is, by the experience of learning and trying things out. In the Read-Ask-and-Tell method, we have a centrally task-based activity that goes through a number of stages – all the while, however, maintaining its experiential base. It is through such experiences of learning that learners learn.

The method is totally learner-centred, with the teacher’s role at all times being that of resource person and classroom manager. This is not to underestimate the importance of the teacher’s tasks: the selection of material, the grouping of students, the management of “pace logistics” (to name but a few) are all crucial to the success of the method. However, what we *do not* have here is a centre-stage, chalk-and-talk, source-of-all-knowledge, guru-type teacher. Rather, we have a manager-of-people who both encourages and allows the learner to assume greater control over her learning context.

Another clear advantage of the method is that it allows for a limited amount of lexis to be exposed to the students in a contextualised fashion. What we are trying to avoid are the twin sins of swamping learners with over-doses of lexis, and the presentation of lexis in isolation. The method successfully avoids both of these pitfalls, and when followed by post-text vocabulary reinforcement exercises (such as those described earlier), it can serve as an effective tool in extending the learner’s vocabulary.

The method successfully incorporates the three basic skills of speaking, listening and reading. (When summary writing is included as a reinforcement exercise, the fourth skill is added). This integration of skills is a more valid reflection of real communicative acts than more traditional attempts at “purist” skills-based lessons. Clearly, for example, speaking is best taught in combination with listening, given that most communicative acts (bar the odd Shakespearian soliloquy) involve a two-way process of listening and speaking. The incorporation of the skill of reading, along with sub-skills of discussing, questioning, responding, double-checking, etc. – succeeds in making the process more genuinely interactive and communicative. As such we can safely assume that the quality of language-learning is improved.

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Appendix 1: Topic-Related Newspaper Articles

10.10.2004  
**Surrogate mothers take on the law**

**T**WO single London women in their 20s are pregnant with surrogate babies for infertile couples and will receive more than \$A10,000 when the babies are born at about the end of the year, despite the ban on commercial surrogacy introduced in Britain last year after the birth of "Baby Cotton".

The pregnancies have been arranged by an American-run agency, which claims it has found a loophole in the law.

The women — an unmarried psychologist who already has a child under five, and an unemployed divorced housewife with a pre-school child — will be paid between \$10,000 and \$14,000 for keeping diaries of their experiences. It was disclosed recently.

Lorrien Finley, the American head of Reproductive Freedom International, the agency that has arranged the pregnancies, said the women, who are both British, would be paid for taking part in a serious research project and not for selling the babies.

They were conducting a pre-natal learning experiment and using unborn babies to see whether they acquired early knowledge to give them a headstart in life, she said.

"This is a very serious project and we shall donate the records to university researchers," Miss Finley said. "There is nothing illegal in paying the surrogate for taking part in this project and keeping detailed diaries.

"I am paying them to do a job, and it just so happens that if they were not

pregnant they could not qualify to do the job".

The childless couples who have ordered the babies have each paid \$26,000, which Miss Finley says is considerably less than in America, where surrogacy is legal.

One couple, a civil servant whose wife is a teacher, live in London. The other couple run a small shop in Surrey. Miss Finley said both were unable to have children of their own but would provide loving homes.

The two surrogate mothers have been impregnated with sperm from the would-be fathers, but neither couple has met, or will meet, the mothers.

Eight weeks before the babies are due, the two surrogate mothers will go to Holland or France, where they

will live in a private house before giving birth in a clinic.

**Midwife births at hospital 'very safe'**

By MARGARET HARRIS, Medical Reporter

A four-year review of births supervised by midwives without "direct medical supervision" has found that they are very safe, provided midwives can refer any women with complications to doctors.

In a study in the latest edition of the *Medical Journal of Australia*, obstetricians, and midwives at the Queen Victoria Medical Centre have reported on 518 births which took place at that hospital's Birth Centre.

There were no deaths among the babies or the mothers and the rate of complications was very low.

One reason for this was that any woman who showed signs of developing complications during pregnancy or labour was transferred immediately to the care of an obstetrician and the routine labour ward next door.

Of 1,040 pregnant women who initially booked into the Birth Centre only 518, or 52 per cent of the bookings, were permitted to have their babies in the centre.

In another article in the same edition of the journal, a Sydney obstetrician, Dr Andrew Child, who is the director of obstetrics and gynaecology at King George V Memorial Hospital, Camperdown, writes of the Victorian report that: "Their figures could

be criticised on the basis that only 52.4 per cent of the bookings were actually delivered in the Birth Centre, but they have wisely accepted no compromise on safety at this stage."

Dr Child points out that, although the "running costs of providing midwives on a one-to-one basis are quite substantial" the costs of a birth centre, when compared with a standard hospital obstetrical service, are relatively cheap.

"Over 60 per cent of confinements can reasonably be called a "normal physiological process" and therefore it is quite unjustifiable and wasteful of resources to suggest that a trained medical specialist should attend all births."

**Babies' at risk when mother depressed**

By MARGARET HARRIS, Medical Reporter

Children of women who suffer depression after giving birth may have significant intellectual deficits, according to a study in a recent edition of the *British Medical Journal*.

The study, by psychiatrists and psychologists at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, looked at 94 women and their first-born children.

Twenty-two of the women suffered post-natal depression during the first year after delivery and the

children of these women were significantly more likely to do poorly when given intellectual tests at the age of four. Other factors which helped lower the children's intellectual performance were a history of marital conflict, fathers with psychiatric problems and a working class home.

The authors say other studies have shown that mothers with post-natal depression are particularly immobilised in the maternal role, and that some of the important influences on a child's intellectual development are "provision by parents of a variety of opportunities for play and conversation, responsiveness to the child's signals, and the teaching of specific skills".

possible long-term sequelae in the children of mothers who experience post-partum psychotic or neurotic depression."

Appendix 2: Topic-unrelated Newspaper Articles

### Space volunteers lie down on the job

MOSCOW, Friday: Ten Soviet volunteers, lying flat on their backs for a year to test the effects of lack of movement during long space flights, are learning the virtue of patience, the government newspaper *Izvestia* reported yesterday.

The 10, including a doctor, a technician and a mechanical engineer, began the experiment last (northern) spring. Five are receiving vitamins and doing arm and leg exercises from their beds while the other five are not moving at all.

*Izvestia* said it was too early to draw conclusions about the physical effects of their inactivity, but it had already led to character changes.

At first the volunteers had argued a lot amongst themselves but now they had learnt to be quieter and more patient, it said.

They were receiving food through tubes and being wheeled out to the bathroom and toilet.

Telephone calls home had been restricted because of the upsetting

effect of conversations with relatives.

Most had given up their intention of learning languages in bed and resorted to reading thrillers, but the doctor, Sergei Kopanov, 34, had taken an exam for a university thesis, *Izvestia* said.

It quoted participants as saying they felt strange at first, lying with their feet five degrees above their heads to simulate weightlessness, but eventually they had got used to the position.

Rester

### Why that screech can drive you ape

By JANE ALLISON

LOS ANGELES, Wednesday: Even the thought of the spine-chilling screech of fingernails across a blackboard makes grown men shiver and wince.

Like the startled jump caused by a loud noise or the mouthwatering reaction to the smell of food, the response appears to be shared by millions of people.

Because it is so universal, a psychologist says, it may be an inherited automatic reflex. Inherited, perhaps, from the apes.

"The fact that this reflex is universal means that it has been with us for thousands of years," says Dr Randolph Blake.

"More than 90 per cent of people react to the sound of fingernails on a blackboard by cringing and feeling uncomfortable. This suggests that at some time in our evolutionary history it had some significance."

To find out what makes it so universally repulsive, Dr Blake simulated the sound by scraping a metal garden fork across a piece of slate. By analysing the sound waves, he found that they were similar to the shrill cries of monkeys which sense danger.

Like their animal cousins, Dr Blake says, humans may still be reacting instinctively to the sound with distress.

### Koalas try to live in the urban sprawl — and it's killing them

Pity the poor koala who tries to survive in urban bushland surrounded by housing.

The slow-moving animal must contend with motor cars, dogs and fences, or risk drowning in backyard swimming pools.

Its feed trees are continually cleared for more houses.

These stresses can predispose koalas to diseases, which often prove fatal, an expert said yesterday.

Dr Paul Canfield, senior lecturer in the Department of Pathology at Sydney University, is one of the few academics in Australia actively involved in koala research.

A large percentage of koalas were killed by cars, or died from mauling by domestic pets, he said. But other deaths were more mysterious.

"In 20 per cent of cases we can't find any tissue damage in the dead koalas, so we don't



housing developments,

Dr Canfield... "ignorance is the biggest problem," Dr Canfield said.

"Ignorance is the biggest problem facing Australia's koala population — ignorance of their health problems, their mortality rate and how they are adapting to the changing environment through contact with humans."

Dr Canfield said koalas were placed under heavy stress when their habitat was taken over by

housing developments,

Pilots nod off for a purpose

BRITISH Airways pilots have been sleeping on the job — with the blessing of their bosses.

Scientists and doctors want to know how pilots and flight engineers sleep during stopovers on long flights, so volunteers from British Airways and three other airlines flying return trips to cities such as San Francisco, Tokyo and Frankfurt spent their nights in sleep laboratories instead of hotels, wired up to monitors that recorded brain activity and indicated the quality of sleep.

The researchers then examined various "sleep strategies" used by

crews — napping, for example, or trying to remain on home time rather than local time.

Crew members had much more difficulty with sleep after eastward flights than westward ones. Sleep on eastward stop-overs was much more fragmented.

The way to make "eastward" crews fresher for the homeward flight, the scientists say, is to limit the amount of sleep taken immediately after an outward flight. Thus they are awake and readier for the local day and readier for a deep sleep when night falls.

— MALCOLM BROWN

### Smokeless cigarettes for oppressed addicts

LOS ANGELES: Tired of smoke-filled rooms? Annoyed by desks and dinner tables covered with ash? Pestered by people who blow smoke in your face?

If so, you might consider offering your smoking acquaintances a Favor, a new smokeless cigarette available in Cali-

fornia and several south-western States.

Favor's maker, Advanced Tobacco Products Incorporated of San Antonio, Texas, said it hoped the product would be successful in the growing number of California cities that had enacted laws prohibiting smoking in public places.

Favor looks like a cigarette, and, depending on who you ask, tastes like one too.

Although the hollow polymer tube does not contain tobacco and cannot be lit, it features a nicotine-laced plug at the end a smoker would normally light.

Without combustion, the plug vaporises the nicotine as

it is inhaled through the tube.

The company's chief executive, Dr Norman Jacobson, said Favor, which has been introduced in Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, was not an answer for people who wanted to stop smoking.

United Press International