

Curiosity and Comprehension

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Many years ago, when I was working in a school in Buenos Aires, I was required to teach *Macbeth* to a class of Spanish-speaking Argentine schoolboys. I was a little apprehensive at being given such a task, because Shakespeare's language is not always easy, even for the native speaker, and that of *Macbeth* is particularly rich and strange to the modern reader. Having myself seen and read the play for the first time at an early age and been carried away by the story and the rhetoric, I decided to concentrate first on the action and drama, and as far as possible let the language take care of itself.

I read the play to my students, scene by scene, taking the different parts myself. I did not, except occasionally, let my pupils read it aloud for themselves, as I thought they lacked necessary experience and skill to benefit from this. At the end of each scene I saw to it that everybody understood what had happened, and we briefly summarized this in writing. After this, I went through the scene again, explaining those language items that might prevent essential comprehension, and then I read the scene straight through once more.

This was a pedestrian approach, the pupils' participation was apparently largely passive, and I was in fact doing most of the work. Not very exciting.

However, when we had gone through about half of the play in this manner, I discovered to my great surprise that the class had taken the book home and finished it for themselves. Through—or possibly in spite of—my efforts, they had woken up to the idea that the story was exciting, and wanted to know how it turned out in the end: how this extraordinary poetic murderer and his no less extraordinary wife finally destroyed themselves.

We went ahead and finished the play, working methodically but now more rapidly, and went on to discuss and re-

read parts of the play with special reference to the characters, plots, themes, witchcraft, and blood. We did not bother very much with topical allusions, internal evidence for the date of the play, or anything philological. Incidentally, and almost without noticing it, we did a lot of practice in oral and written English.

The point of what I have just described is not that we should “throw our pupils in at the deep end” by making them study literary classics in archaic language.¹ Certainly not. At least not from a language teaching point of view. Normally they should read what they *can* read without excessive difficulty. But, obsolete language apart, the main trouble with introducing them to a difficult text is not that it is difficult, but that the difficulty may kill the pupils' interest and motivation unless these are very strong. In the case that I have just described, curiosity carried them through. They even appeared to enjoy it!

Exploiting the student's curiosity

Most people have an innate curiosity about things and ideas, people and events. When they read stories, especially those concerning crime, love, or adventure, they not only want to find out what is happening or has happened,

1. EDITOR'S NOTE: “To throw someone in at the deep end” is an idiom referring to a rather extreme method of teaching someone to swim: by throwing him into the end of the swimming pool where the water is very deep so that he has no choice but to try to make his way to the edge of the pool or to shallow water, by attempting to swim. This saying is often used figuratively, as here, to express the idea of requiring someone to do something that seems too difficult for him, or for which he has had no previous training.

but they generally make some kind of guess as to what is likely to happen next. Where there is no such curiosity on the part of the reader, a detective story becomes a pointless tale of violence that few intelligent people would take the trouble to read.

We can exploit this innate curiosity when teaching pupils to read a foreign language, and it is sad to reflect how little this is done, or was done in our school days in the French and Latin readers we wearily waded through.

Teaching of a certain kind may actually inhibit curiosity. This can be particularly serious when you are trying to teach reading and comprehension to students who have little or no written literature in their own language, and where the tendency has been to treat written texts in a “school language” like French or English merely as material for commentary, definition, analysis, manipulation, or translation, but never, never, as a medium of communication—a means of finding things out or making them happen. It is noticeable that in most of the language textbooks used by such students, although the reading texts are in the target language, the instructions for doing exercises and so on are in the mother or vehicular tongue. The latter remains for them the *real* language; the target language is just something you have to study.

A useful technique

This lack of expectation or interest in what the language had to offer was very evident among recent first-year students at the University of Chad, and I should like to describe briefly some of the ways in which I tried to tackle this problem. Naturally, some methods work better for some students and teachers than for others; the methods I used seemed to give results in this particular case.

At the beginning of the academic year all students read extremely slowly. Their vocabulary was quite extensive, but as they read one word at a time they had little real understanding of what they were reading, let alone any curiosity as to what was likely to come next.

To stimulate a questioning attitude and to increase reading speed and comprehension, I used pre-questions similar to those used in rapid-reading courses to highlight the essential information in the text to be read. But such questions, being somewhat artificial and externally posed, did not strike at the root of the problem, which was the need to cultivate a questioning attitude on the part of the students themselves. Something more was required.

One method I tried was to get the students to make up their own pre-questions on the basis of a brief sketch of the subject-matter. This was fairly successful, but needed careful control to prevent the questions from wandering

too far from the text they were to read, or from concentrating too much on one aspect of the subject. For instance, before beginning one such reading project I told the students that the passage they were going to read, and on which they would have to prepare pre-questions, dealt with houses and buildings in different parts of the world. Most of the questions the students produced referred to the cost of building skyscrapers, and very few to ordinary dwelling-houses—none to huts, or cabins, or igloos. This may have been due to a misunderstanding of the word *building*. Or perhaps they thought small buildings unworthy of attention.

However, after a little guidance, they did produce some perceptive and pertinent questions, and they evidently felt that these had helped them to read with greater ease and understanding, and to take an interest in what they were going to read.

A “discovery” approach

Another method that I used to arouse curiosity and deepen comprehension—as well as to provide oral practice—may be suitable only when dealing with narrative or other material in which the content is arranged in chronological order or some other predictable sequence. For one exercise of this kind I selected a short extract from *The Citadel*, by A. J. Cronin. I “conscripted a volunteer” to write on the blackboard, the rest of the class writing down the text in their notebooks as we jointly “discovered” it. Only I had a copy of the original, against which we checked and supplemented our guesses as we went on.

I began by dictating the opening words of the chosen passage:

He reached 7 Glydar Place ...

I explained the meaning of *Place* in this context, as this is a *faux ami* (false cognate) for speakers of French. (In English *Place* usually refers to a street, not to a square as it does in French.) Most of the class understood that *7 Glydar Place* would be the name of a house.

Well, what did they think happened next?

Some thought he would have gone straight in, others that he would have knocked at the door. The latter proved to be correct, as shown by the words of the original text:

He reached 7 Glydar Place, knocked breathlessly upon the door, and ...

A pause to consider the implications of the word *breathlessly*. Then ... what did they suppose happened?

Naturally, and correctly, they supposed somebody let him in.

... and was at once ... (Why at once?) ... admitted to the ...

To what kind of room? Many suggestions were made,

but nobody guessed the true answer, one that caused a genuine stir of surprise and interest:

... and was admitted to the kitchen ...

This was not much like African homes, where cooking is often done out-of-doors, nor did it square at all with what the students know of European- and American-style houses.

Further surprises were in store as I dictated the rest of the sentence:

... where in the recessed bed ...

Why a bed, recessed or otherwise, in a kitchen? And who was lying in the bed?

... where in the recessed bed the patient lay.

What did this suggest? And who was “He,” the person who had come to see the patient? After some discussion we agreed that “he” was probably a doctor.

With a little nudging, some help from the text, and a good deal of argument, the story unfolded, raising, as it did so, further questions.

The doctor approached the bedside *with a fast-beating heart*; he felt *the significance of this, the real starting-point of his life*; he was *alone, confronted with a case which he must diagnose and treat unaided*; he was *conscious of his nervousness, his inexperience, his complete unpreparedness, for such a task*.

What do all these details add up to? What do they tell us about the doctor?

Then again, what kind of house was it in which the main room—the kitchen—was described as *cramped, ill-lit, stone-floored*—in cold Europe, where the coolness of a stone floor might not be appreciated? What kind of people might live in such a house?

The narrative goes on to describe the young doctor’s examination of his first patient. What did the class think were the commonest symptoms of illness? Several were suggested, some of which were confirmed by the text:

She complained that her head ached intolerably. Temperature, pulse, tongue, they all spoke of trouble, serious trouble. What was it?

What was it?

What indeed?

This is where we left this particular text, on a question to which students were invited, if they wished, to think of an answer for the following class hour. Some students did so; some, on their own initiative, borrowed the book and read it to find out what the poor woman really was suffering from and what the doctor did about it. Their curiosity had been aroused, and they wanted to satisfy it.

The exercise—one of several such—that I have just described in some detail, was, of course, designed to train students in imaginative thinking as much as in language

skills, but it is surely wrong to dissociate the two faculties of thought and speech.

Developing “reactive” skills

There has been a tendency in the past—and there is even now, perhaps, with the insistence on the dichotomy of competence and performance—to treat language as a kind of abstract calculus, the mastery of which bears little or no relation to its actual use. Yet it is surely true to say that a language is not really known until it is put to use for purposes that are interesting and important to the user.

The use of language for purposes of real communication is difficult to achieve, however, because in the typical classroom situation the use of target language as a means of communication is apt to be artificial and redundant, however well simulated. Plenty of oral practice is essential to acquiring the language, but unless the learner is in a country where it is the native language, he does not usually rely on it as his means of communication with the people around him, with his fellow learners and companions, nor, as a rule, with his teacher. It is likely, therefore, that for some time his chief opportunity of using the language as a necessary means of communication will be through the receptive skills of aural and written comprehension, with the aid, if possible, of the radio, films, newspapers, and books. These skills are sometimes called passive, but this is wrong; they are reactive, and the student will gain in proportion to what he gives in the way of mental activity. Comprehension will be greatly improved, and its benefits increased, if the material used is interesting and informative in content, and if the learner forms in advance, and as he progresses, predictions and conjectures about what it has to tell him, so that the language operates on what is already in his mind.

The ancient Greeks believed that wonder was the mother of thought. Thoughtful curiosity may often be the parent of speech.