

*Making the Most of a Textbook Passage*¹

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TEACHERS ARE NOT MASTERS of their classroom situations and are often condemned to use textbooks that are narrow-minded in their approach, badly graded, boring to the children, remote from their interests, irrelevant to their needs, with insufficient opportunities for speech-work and active participation in the lesson, and too little concerned with success for the average and slower-learning pupil. A textbook lesson that offers a reading passage, comprehension questions, and grammar exercises, and suggests topics for composition, may have been tolerable when education aimed at producing an élite minority, but is out of date and out of touch today when English is being learned in many countries by increasing numbers of 'ordinary' children, who may well be taught by very ordinary teachers.

These pupils, in both primary and secondary schools, need lesson material that is meaningful, interesting, alive, and personal, and which becomes memorable because it is made familiar in a wide variety of approaches. They need some formal controlled oral work, but also plenty of application of this in informal situations where it is really used as a means of communication; they need to find pleasure in their use of English and to laugh, which itself indicates comprehension; their reading and writing should be introduced by oral work and should often be regarded as a consolidation of the oral work; as many children as possible should be involved actively in the learning process, and here chorus-work, team-work, group-work, and pairs can play an important part and also offer a variety of treatment; both the material and its presentation and practice should be so staged that it takes account of the rate of learning of the children concerned, and gives them sufficient exposure to each new form and sufficient revision of it to ensure mastery of the basic items by even the slow learners. There should be plenty of additional practice-material, both formal exercises and informal games, crossword puzzles, and projects to keep the quicker ones busy.

If the meaning is clear, the battle is half won; so visual and perhaps auditory aids are a necessity. The pupils should use *all* their senses in the language-learning process, their muscles, their hands, and if possible their whole bodies. Activities and

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dramatisation should therefore be regarded as 'normal' features in English-learning lessons. *See and hear, see and do, do and say, read and do, do, say and write* should be sign-posts in the developments of learning programmes.

As an example, let us take a textbook passage that involves a number of characters involved in a situation. *John is a small boy. He lives at Number 25 Main Street. He lives with his father and mother. Every morning he goes to school. His father tells him to get up. He puts on his clothes . . .* and so on. The teacher should be told, or should be able to recognise, which grammatical and lexical items are new to the class and which need revision. How can he get the meaning across of both the new items and of the situation generally? In many cases a simple drawing or series of drawings, quickly drawn and coloured with crayons or felt pens, will answer his needs and also concentrate the children's attention on the points he is making. The pictures will give him and them plenty of material for oral work, revising former material and introducing the new. Discussion of the characters involved will require the use of the third person. All this will be done without the book being used.

This is John. He is a small boy.

Who is this? It's John.

Is he a boy or a girl? He's a boy.

Is he a big boy? No, he isn't. He's a small boy.

He lives at Number 25 Main Street.

Does he live at Number 25 Main Street? Yes, he does.

Does he live at Number 26? No, he doesn't.

Where does he live? He lives at Number 25 Main Street.

Show me his father.

Where does his father live? and so on.

The pupils themselves, when they have become reasonably proficient in answering such questions, can ask the same ones themselves, using the pictures as reference points, and this can easily develop into a game between teams. The pupils will become increasingly involved in the game and less conscious of their use of the foreign language. After the class has had some practice in this 'controlled' situation, the teacher can ask the pupils individually whether they have experienced a similar one and what they do or did in it. This makes the subject personal and requires the use of the first and second person.

What's your name?

Are you a boy or a girl?

Are you a big boy or a small boy?

Where do you live?

When do you go to school?

What clothes do you put on? and so on.

The third stage could be to bring the scene to life. The teacher asks what the characters, or what the pupils themselves, would

say in a situation like this, and he thus evolves or builds up a dialogue. If he is clever, he can model the pupils' suggestions into a shape that includes the sentence patterns and language items that he wants them to practise and that they will find later in the textbook. He is now well on the way to producing a dramatisation and he can introduce further characters, if he wishes, to make the setting more real or to provide more repetitions of some of the dialogue or to involve more pupils in the activity. Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, policemen, bus-conductors, animals, ticking clocks, a narrator, a chorus, music-makers, and so on, can be added, depending ultimately on the teacher's objectives and the time available. *Every morning John's father tells him to get up. What will his father say to him?* Suggestions come from the class, or from the teacher if necessary.

'Wake up, John. It's time to get up.'

What will John answer?

'Oh dear, what's the time?'

What will his father answer?

'It's seven o'clock. It's time to get up.'

His mother comes into the room. What does she say? 'Hurry up, John.'

What will John do when he gets up?

What clothes will he put on first?

His mother is watching him, but his father is not in the room. He cannot see what John is doing. What will he say to John's mother?

'What's John doing now?'

What will his mother say to John?

What are you doing now?

What will John answer?

I am putting on my shirt.

What will his mother say to his father?

He is putting on his shirt.

Different groups can take turns in presenting the characters in the situation, weak pupils mixed with good ones.

At the end of this stage, the children should be quite familiar with all the language involved. Now they can be introduced to the reading of it. If they are at a relatively elementary stage, this is best done using the pictures again and providing sentence-cards to be associated with them.

This is John.

He is a small boy.

He lives at Number 25 Main Street.

Every morning his father tells him to get up.

He is putting on his shirt.

and so on.

The meaning is now clear, and reading the cards becomes more a familiarisation with the written form of the spoken words. If the pupils have all passed this stage, then they can open their textbooks and read the passage for themselves silently. *This is John. He is a small boy. He lives at Number 25 Main Street. Every morning his father tells him to get up. He gets up at seven o'clock . . .* The teacher can then question them on their comprehension and give a model reading aloud to ensure accurate pronunciation. If he has mixed abilities in his class, he can group them according to their ability in reading, and some can be given longer and slower exposure, while others move on to the next stage.

The writing should reinforce what has been spoken and read. The exercises can be graded, the first one with sentence completion and a great many cues and prompts, the control gradually being removed until the last exercise is entirely free, but still reflecting the sentence patterns of the first stage. The sentences should be gone through orally first to ensure success by everyone.

- (i) *This is John. J a small boy.*
- (ii) *He lives at Number 25 Main Street.*
His father at
- (iii) *Every morning his f tells . . . to get up.*
- (iv) *E m he at seven o'clock.*
- (v) *Now he . . putting on his shirt.*
- (vi) *Now trousers.*

And so on, leading up to free questions:
Where does John live?

.....
When does he get up every morning?

.....
What clothes does he put on?

.....

and so on, leading on to:

Where do you live?

.....

When do you get up?

.....

What clothes do you put on?

.....

Plenty of this graded writing-material, leading up as the course progresses from sentences to a paragraph to three paragraphs, which form a composition, will be needed if all the groups are to be kept busy. Individual pupils can come up and read aloud to the teacher when the opportunity allows. Alternatively, the teacher could produce a tape-recording of the passage with suitable questions, and his slowest readers could be receiving this extra instruction by themselves in one corner of the room. The pupils in a group listen to the tape, reading the passage aloud.

They can follow in their books. Each pupil sits in a place which has a number allotted to it. The tape asks comprehension questions and pauses for the answer. The other pupils check the answer given by the pupil mentioned.

Number One. What is John?

Number Two. Where does John live?

Number Three. When does he get up?

The pupils should have had a reasonable amount of pleasure from the oral work and the dramatisation, especially if different groups have vied with each other as to who can provide the most convincing performance. But the opportunity for informal language-practice has not yet been provided. So a game of some kind (see W. R. Lee's *Language-Teaching Games and Contests* for many suggestions) is important, preferably including items from the lessons, so that these get revised at the same time as many colloquial expressions are introduced and practised in the most informal and incidental way. In this case, a game of Word Bingo can be played using words from the passage on boards and repeated on small cards. The teacher or, better, a pupil reads from the card; the child, or group of children, who has the word written on his board calls out *I've got* —, and the card is passed to him, and the one who fills up his board first is the winner. The children thus hear, read, and say the words. Expressions such as:

Please pass the card to John.

Would you mind passing the card to John.

Who's got the most cards?

Who's going to be the winner?

You must be cheating!

Oh dear, I've dropped it.

and so on, become normal in the classroom, and are learned and memorised in the most natural and pleasurable way.

To go through all these stages will, of course, require a number of lessons. The textbook and the official syllabus (the 'dictators' in so many countries!) have been covered, but have not dominated the teaching. The teacher has based his classroom activities on them, but the variety of approaches he has used and the principles he has applied should ensure far greater mastery of the English language by far more children than would have prevailed under the 'traditional' system, and the teacher himself has had a much more stimulating time.