

Empowering Nonsense: Reading Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in a Basic Writing Class

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First year basic writing and reading college students are scared. More than the unfamiliar places, faces, methods and serious consequences of it all, they are afraid of words. College means BIG words, words like "galvanization," "slovenliness," "egregious," and "pretentious." They are afraid because they know they will be asked to read, understand, write, and then be tested on these words. To make matters worse, most of the textbooks our students will read still suffer from the ills George Orwell describes in his classic essay "Politics and the English Language." "The English Language is in a bad way," declares Orwell, because it is plagued by "a mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence" (311). Even if they successfully complete remediation, move on to English 101 and advance to upper courses in other disciplines, developmental English students often face monstrous texts, which they have precious few skills to decipher. As a long-time teacher of writing, currently at the exceptionally diverse City University of New York's Borough of Manhattan Community College, I have struggled to help my students acquire the reading skills they will need throughout their academic career to decipher the vagueness and incompetence of college texts in order to be able to write about them intelligently.

The ability to read aright is essential in writing, especially in developmental or basic writing, classes not only because the readings discussed provide content that students need to prove they understand, but also because reading model texts allows them to learn by example.

We assign readings because they show how it is done when done right. This process does not only mean that readings offer them approaches to structuring an essay, they also teach style, tone, vocabulary, correct spelling, syntax, grammar, idioms. In class, we take time to help students uncover all of these wonders and try to mold them into independent readers and deliberate writers, but the lonely, too-short single semester we are allowed with them is never enough to make them truly self-sufficient. Since we cannot cover every word our students will encounter, we try to provide them with strategies that would help them understand the overall meaning of a sentence or a paragraph even without recognizing all the words in it.

Having used Dr. Seuss's books and Edward Lear's limericks in English Language Learner (ELL) classes before beginning my journey as a college professor, in fact, I am well aware of the pedagogical power of nonsense. I have often introduced Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in my ELL classes because it not only offers a unique way to support an understanding of parts of speech, but it also disarms new language learners. It comforts them to know that they cannot make a mistake because the words do not have a correct or incorrect value, which in turn does wonders for class morale (Francis 308-9, Kasper 73). For these same reasons, "Jabberwocky" is often used in grade schools to teach parts of speech and basic grammar, but the poem is just as, if not more, effective in higher education because it prepares students for more than just grammar (Billman & Cabrera, 1996). In a college level basic writing course, "Jabberwocky" teaches vocabulary, reading skills, and literary literacy. Furthermore, it teaches confidence and self-esteem because it allows students to lower their defenses, relax into learning and build upon their strengths. Community college students in remediation are not only scared, they are also angry and frustrated because they were placed in remediation and told too

many times that their writing and reading skills are incompetent (Elbow 285, 292 & Hynes 100). Introducing a Nonjudgmental Awareness initiative in college remediation courses is just as important as it is for ELL courses (Kasper “Applying the Principle” 73).¹ Using “Jabberwocky” as part of this program is a clear and natural choice, as it is filled with empowering creativity of thought and process.²

If there is something students are more afraid of than words, it is words in a poem. As I distribute the first handout in the activity, a mirror-image copy of the first stanza of “Jabberwocky,” I prepare myself for the protests that follow. The way remediation students first view “Jabberwocky” is very similar to the way Alice reacts on first encounter with it in *Through the Looking-Glass*. At first, Alice does not even attempt to read it because at a glance she concludes, “it’s all in some language I don’t understand” (Carroll 148).

YKCOWREBBAJ

sevot yhtils eht dna ,gillirb sawT`

ebaw eht ni elbmig dna eryg diD

,sevogorob eht erew ysmim llA

.ebargtuo shtar emom eht dnA

At first glance, my students invariably express the same sentiment. “I don’t get it,” says one and flips it over. “Is this even English?” asks another, while a third silently stares at the words, her eyes glazing over. Paradoxically, the idea that this text “isn’t even English” disarms them because, as I said, English is scary. They feel no academic responsibility towards “Ykcowrebbaj” and that makes it easier for them to make mistakes—a sure way to learning.

Students' reactions to the poem can actually be described following the Kübler-Ross model for the five stages of grief. At first they deny the fact that they will have to confront it ("can't we just do a practice exam?"), next they become angry and frustrated ("this is a waste of time!" "It isn't a poetry class!"). After anger comes bargaining ("Can we read this at home?" "How about letting us choose our own poem?"). Soon depression sets in (sinking down in their chairs they utter a weak "oh man..." or "damn..."), but as they realize I will not give in, they accept their fate ("fine, no big deal, let's just do this"). Once they decide to cooperate and take a second look at the poem, they realize, again like Alice, that they CAN attempt it. "Why it's a looking-glass book, of course" says Alice, "And if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again" (148).

We begin by reading the poem out-loud because, although it is filled with new words, "readers (even as young as Alice) can still infer some of what is being said. When people hear a novel word, they can induce part of its meaning from information conveyed by other aspects of the whole utterance" (Billman & Cabrera 539). Luckily, as part of the stage of acceptance, they willingly volunteer to read the poem themselves. It might take a while as they often struggle with pronunciation, giggling as they read:

JABBERWOCKY

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

‘Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jjubub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!’

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought
So rested he by the Tumtum Tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

‘And has thou slain the Jabberwock?’

Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!

He chortled in his joy.

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

I allow time for their eyebrows to settle before asking, “so, what do you think?” Their responses usually repeat Alice’s response, sometimes verbatim: “‘It seems very pretty...but it's RATHER hard to understand!’” or “‘SOMEBODY killed SOMETHING: that's clear, at any rate’” (150).

Asking them to read the poem aloud helps them hear meaning, even if it is on a most basic level.

We often ask our students to read their own writings aloud because they invariably detect errors in grammar and problems in logic. Similarly, reading texts aloud helps students reveal meaning (Emig 123). A poem that seems to be written in a foreign language suddenly becomes less of a mystery. Carroll immediately explains, however, that, although Alice was not intimidated by the appearance of it anymore, “she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all” (150). We can guess just the same about our students. But we may also be sure that it affected them, just as it affected Alice, “somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas -- only I don't exactly know what they are!” This is what I count on when we enter the next stage: deciphering the vocabulary.

In entering the long process of understanding the meaning of “Jabberwocky” in a remedial writing class, I count not only on students’ hearing abilities, but also on their “Grammar 1” abilities, to use W. Nelson Francis’ term in “Revolution in Grammar.” Francis defines Grammar 1 as “the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings” (299). He further explains, “it is not necessary that we be able to discuss these patterns self-consciously in order to be able to use them. In fact, all speakers of a language above the age of five or six know how to use its complex forms of organization with considerable skill.” In other words, college students possess Grammar 1, or what Billman and Cabrera term “learning biases” (553) and Patrick Hartwell describes as “eminently usable knowledge” (111) that allows them subconsciously to apply language features to a text in order to extract its meaning even if they cannot actually name each part of speech by its proper name.³ The combination of hearing the words of the poem spoken aloud and triggering their pre-knowledge of the features of grammar make students “feel the meaning very much *in* those words” (Francis 308-9, Elbow 299).

In chapter Six, Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, who declares, “I can explain all the poems that were ever invented -- and a good many that haven't been invented just yet” (214). She recites the first stanza from “Jabberwocky” and asks for an explanation. Rather than discuss the overall meaning of the poem, Humpty Dumpty proceeds to explain every individual word without connecting them to produce a better understanding of the whole. Similarly, rather than allow them to discuss the narrative action of the poem, I focus, like Mr. Dumpty, on the “plenty of hard words there” (215).⁴ The key to this stage is to think of the entire classroom as a collective brain, never offer an opinion or explanation, but allow them to rely on each other to think things

through. Invariably, one of them will figure something out and the rest will continue the thought process. I ask my students to feel the words; to remember that words often sound like the very thing they describe, like buzzing, bubble, or wonder. It also matters very much how one reads the poem; what emotion they ascribe to the words. One receives a very different message, for example if the sentence “I am pregnant” is said happily, sadly, or with a tone of utter surprise.

I read the first line: “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves...” The first word to be explained is usually “’Twas.” They are not familiar with the abbreviation. As soon as they recall the uses of the apostrophe, they realize that it took the place of the “I” for “IT.” It is a small yet important moment. They seem to subconsciously activate those parts of their minds that help them recall past grammatical lessons that will help them understand their present task. What does brillig mean? One student takes out his iPhone and proceeds to look it up in an online dictionary. I wait patiently knowing that technology will fail him in this instance. Rather than invoke grammar, which often turns students off, I suggest they ascribe an emotion to the word in order to understand its meaning within the context of the sentence. The “ig” ending is close enough to “ing” to suggest a verb, but unlike grade school students, college students know this automatically. Asking them to name the part of speech each nonsense word belongs to will be condescending for they possess the power of Grammar 1! “It was brillig,” I hear one student whisper to himself, “it was bright?” “What was bright?” I ask. “The weather,” answers another student impatiently. I rejoice! Nothing provokes students into thinking more than if they believe I know less than they do. They feel their way through the rest of the words in the first stanza, basing their conclusions on internal logic and past literary experience. They reason that if the weather was bright, the rest of the words must construct a description of nature. “The slithy

toves” could be plants (“slimy bushes”) or animals (“toves could be a type of doves”). Then, without being asked to identify the part of speech, they figure out that “gyre” and “gimble” are actions because they follow the word “did.”⁵ Then I ask them to put it all together. The slimy bushes moved and swayed. “Wabe” then MUST be a kind of wind! In no more than fifteen minutes, they “translated” the first two lines of a poem they previously thought was beyond their ability to comprehend. They feel a sense of accomplishment. It does not matter if their translation is correct because in this case there really is no one right way to read it.

After going through the third and fourth lines of the first (and most confusing) stanza, I ask them to utilize the same thought process and translate (individually or in groups) the entire poem. The results are fantastic because often one word is ascribed multiple, sometimes, contradictory meanings by different students. “Uffish” in the fourth stanza, for example, is sometimes translated as “indecisive,” “deep,” or “lazy.”⁶ These discrepancies produce a discussion regarding the suitability of the translated words to the narrative’s internal logic. The boy is obviously brave to fight a dragon,⁷ then why would he be lazy? Why would he be indecisive? Maybe he was suddenly scared or else why would he stop to think about it? And so, without noticing it, they enter into an analysis of character development and narrative structure and the words they were so scared of earlier become instruments they use to facilitate creative and critical thinking. Almost as soon as they notice how proud the father is of his son’s bravery in defeating the monster, so do they become proud of their control of the language in the poem. As soon as they realize the meaning of the “nonsense,” they open up to a wonderful discussion of the poem’s narrative that is universal and familiar in any culture. They have conquered their own monster just as the boy defeated the Jabberwock. Additionally, they have a clear grasp of

Carroll's purpose in writing this poem and the effect it might have on young readers. They explain that it isn't just an amusing adventure story, but also a coming-of-age lesson on how to be brave and independent. They call it a "rite of passage," something many kids experience, like going to college, completing remediation.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty claims, "when I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less" (213). When Alice questions his ability to "make words mean so many different things" he replies that the real question is "which is to be master," the writer or the words. We want our students to become masters over words, to rule them rather than be intimidated by them. "Jabberwocky" trains remedial students to enter into challenging texts with a sense of adventure and empowerment that allows them to tackle new vocabulary as friendly nonsense words to which they can ascribe meaning, rather than threateningly monstrous verbal communication they are powerless to tame. We teach reading and writing to our students as a means to an end not as an end on to itself. Our hope is that through the practice of reading and writing, our students will be able to see the process and a way to express thought, new and original thought. We hope they will see words as tools to express what their ideas, rather than allow words to intimidate and obscure. That, George Orwell concludes "Politics and the English Language," is what is most needed to save the English language "to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about" (318).

When she leaves Humpty Dumpty, Alice feels disappointed and frustrated, as she does with most other Looking-Glass characters she meets. But she expresses her frustration with such a new sense of command over language that Carroll feels compelled to note it particularly.

'Of all the unsatisfactory -- ' (she repeated this aloud, as it was a great comfort to have such a long word to say) 'of all the unsatisfactory people I EVER met -- ' She never finished the sentence, for at this moment a heavy crash shook the forest from end to end. (220)

The crash is the sound of Humpty Dumpty falling off the wall, a fine metaphor for the pretentiousness he represents and the triumph of the little girl he fails to intimidate.

My students' triumph over "Jabberwocky" does wonders to their morale and self-esteem. This becomes obvious in the follow-up activity in which I ask them to write a prose "translation" of the poem in their own words. Their new found confidence shines through drowning out the shadowy voices of self-doubt that have been implanted in them for too long. This, of course, is not a permanent condition. Their self-confidence is something that needs constant nurturing; it is vital to their success in the course (Hynes 102). When next I see them, I hand out copies of Cynthia Ozick's essay "The Seam of The Snail," a tour-de-force of structure and vocabulary. In it Ozick compares herself as "a pinched perfectionist" writer, who attends "crabbed minutiae and a self-trammeled through taking pains" to her mother's personality, which was "all profusion, abundance, fabrication" (79-80). Ozick, an accomplished writer, goes on "casting and recasting sentences in a tiny handwriting on monomaniacally uniform paper" while her mother mispronounced words and wrote in "gargantuan Palmer loops." Although her own endeavors in the specialized field on non-fiction writing is "perfect"; Ozick describes her mother's imperfections as "excellence: insofar as excellence means ripe generosity" (79). She "thought herself capable of doing anything, and did everything she imagined. But nothing was perfect" (78). I assign this essay in order to allow my students to view their own imperfections as excellence, but also in order to offer them an opportunity to solidify their enhanced reading

skills. As we finish reading Ozick's essay aloud, one student raises his head, and, with a smile, exclaims, "well, THAT was a Jabberwocky moment!" But I can tell that he is not afraid.

Notes

¹W. Timothy Gallwey first introduced Nonjudgmental Awareness in *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1974). Gallwey believed that in every human activity there are two levels of engagement: the outer and the inner. The outer level is played in the world external to the individual. The person tries to overcome external obstacles to reach an external goal. The inner level is an internal struggle against such pressures as fear, self-doubt, lack of confidence, and poor concentration. The inner struggle is often fighting self-imposed hurdles that prevent an individual reaching his or her full potential. Application of Nonjudgmental Awareness means allowing the individual to learn in the outer, without constantly calling attention to, or subconsciously aggravating, the inner. Gallwey's theory was originally invented for training in various sports, but it has had a much wider influence. Applied to the teaching of language skills, it means "learning proceeds most effectively and effortlessly when learners allow themselves to move naturally through the learning process, aware of relevant aspects of performance without making excessive critical judgments about that performance" (Kasper "ESL Writing" 58). This principle has even wider implications to the practice of teaching in every discipline at any level.

² I have used the poem in all levels of writing classes at BMCC. Whether in developmental writing as described here, college composition (English 101) and Writing Through Literature, where it helps in discussing context, narrative techniques, and elements of fiction, and even 300 level writing intensive courses, "Jabberwocky" never fails in assuaging fears and easing students into comprehension and conscious performance.

³ Francis identifies formal, scientific knowledge of grammar, or “the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulization of formal language patterns,” as “Grammar 2” (299). Grammar 2 may be more successfully incorporated in upper level writing courses, as per Janice Neuleib’s suggestion in “The Relation of Formal Grammar to Composition”: “Perhaps we need to change our scope and sequence so that negative attitudes are not developed at the lower-grade level. Maybe we ought to make grammar something mysterious and special, which can be learned only by those who are ready for its intricacies” (249).

⁴ I do not use Humpty Dumpty’s explanation of the poem from *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* in class because Carroll intended him to be a parody of literary critics claiming mastery over their subject. It is a subtlety that often confuses students in basic classes and creates unnecessary tension in class. Mr. Dumpty offers an ironic moment I prefer to reserve for use more successfully in my Introduction to Literature course (English 201).

⁵ “Gyre” is defined in Webster as “a circular or spiral motion or form; especially: a giant circular oceanic surface current,” which still leaves much to be explained in the context of the poem.

⁶ Carroll explained in a letter to child-friend Maud Standen that by “uffish” he means “a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner is roughish, and the temper is huffish” (quoted in Gardner 153).

⁷ No one disputes the fact that the Jabberwock IS a dragon and I always show my students John Tenniel’s illustration to validate their pre-knowledge.

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