



## WRITING ABOUT AND LEARNING FROM SELECTED TEXTS

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It is well known that there are many problems when facing a text, such as the challenge that implies trying to find a method which stimulates language development and takes into account the needs and interests of students at the same time.

We assume the fact that natural language is produced for purposes, to achieve pragmatic ends but, too often, the classroom and the real world are thought of as two different things. In this context and, trying not to miss the point, we think that selecting the topics with adequate matters and practising a variety of activities to this end may set the students talking about a real problem quite familiar to them. The different kind of activities practised will be used to encourage classroom interaction and will serve as a basis:

- \*- for lexical study
- \*- to practise structures and grammar points already learnt.
- \*- to do general and specific reading comprehension (skimming and scanning)
- \*- for discussion and debate
- \*- for oral and written work
- \*- to practise the phonological component

These activities can be organised in:

1. Pre-reading activities
2. During-reading activities and
3. post-reading activities.

The text selected in this case is of an intermediate level and easy and quick to digest. The subject matter is about the new system for dealing with patients' complaints. It is expected that most verbal complaints will be resolved on the spot or within a couple of days at most. If they cannot be resolved at this level, they will be referred to the complaints

manager, or as a last resort, to the health service commissioner. Being this fact a common problem widely spread, students will surely know, and will probably say, something about it.

## **I. PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**

These activities focus attention on the subject and prepare for the actual reading in the hope that it will stimulate students to think about the subject matter and get them into the right frame of mind. In this way the students' minds are open and alert and ready to participate in the lesson. Being obvious that one good picture can tell more than many words, if there is a photograph of some sort this would also help the students to associate it with their own personal experience or surroundings. It may also arouse their curiosity and interest which is always a positive sign in language learning. If questions are formed on the text the students then have a further reason for paying close attention to what they are reading so that they will be able to answer them on completion of it.

Among the activities we could do are:

a) -A comment on the headline, and

b) -Word-prediction

a). A comment on the headline. Reading the title of the text aloud can be a good point to begin with and may lead to a discussion and to the asking of questions before the text is read. The aim of these exercises is to guess or anticipate information that students would expect to find under the headings.

b). Word prediction. If we are going to read a passage on patients' complaints, students should predict words they would expect to find in the text, explaining their choice. This brainstorming phase allows students to make use of their prior knowledge or experience and could serve as a first focus on vocabulary.

## **II. DURING-READING ACTIVITIES**

This is a way to maintain students' interest and concentration while in the process of reading a text. It encourages and motivates students to draw from prior knowledge of the language, already acquired in previous lessons, and to be open minded about new words and expressions.

These activities could be performed in different ways, individually, or in pairs or groups; sometimes they could be done at home, as well. In this case, students should quickly underline words and expressions unknown to them checking their predictions on vocabulary, and the teacher should help them guess the meaning of the words unfamiliar to them. There are a variety of activities that can be used to deduce the meaning of a word, among them we could use the following ones:

\* Give a definition in English with enough explanation for the meaning to be clear, even giving a sentence with each word in English.

\* Find synonyms and antonyms. In the first case, find a familiar word that relates to the subject in the same way the unknown word does and, in the second, giving the opposite meaning of the word.

\* Do transformations as well, from noun to verb and viceversa. This could be done as a pre-reading activity, a during-reading activity or a post-reading activity.

### III. POST-READING ACTIVITIES

One of the basic aims of the communicative approach to language teaching is that students are involved in actual interaction in the classroom. To this end, a range of different activities have come to be used, and due to this vast amount of them to practise, the teacher should be forced to select among those which suit the particular class best. Among them, we could use

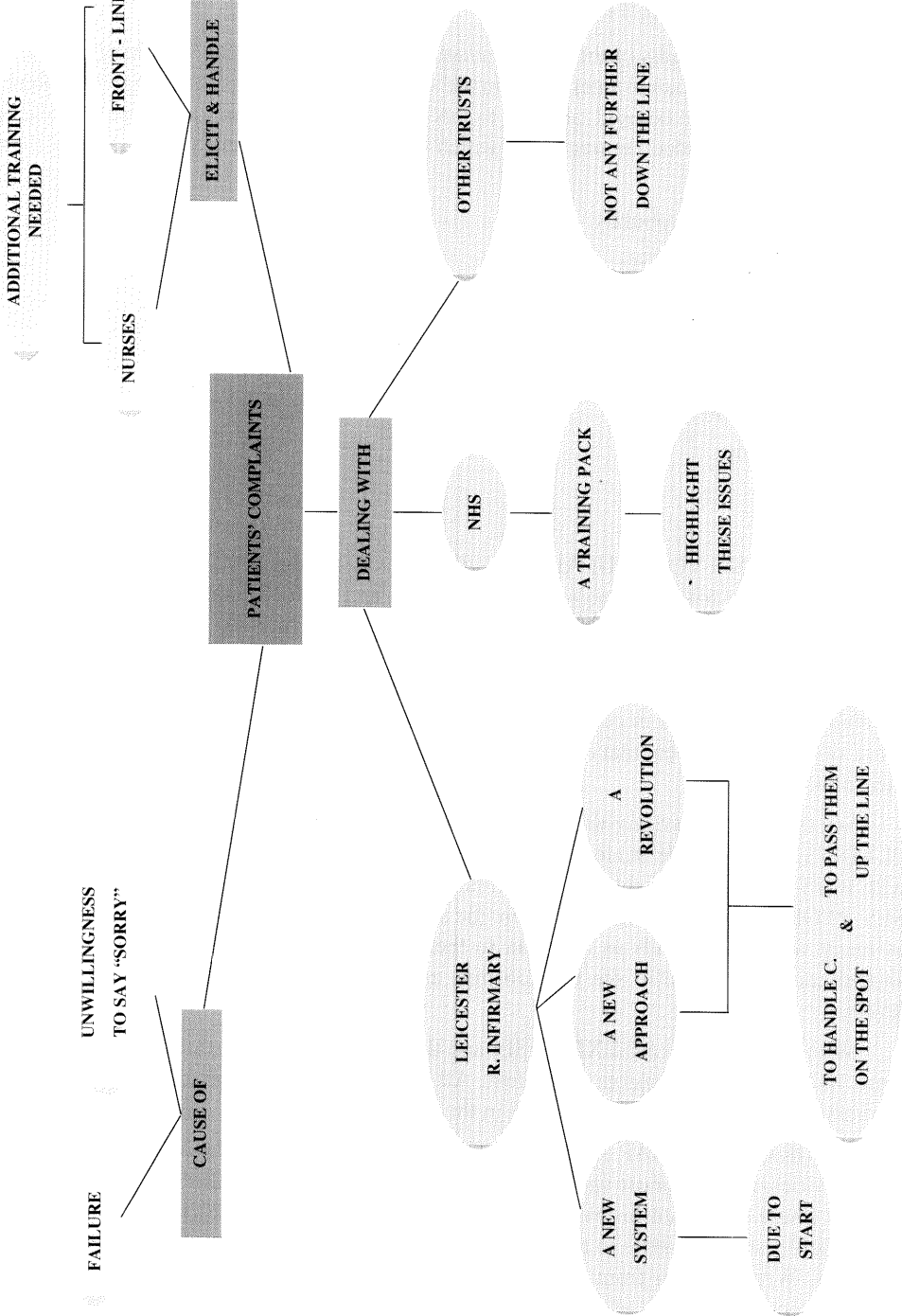
- Expanding vocabulary
- True/false exercises
- Information-gap activities
- Question and answer
- Grammar review
- Pronunciation
- Listening
- Video.

**EXPANDING VOCABULARY.** Vocabulary is beginning to occupy a central place in the way people learn a language. Learning words and their meanings, and how they are used is increasingly seen as the key to teaching a language, not just an annoying or irrelevant side activity. So, that's why after students have read the text, a second focus on vocabulary could take place. Following the lexical approach and assuming the fact that new vocabulary is best learnt in context, organising a diagram of the text could be useful in the sense of expanding vocabulary in a logical and sensible way helping students to fix it in their minds.

So, the teacher, writing the key word in the middle of the board, in this case **COMPLAINTS**, should guide students to list their associations already given around the topic, with word-prediction. Establishing different levels, we could put a first step around **CAUSES**, **PEOPLE** and **ENTITIES**, and then, the students, having read the text now, should add as many words and levels as they can to their map in order to complete it. The teacher should encourage them to see relationships among words categorising them at different levels.

With a **TRUE-FALSE EXERCISE**, and through different questions we may lead students into the comprehension of the text. All the questions are related to the subject, and the answers could be easily worked out in the text.

**INFORMATION-GAP ACTIVITIES.** Problem-solving, roleplaying and information-gap activities, are seen most valuable for communication, too. Usually it is the teacher who decides where and when to give information and students the ones to carry out the tasks, but it could also be possible to allow students to use their own writings for information-gap activities. Writing, apart from contributing to the students' understanding of the text, can become a powerful means of rethinking, revising, and reformulating what one knows.



Information-gap activities may include incomplete plans and diagrams in which the students are asked to complete them relating their own information.

## **QUESTION AND ANSWER**

Oral and written Q & A can be used, too, to check on students understanding of the text. This activity enables students to practise comprehension and to respond to several questions formulated in relation to the text they have just read. This is important as not only does it stimulate them to answer correctly, but they can also search for adequate vocabulary and use it accordingly. In this way students are using English freely of their own accord.

## **GRAMMAR POINTS**

Although vocabulary and comprehension are basic points when studying a text, we must not forget that grammar review plays an important part, as well. So, apart from the questions on the content of the text, we think that the study of grammar is not a waste of time and students should be introduced to the structures at the same time that they learn to use the language. And that's what communicative grammar implies, the practice of different grammar aspects in context, in such a way that structures and communication should go side by side. In this context we must highlight the frequent use of passive voice in English scientific texts in which the Agent is not so important as the Affected. A few examples from the text will do, and students should find as many active sentences as they can in the text and change them into passive. As an alternative exercise, we could revise two important tenses for talking about the past, the past simple tense, and the present perfect tense.

Apart from the tasks already mentioned, exercises in which the students should put the verbs in brackets into the Past Simple or the Present Perfect tense, could be done if necessary.

## **PRONUNCIATION**

So far, we've done exercises related to grammar points and to the content of the text but, at the same time, conscious of the importance of a good pronunciation, and seeing it as an integral part of language learning, we've thought that practising certain sounds could be appropriate, basically when they appear in the text and perhaps when they've been repeated a few times.

- \*to help students to produce English sounds
- \*to show them how to pronounce correctly, and
- \*to show the relationship between spelling and pronunciation.

Pronunciation tends to be neglected by many students as they know they will not be tested on it. The ideal way of testing pronunciation is to actually listen to the student, but since this is not always possible, other alternatives can be used and dictation can be one of them. A dictation exercise may appear in different forms and it may consist of:

- A list of words to be practised
- Some words beginning with or containing a particular pattern
- Fill in the blanks
- Matching words and transcriptions
- Exercises on minimal pairs.

## **LISTENING**

Listening can be in many ways so exciting as reading. Although the reader can stop, look up a word and reflect or slow down when the information is dense or the exposition difficult, and the listener has no such advantages, if the material is related to the listeners' particular field of interest then it will, undoubtedly, be received better.

We may find that listening to a tape describing certain aspects or situations on a subject matter can provide the student with useful information, and could be the pretext to practise dialogue getting the students to take on the part of each of the characters and set them talking about a real problem. Students should study the short dialogue and then, practise it. The exchanges should be done aloud so that pronunciation can be checked. This supervised pairwork can be an ideal solution for large classes.

The students may be asked, as well, to imagine that they have to interview one of the people in a picture and to think of five questions they would like to ask him/her. A dialogue can be developed around these questions. The students may also be asked to carry out communication tasks that relate to the topic: for example, a patient complains of slowness in dealing with his application for a hospital bed, what apologies/assurances would you give him?. Such activities serve to relate the topic to the students in some personal way.

Diagrams and charts are also very useful. It can be helpful to get hold of a large diagram of the human body so that students, basically those in their 1st year, can revise the names of the parts of the body in English helping to clarify certain aspects in specialist medical texts.

## **VIDEO**

Next we come to an area where technology lends us a helping hand and it is, in this case, the video. A video not only allows us to hear what's going on in a certain situation but also to see real people in a real situation, their behaviour, facial expressions, mood, etc.

Video and TV form part of our daily life, but it is necessary that we learn from them. Videos allow us to rely on a context already given to present vocabulary, structures and functions, apart from a stimulus to talk. That's why using the video in the classroom can be a motivation to learn English, and now that satellite TV programmes have invaded Europe, both teacher and students can get to grips with English.

On preparing a video session, it is necessary to have a clear objective, either as an activity in itself that allows us to focus on particular linguistic and grammatical aspects, or as a complement too to a unit which has already been studied and with which it bears relation. In this way, the viewing of a video tape could be used as an advanced extension for students above intermediate level. Helped by transparencies, and after the video has been

shown for the first time, we could give the students the basic vocabulary and expressions to help them to overcome difficulties in content and language.

Then, the teacher should show the students the video again and, with a few questions, try to facilitate the understanding of it. On the other hand, and as we've mentioned before, grammar review is very important, too, and something to pay attention to. Other times, a game having to do with the subject matter, can be the pretext to encourage the students to talk.

Being able to follow and understand TV programmes, picking up the language, requires great effort and attention, but in the end it seems to be very rewarding and a complimentary method for being up-to-date in English.

With the activities already mentioned we hope to give an idea of the way of undertaking a reading comprehension text. In no way do we try to make of it a rigid pattern, but an stimulus for language interaction and implication in situations taking place in real contexts.