# Chapter 6   **Classroom texts**

In the opening of his play *The Bald Prima Donna*[65], the playwright Eugene Ionesco satirizes the kind of language and values that – in his day, at least – were associated with foreign language classes:

MRS SMITH.   Goodness! Nine o'clock! This evening for supper we had soup, fish, cold ham and mashed potatoes and a good English salad and we had English beer to drink. The children drank English water. We had a very good meal this evening. And that's because we are English, because we live in a suburb of London and because our name is Smith. [...] Mashed potatoes are very nice with cold ham. The mayonnaise was quite fresh. The mayonnaise from the grocer round the corner is much better quality than the mayonnaise from the grocer opposite, it's even better than the mayonnaise from the grocer at the bottom of the hill...

Ionesco realized that the bland, unexciting world of coursebook characters and the somewhat surreal detail with which their daily routines are described was a genre in its own right – distinctive enough to be recognized by his audience and surreal enough to fit neatly into the tradition of absurdist theatre. It was familiar to his audience because of texts such as this one[66], from the same period:

6.1
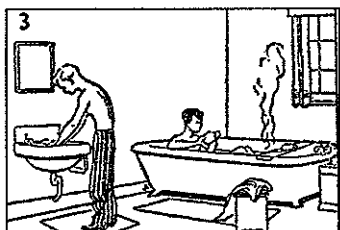
It is ten past seven now. Are Roger and David still in the bedroom? No, they are not in the bedroom now, they are in the bathroom.

David is having a bath. He has a bath every morning. Roger is standing at the wash-basin. He is washing his hands and face. Roger has a bath in the evening, before he goes to bed.

What are Roger and David going to do next? They are going back to the bedroom. They are going to dress.

As banal as this text may seem to us now, there were in fact good reasons for such texts being like this. For a start, language teaching texts needed to be intelligible, even for beginners, and so a degree of simplification was considered necessary, both in terms of syntax and vocabulary. In this sense, the writers of these texts were 'keeping their audience in mind', or, in Hallidayan terms, respecting the *tenor* of the discourse. Moreover, these texts were not designed in order to inform their readers about the world nor to influence them to change it: they had a purely *pedagogic* (that is to say, teaching) function. Part of this teaching function was to display the target language in contexts that would make it both comprehensible and also learnable. And part of what makes a language learnable is that its patterns are frequently and prominently displayed, thereby increasing the chances that they will be attended to (or *noticed*) – either consciously or subliminally. Hence the repetition and alternation of these grammar patterns:

- present continuous: *David is having a bath... Roger is standing at the wash-basin,* etc and
- present simple: *He has a bath every morning... Roger has a bath in the evening...*

In fact, *not* to be either simplified or repetitive would be a sure sign of their failure as appropriate texts for teaching purposes, one would have thought.

Nevertheless, a reaction against texts of this type set in at the same time as a more *communicative* approach to language teaching was being advocated. It was felt that such texts provided poor models of real (or *authentic)* language use and, moreover, were obsessively concerned with the *forms* of the language, particularly its grammar patterns, at the expense of more communicative features of text, such as vocabulary and discourse features. Especially since the advent of *corpus linguistics,* ie the systematic study of (often vast) data bases of naturally occurring texts, artificially doctored classroom texts have been subject to extensive criticism, even derision. The fact, for example, that few if any scripted dialogues in coursebooks include such highly frequent items as the discourse markers *you know, I mean, but, erm* and so on, is just one instance of their lack of representativeness. Worse, many coursebook texts actually distort the evidence, presenting language items in ways that they would rarely or never be used in naturally occurring language use. In this dialogue in a beginners' course[67], for example, the modal verb *must* is presented for the first time, but in a way that seems rather forced:

6.2

MRS JONES:	Come in, Bessie.
	Shut the door, please.
	The bedroom's very untidy.
BESSIE:	What must I do, Mrs Jones?
MRS JONES:	Open the window and air the room.
etc.	

What must I do? with its connotations of self-imposed moral obligation, seems an odd choice in this context. (A corpus search shows that the phrase *what must I do…* often collocates with … *to be saved?* Maybe Bessie has other things on her mind.)

Simplification in coursebook texts could lead to distortion, not just at the sentence level, but at the level of the entire discourse. The following dialogue[68] not only misrepresents the way telephone openings and closings are ordered and elaborated, but seems to have no communicative purpose, in that the speaker phones simply to tell the listener something he already knows:

6.3

CHRISTINE:	Hello. Is that Uncle Bob?
UNCLE BOB:	Yes?
CHRISTINE:	This is Christine. I'm in my hotel in New York.
UNCLE BOB:	Hello, Christine! How are you?
CHRISTINE:	I'm fine. I'm very excited. How are you?
UNCLE BOB:	We're all fine.
CHRISTINE:	My plane arrives in Montreal at seven fifteen this evening.
UNCLE BOB:	Yes, that's right.
CHRISTINE:	See you very soon. Bye.
UNCLE BOB:	Goodbye Christine.

One argument for simplification in coursebook texts was that this made them easier to understand. It's true that at the level of vocabulary and grammar the conversation between Uncle Bob and Christine is easy to process. But as coherent discourse, it is less transparent. Uncle Bob's response to Christine's informing

him about her arrival time (*Yes, that's right*) doesn't make sense unless Christine's utterance is some kind of coded message (are they secret agents?) or he is hard of hearing. Moreover, he doesn't appear to share her feelings of excitement. Maybe Uncle Bob is a computer program, like AOLiza?

In fact, the lack of correspondence with any kind of reality may have made some coursebook texts *harder*, not easier, to understand. And, as we saw in Chapter 4, when spoken language is stripped of all its repetitions, filled pauses, false starts and discourse markers, it can become very dense and hence difficult to process in real time.

Finally, coursebook texts were boring. They provided little intrinsic motivation for learners to *want* to read or listen to them. Only a perverse imagination could have responded with anything but a yawn to Roger's and David's bathroom antics, or to Christine's electric conversation with her uncle.

The communicative approach ushered in a re-evaluation of such texts and one response was to look to *authentic* texts for guidance. Accordingly, *authenticity* became the standard by which classroom texts were judged, and authentic texts, ie texts not written specifically for teaching purposes, started to make an appearance in coursebooks. Here, for example, is a text from a beginners' course published in 1982[69]:

6.4

parties	**MAKING FRIENDS IN LONDON**
discos	
pub evenings	is a challenge even for the most sociable of us. You can't just go up to strangers and say: 'Hi, I'd like to meet you.' If you enjoy
wine bars	meeting people LONDON LINKUP could be just what you've been
films	looking for. We are a friendly cross-section of mostly unattached young people aged 20–40, equally divided between the sexes.
concerts	Our aim is to become involved in things that really interest us and to make worthwhile use of our spare time. There's always lots
folk	happening all over London amongst our 1,500 members who
jazz	organise over 150 events each month.
ballet	To find out all about us, just drop into one of our informal introductory talks. These take place at both 6.30pm and 8.00pm
cooking	on the following days (excluding public holidays).
bridge	Mondays and Thursdays. At the International Sportswriters'
chess	Club, Great Russell Street. (Opposite the YMCA near Tottenham Court Road tube.)
football	
waterskiing	If you would like a chat beforehand, please ring us 01-606 1750. We look forward to welcoming you.
horseriding	
astrology	**LONDON LINKUP**

In order to deal with texts like this, teachers were faced with at least two challenges: how to ensure that their learners understood such texts, and how to decide which language features of these texts should be selected for teaching purposes. Inevitably, a number of compromises, especially at lower levels, resulted. One was to select only the simplest authentic texts, such as restaurant menus and bus timetables, for use at lower levels. But even purists recognized that this minimalist strategy risked depriving learners of a sufficiently varied diet of texts and language input. Another was to produce so-called *semi-authentic* texts, that is, texts that replicated features of authentic texts, but which had been simplified linguistically. This strategy is still widely adopted, especially with texts designed for listening practice.

Discovery activity 6.1   *Authentic texts*

Which of these texts – all from coursebooks – is a) authentic (ie not originally designed for classroom use), b) an authentic text adapted for classroom use, or c) completely contrived? What features of each helped you decide? How successfully simulated is the 'semi-authentic' text?

6.5

Dog bites policeman

WHEN POLICEMAN Alan Handley received an emergency call from a fellow officer, who was trying to arrest three thieves in a local park, he responded immediately. When Handley arrived on the scene, the officer and his police dog were losing the fight, so Handley bravely jumped in. However, the dog did not recognize him and bit him on the arm, allowing the thieves to escape. 'I was wearing my uniform, but maybe he didn't recognize my number,' joked Handley.[70]

6.6

Sarah's surprise

Shapely Scottish singing sensation Sarah Sownes broke off her engagement with American transport millionaire Laurie Van Truck yesterday. Sarah has been seeing Laurie since her marriage to film star Steve Newman broke up two years ago. She said, 'I've decided to break with Laurie completely. I don't love him. He was helping me to break into the film industry, but nothing's happened.'[71]

6.7

Police hold 18 football fans in dawn raids

POLICE investigating football violence arrested eighteen people yesterday in dawn raids on homes in London and the Home Counties.

Detectives said they hoped they had 'broken the back of a hard-core element' of violent football fans. Weapons including knives, coshes and a crossbow were seized by the ninety officers involved in the raids.[72]

Commentary ■ ■ ■

It should be fairly obvious that text 6.6 is the contrived text. Even without the cutely invented names, the unusually high frequency of instances of the verb *brea* gives the game away and suggests that there is a language agenda here, ie phrasal verbs. Nevertheless, the text does replicate some of the stylistic features of tabloid text, including pre-modified proper nouns (*American transport millionaire Laurie Van Truck*), alliteration (*shapely Scottish singing sensation*) and the use of direct speech. Even the relative simplicity of its language is probably just as much a characteristic of tabloid newspapers as of coursebook texts. What is less typical is the absence of any idiomatic language, apart from the phrasal verbs themselves.

Text 6.7, however, makes no concessions to learners, either in terms of syntax or the choice of vocabulary. The average sentence length of seventeen words contrasts with twelve in the text about Sarah Sownes, suggesting greater syntactic complexity. There is no evidence of any form of simplification: rare words, such as *coshes* and *crossbow*, have not been omitted. Nor have the relatively uncommon words *dawn* and *seized* been replaced by more common synonyms, such as *early morning* and *taken*. And the idiomatic expression *broken the back of* is left intact.

Text 6.5, on the other hand, does show signs of simplification, while remaining true to the generic features of this kind of text. It may be interesting to compare the coursebook version with the original on which it was based[73]:

6.8

Dog bites man

Hereford, England – Policeman Colin Kerfoot responded instantly to an emergency call from a fellow officer who was tackling three burglars in a local park. When he arrived at the scene, the other officer and his police dog were losing the battle, so Kerfoot bravely jumped in. However, the dog failed to recognize its ally and bit PC Kerfoot on the arm, allowing the suspects to get away. 'God knows what he would have done if he'd been on their side,' joked the officer.

Notice for a start that low frequency words, such as *tackling, burglars, battle* and *ally,* have been replaced by more common synonyms, as has the idiomatic phrasal verb *get away.* In the interests of clarity, a pronoun has been replaced by its noun phrase referent (*When he arrived → When Handley arrived*) and *joked the officer* re-written as *joked Handley.* Also, the last sentence has been completely re-cast so as to eliminate the relatively difficult third conditional structure and replace it with something that is grammatically more transparent. (The change of proper names, by the way, has nothing to do with simplification and more to do with copyright.) On the whole, the text succeeds in sounding like an authentic text, while being a little more accessible to learners than the original. ■

Another way of addressing the authenticity issue when it first emerged was to argue that a complete understanding of such texts was not necessary – nor even desirable. After all, who completely *understands* the instructions in a computer manual, and who needs to understand them? Accordingly, tasks were designed to discourage learners from 'reading every word', despite many learners' strongly felt desire to *want* to read every word.

Discovery activity 6.2   *Grading the task not the text*

In order to cope with the difficulty of ungraded authentic texts, a methodology was devised based on the slogan: *Grade the task, not the text*. That is, the learner's load in processing the text could in theory be eased by tinkering with the reading (or listening) tasks, rather than by simplifying the text itself.

The following tasks are designed to be used with text 6.4 above. Rank them in terms of the relative depth of text processing required. That is to say, which tasks require processing of the text at only a superficial level and which require deep processing?

Task A
Which of the following are typical Linkup members?
a a married 30-year-old man
b a single 25-year-old woman
c a single 50-year-old man
d a divorced 35-year-old man

Task B
What is there to do in London if you like…
music?   outdoor sports?
meeting people?   indoor games?
the arts?

Task C
Who is London Linkup aimed at?
– bored people
– lonely people
– shy people
– sociable people
– unattached people

Task D
You are interested in becoming a member of London Linkup. What do you do next?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Tasks A and D both require a fairly detailed understanding of a small part of the text, but not necessarily the whole text. Task B (which in fact is the task that is offered in the coursebook) requires no processing of the body of the text at all, but only of the list of activities on the left. In fact, with a little common sense learners should be able to answer the questions without even referring to the text. It's difficult, therefore, to understand why the text was included at all. This raises the question as to whether the strategy of *grading the task, not the text* may not sometimes be taken too far, resulting in tasks that are trivial and texts that are redundant.

Task C, on the other hand, could require a quite detailed reading of the text, since it is not immediately obvious whether the purpose of London Linkup is to 'become involved in things' and 'to make worthwhile use of ... spare time', or 'making friends'. Moreover, members are described as 'friendly' and 'unattached': the words *shy* and *lonely* are never used. Yet the 'sub-text' suggests that it is precisely these kind of people who are being targeted. However, processing the text at this level of subtlety would be beyond the means of most beginner students. Teachers using the text at this level might be content, then, to use the title (*Making friends in London*) to elicit ideas as to the kind of organization London Linkup is, and then set tasks A and D. ■

Texts designed for the classroom

Despite the ingenious attempts on the part of teachers and writers to accommodate authentic materials, some scholars, such as Henry Widdowson and Guy Cook, have begun to question the whole notion of authenticity itself. For a start, isn't the classroom a specific context with its own standards of authenticity? The whole point of studying a language in a classroom setting (it is argued) is so that the learning process can be purposefully engineered and streamlined, eliminating the hit-and-miss nature of 'just-picking-it-up-in-the-street' type of learning. One way of doing this engineering and streamlining is by deliberately contriving texts in order to maximize their educational potential. The resultant texts are appropriate to the context for which they were designed: the classroom. They are authentic classroom texts, just as prayers and sermons are authentic place-of-worship texts, or sports commentaries are authentic sports arena texts. The coursebook text *genre*, in fact, has a long history, and few learners would have been surprised by the Roger-and-David type texts that they encountered in the classroom. (It would be a different matter if they encountered them *outside* the classroom, of course.) Learners are quite happy, on the whole, to suspend their disbelief about such texts. In fact, some learners, like the writer Vladimir Nabokov, came to cherish them:

> I learned to read English before I could read Russian. My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar – Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts – 'Who is Ben?' 'He is Dan', 'Sam is in bed' and so on. Although it all remained rather stiff and patchy (the compiler was handicapped by having to employ – for the initial lessons, at least – words of not more than three letters), my imagination somehow managed to obtain the necessary data. Wanfaced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in their possession of certain tools ('Ben has an axe'), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory...[74]

Nabokov's story is a good example of the way learners make 'non-genuine' texts authentic for their own learning purposes: that is, they *authenticate* them. According to this view, authenticity is not a property of texts, but more a property of the learner's response to the text: authenticity is in the eye of the beholder.

Authentic tasks

A preoccupation with text authenticity has also been questioned on the grounds that the authenticity of the text may be of less importance than the authenticity of the tasks that learners engage in when using the texts. After all, it doesn't require an authentic menu in order to perform a restaurant role-play. If the task is to collaborate in choosing a meal, a simplified menu would do just as well. An inauthentic task, on the other hand, would be to read the menu aloud from start to finish, or to write a summary of it, or to turn it into a gap-fill exercise. Such tasks, it is argued, de-authenticate the text, turning it into a mere linguistic object.

Despite these arguments, however, the issue of the interest-raising – and hence motivational – potential of real texts doesn't go away. The 'suspension-of-disbelief' principle may work up to a certain point. But how much satisfaction is to be gained from working with texts that were merely designed to display language? And how much spin-off, in terms of authentic classroom *talk*, can be milked out of a text like the Roger-and-David one above? Or, to cite a more recent example, the text about Suzy Stressed (on page 18)? Of course, such texts don't *have* to be banal. Even a little tweaking – by giving the 'story' some narrative twist, for example – might serve to turn the Roger-and-David text into something quite interesting. Could their very colourlessness be in fact a subterfuge? Could they be aliens in disguise? Undercover agents? Lovers?

But what happens when learners encounter a text like this[75]?

6.9

THE POP STAR AND THE FOOTBALLER

DONNA FLYNN
& TERRY WISEMAN

TALK TO *HI! MAGAZINE* ABOUT THEIR
LOVE FOR EACH OTHER

This is the most famous couple in the country. She is the pop star who has had six number one records – more than any other single artist. He has scored fifty goals for Manchester United, and has played for England over thirty times. Together they earn about £20 million a year. They invited *Hi! Magazine* into their luxurious home.

Donna: A lot of the time since we've been together, one of us has been away. We really have to try hard to be together. We have both flown all over the world just to spend a few hours together.

Terry: Obviously people say, 'Oh, you've got all this money, what are you going to spend it on?' But the best thing is that money buys us the freedom to be together.

Donna: It hasn't changed us. We are still the same people. Newspapers have told terrible stories about us, but it's all lies.

Terry: Our perfect Saturday night is sitting in front of the telly with a take-away. Our favourite programmes are Blind Date and Friends. You won't find photos of us coming out of pubs and clubs drunk, having spent the night with a whole load of famous people.

Here is a text that is obviously based on people who will be familiar to most learners (the footballer David Beckham and his wife Victoria), but who have unaccountably morphed into coursebook characters. Unlike fictitious Roger and David, Donna and Terry hover somewhere between fact and fiction, such that the set question *Who is the couple in the interview?* can be answered in any number of ways. This peculiar alienation effect makes the text difficult to exploit for anythin other than its superficial language features. As a springboard into a discussion about the rights and responsibilities of the rich and famous, for example, it will be all but useless, unless everyone agrees to remove the surface 'film' and to talk about the real people underneath. A genuine text, on the other hand, is much more likely to elicit a genuine response.

As evidence of which, here is the description of a lesson that a colleague, Peter Coles, who teaches in Turkey, posted on a teachers' website:

My weekend students have an exam next week in which they have t write an 'informal letter'. This is how it [the lesson] went.

Stage 1.   Get students to look at the sample letter in the coursebool and then we analyse the language and style together. (3 mins)

Stage 2.   Group discussing informal letters, noting how even informa letters conform to certain conditions eg always ask how one is a the beginning etc. (1 min)

Stage 3. I thought 'What the bloody hell am I doing?' (2 secs)

Stage 4.   Opened my diary and found an e-mail from my brother-in-law ran to the photocopy room, ran back (out of breath) then we looked a a real informal letter together. Again noting the style, content etc in pairs and as a group. (wasn't looking at the time)

Stage 5. Students wrote letters to me for their homework.

The result: Yesterday I received 18 of the most wonderful, genuine, honest pieces of writing that I have seen. Expressing thoughts about the course, their families, their love lives et al.

Real people writing about real things.

Discovery activity 6.3   *Purposes of classroom texts*

Peter's lesson reminds us that texts are used for different purposes in the classroom: in his case, the text served as a model for a writing task. It was only incidentally used to develop reading skills, or to focus on grammar, for example. But what about some of the other coursebook texts that we have been looking at? What do you think was the purpose (or what were the purposes) that motivated their inclusion in the coursebook? And how successful are they, in the light of their purposes?

Look specifically at texts 6.3 (Christine and Uncle Bob), 6.4 (London Linkup) and 6.6 (Sarah's surprise).

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The phone conversation between Christine and Uncle Bob was probably designed to contextualize the language of phoning, particularly the potentially problematic use of *this* and *that,* as in *This is Christine, Is that Uncle Bob?* Hence, we can say that the purpose is primarily *linguistic* and specifically *pragmatic,* in that it focuses on the way language is used in specific contexts. As we have already noted, it might have been more successful had the conversation more closely reflected real-life discourse structures, but it does have the virtue of being short and easy to process. There may also have been a secondary motive for the text, which is to develop the book's 'storyline': Christine's adventures continue in the next few units.

The London Linkup advert, on the other hand, was not included for any specifically linguistic purpose, but more as material for *skills development* and, specifically, the development of strategies for processing text beyond the learner's current linguistic competence. It has been argued that learning how to cope with authentic texts involves using such strategies as:

prediction: eg predicting the content of a text on the basis of its title

skimming: eg identifying the gist of the text

scanning: eg finding specific information in the text and ignoring everything else

recognition: eg identifying familiar words in the text

selection: eg selecting as key only those words that carry the main informational load of the text.

 The development of these skills involves choosing authentic materials – the content being less important than the fact that they *are* authentic – and setting tasks that mobilize these skills and, importantly, which discourage a tendency on the part of the learner to 'read every word'.

As we have seen, the task that was originally set for this text was perhaps less than adequate as a means of activating these strategies. But, more recently, this whole 'strategy-based' approach has been called into question. For a start, it has been argued that encouraging learners to process text at this very superficial level – eg by skimming and scanning – may be counterproductive, since successful reading involves a much greater degree of engagement with the text than such an approach allows. Successful readers may, indeed, 'read every word', at least some of the time. By discouraging learners from processing texts at anything other than a very superficial level, teachers may be giving learners the wrong message.

Finally, the text called *Sarah's surprise* is, as we have noted, clearly written to display a specific language feature (phrasal verbs with *break),* and therefore its purpose is primarily linguistic. The fact that the writers have chosen to co-opt an existing genre (the gossipy news item) suggests that a secondary motive may have been to provide not just a context for the targeted item but some incidental skills development as well. Exposing learners to examples of different text types (even if not authentic) might arguably improve their ability to handle these text types in real life. Certainly, success in processing an example of a text type may at least motivate some learners to read beyond the text book. ■

To sum up, we have identified at least two main reasons for including texts in coursebooks: a *linguistic* purpose, such as providing contextualized instances of grammar structures, vocabulary items, pragmatic functions, or as a model for text production (as in the case of Peter's informal letter), and a *skills development* purpose, ie as material for the development of reading and listening skills.

We should add a third purpose, which we will call *text-as-stimulus* – that is, the text is used to introduce content into the classroom that learners can then respond to, in the form of discussion or role play, for example, or as a prompt for some writing task or even project work. Finally, some texts are included in coursebooks purely for their informational content, as for example, when cultural information is being conveyed. An example of this might be a text in a business English course about the conventions involved in accepting an invitation to dinner at a business colleague's home.

Of course, one text may serve a variety of purposes, just as one purpose may be served by a variety of texts. On the whole, however, linguistic purposes have usually involved using invented texts, while, for the purposes of skills development, genuine or 'adapted-genuine' texts are now favoured. For texts-as-stimulus it's likely that genuine texts will work best, on the principal of, as Peter Coles put it, *real people writing (or talking) about real things.*

If genuine texts are going to be used effectively, however, teachers need to be able to address the issue of *difficulty.* Specifically, what makes a text difficult and what measures can teachers take to reduce difficulty, or to help their learners cope with it?

Discovery activity 6.4   *Level of difficulty*

Read these four texts and rank them in order of difficulty. What criteria did you use?

6.10

COLUMN 8

☐ A COUPLE from Dandenong arrived at the Manly Pines Motel the other day. 'Did you come here through the tunnel?' asked Brian Marshall, the manager. 'Well we did and we didn't,' he was told. They had been driving through the city, had got into the tunnel and come out the other side. But they hadn't realized they'd passed under the Harbour – and knowing that to get to Manly they had to cross the Bridge, they did. Whoops, back in the city...

6.11

Dear Mr Thornbury

In response to your letter dated 15th May, I regret to inform you that I am unable to carry out your instructions to send your Debit Card to the destination requested. The reason being that the signature we hold on file differs from that on your letter. Therefore, could you please sign and return the enclosed Signature Slip and provide a copy of your current Passport.
I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely,

C...... M......
Senior Customer Services Clerk

6.12

> **Tea bags** can cure sick building syndrome, say Japanese researchers. People who move into a new house can suffer nausea and sore throats due to the chemicals from fresh paint and glue. One of the chief culprits is formaldehyde. Now the Tokyo Metropolitan Consumer Center has found that tea bags scattered around the house soak up the formaldehyde, aided by tannin in the tea. They found that the concentration of formaldehyde in the air fell by between 60 and 90 per cent. Dry black or green tea is said to work best.[76]

6.13

> Last month my big sister bought a flash new car. It was perfect timing, as I was going to a disco and thought it would look really good if she picked me up in her new cool-mobile. She couldn't though and neither could anyone else, apart from my nan […] The disco was fab – especially as I'd managed to chat up Josh – the guy I'd fancied for ages. As the night came to an end, they played My Heart Will Go On and I snuggled up to Josh for a slow dance. Then, just as we were about to go for our first romantic snog, the music stopped and the DJ said, 'Could Lucy Sage please come to the front of the hall, your nan's waiting to take you home!' I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me, as Josh looked at me and burst into laughter! Talk about uncool!
>
> Lucy, Freddie Prinz Jr fan, Essex[77]

Commentary ■ ■ ■

All four texts present varying degrees of difficulty and the relative degree of difficulty will depend to a large extent on the individual learner, so there is no one 'right' answer to this task. The kinds of difficulty specific to each text include the following:

Text 6.10: The vocabulary is unspecialized and non-idiomatic (apart from *whoops*) and should present no major problems so long as the key word *tunnel* is known. The grammar and syntax shouldn't present too many difficulties either, despite the preponderance of past perfect verb forms. More problematic might be the use of grammatical substitution, that is the use of *did* and *didn't* in place of full clauses. What, for example, does the last *did* stand for? The text type is a narrative, which provides a familiar *schema* on which to construct the events, but because it is unfinished, the point of it is rather elusive. Also, it is not clear what kind of text this is: it is too vague (*a couple…, the other day…*) to be a news report, but the use of real names (*Brian Marshall*) rules it out as a joke. But the greatest source of difficulty will be the fact that most readers will have no idea of the geography that is being described: in other words, they lack the necessary background knowledge to make sense of the events or to understand the point of the story. It is in fact a columnist's anecdote from the Sydney Morning Herald[78].

Text 6.11: The vocabulary is more specialized in this text, the field being banking and bureaucracy, and the register is formal, which in turn means that the language is syntactically complex (there are six verbs in the first sentence alone!). However, the text type (a formal letter) is immediately recognizable, as well as its purpose:

the discourse structure (apology → reason → consequence) is not only a familiar one, but is clearly signalled, both lexically (*regret, the reason, please*) and through the use of linking words (*therefore*). The text is both coherent and cohesive. Because the letter is a response to an earlier letter, readers are missing some of the background to the text, but this is fairly easily recoverable from the first sentence.

Text 6.12: The scientific register may be difficult for non-specialist readers and this is evidenced in the technical vocabulary, such as *formaldehyde* and *tannin*, as well as the relatively high number of low-frequency words: only 80% of the words in the text fall within the top 2000 most common words in English (proper nouns excluded). Those that fall outside this range include: *aided, chemicals, concentration, consumer, researchers, culprits, soak, glue, nausea* and *syndrome*. That means that a learner with a recognition vocabulary of 2000 words would have difficulty processing the text, even using context clues to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar words. Compare this to the two previous texts which have a high frequency quotient of 94% and 92% respectively, which means that the same learner would recognize more than nine out of every ten words. Moreover the tea bag text is relatively dense: the proportion of grammar words (like *can, of, into, the*) to content words (like *sick, paint, scattered*) is very low – just over a third of the words being grammar words. This is largely due to the high proportion of multi-word noun phrases in the text, such as *sick building syndrome, Japanese researchers, fresh paint and glue*, etc. In the text about the tunnel, however, there is double the proportion of grammar words, which suggests that the information is much less densely packed. The debit card text falls somewhere between the two, being roughly half grammar words and half content words.

On the plus side, text 6.12 is totally self-contained and doesn't rely on the reader having detailed background knowledge nor being familiar with another dependent text. The argument is presented logically and follows a recognizable discourse structure, that of the scientific research paper, summarized down to just five sentences.

Text 6.13: The text type may not be familiar to many readers, being a reader's letter to a teenage girls' magazine describing an embarrassing moment, a regular feature of such magazines. Lack of familiarity with the text type may be compounded with lack of familiarity with the style and the concerns of teenage magazines in general. But because it is clearly a coherent narrative, told chronologically, it presents no real cognitive challenge to readers in terms of their being able to construct a matched mental schema of the events. It has the universally familiar narrative structure of *circumstantial information* followed by a series of *past events,* which include a *complication* and its resulting *outcome,* interspersed with frequent *evaluation*. Moreover, the situation – the unwelcome appearance of an older relative and the speaker's consequent humiliation – is a fairly well-known, and hence easily recognizable, one. Of course, the whole story depends on knowing that *nan* is a colloquial term for *grandmother*. More than that, it is the idiomatic and 'in-group' vocabulary that would make this difficult for readers accustomed to more standard varieties of English: 'slang' terms, such as *flash, fab, chat up, fancied, snuggled up, snog* and *uncool* would present problems, but the context would probably resolve many of these.

In short, a 'comprehensibility ranking' of the four texts would leave little to choose between texts 6.11 and 6.13, with texts 6.10 and 6.12 more difficult but for different reasons.

To summarize, then: the factors that influence text difficulty include:

'Top-down' factors
- topic familiarity, including background knowledge
- context familiarity
- cognitive complexity, eg density of information
- visual support, eg pictures, maps, diagrams, etc
- length
- layout and signposting
- organization of text
- internal cohesion, eg linking of sentences

'Bottom up' factors
- sentence length and complexity
- grammatical familiarity
- lexical familiarity and idiomaticity
- lexical density ■

Classroom applications

However you define authenticity, there is little doubt that texts that come from genuine sources have a great many advantages in the language classroom. Not only do they offer the learner reliable data about the language, but they have a greater chance of capturing the learner's interest – and therefore attention – than fake or imitation texts. But, being ungraded, they are often less accessible than purpose-built texts. The challenge facing the teacher, then, is how to alleviate text difficulty. Various options are available and the choice of these will depend largely on the factors that make the text difficult in the first place, as well as on the classroom purposes for using the text.

We can divide possible approaches into those that involve adapting the text in some way (*text-adaptation strategies*) and those that involve designing appropriate tasks (*task-design strategies*).

Text-adaptation strategies

shortening

Cutting out unnecessary sections, and thereby reducing the length of the text, is one way of easing the processing load, but it is done at one's peril. If the editing threatens the overall coherence, eg by omitting a key stage in a narrative or argument, it will make the text harder, not easier.

segmenting

Dealing with the text in short sections, one at a time, can ease the processing load. A long article from a scientific journal, for example, might best be dealt with in sections: the abstract, the background, the research question, the method, etc. However, splitting the text between different readers (or listeners) who then interact to reconstruct the gist of the text (the so-called *jigsaw* technique) compounds reading or listening difficulty exponentially. For example, reading the

second half of a newspaper narrative without access to the background information makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct a coherent schema of the story. The problem is exacerbated when learners have to use their limited linguistic means to communicate to each other their slender grasp of the text. Jigsaw activities work best when pairs of learners each have two different but entire texts, preferably of the same length and type, which they each individually read and then report on, with a view, perhaps, to finding similarities and differences.

simplifying

This has always been the preferred strategy by materials writers and, as we saw (on page 104), can take many forms, such as replacing low-frequency, specialized or idiomatic vocabulary, such as *culprits* or *snog*, with high frequency words, such as *causes* or *kiss*. Another way of simplifying texts is to reduce the length and complexity of sentences, for example by making dependent clauses into independent sentences. For instance, that last sentence could be unpacked into two: *Another way of simplifying texts is to reduce the length and complexity of sentences. One way of doing this is to make dependent clauses into independent sentences.* Sometimes simplifying involves expanding the text rather than shortening it, as when pronoun references are replaced by their noun phrase referents, or when clause substitutions (such as *they did* in text 6.10) are made explicit: *they crossed the Bridge.* One problem with adapting a text in this way is that the authentic 'look' of the text will be lost: a newspaper article will no longer look like a newspaper article, but like a classroom text, thereby losing some of its intrinsic appeal.

co-textualizing

Giving learners the article embedded in its surrounding text can help them activate top-down schema, making the job of processing easier. When learners can see that a text is a newspaper article and can see the accompanying graphics (photos, diagrams, maps, etc) there is a much greater chance that the text will be more easily intelligible.

glossing

Providing a glossary of difficult words in the text, either alongside the text or as footnotes under the text, can help reduce the vocabulary load and save time spent consulting dictionaries. The gloss can either be monolingual (such as a synonym) or bilingual (a translation).

Task-design strategies

pre-teaching

Perhaps the best-known way of reducing text difficulty is to pre-teach key vocabulary items in advance of reading or listening. This is not without its problems, however. For a start, what items do you select for pre-teaching? If the words that are selected have little logical or thematic connection, the pre-teaching of them can become rather bitty and prolonged. One option is to select only those words that are uncommon and therefore less likely to be familiar to learners. Most learner dictionaries, such the *Macmillan English Dictionary*, provide word frequency information. There are also web-based programs that will tag the

words in a text according to whether they are high or low frequency in the
language as a whole. In text 6.12 above, for example, we saw that there were a
number of words, such as *culprits, soak* and *syndrome,* that fall outside the 'top
2000' band of the most frequent words in English. However, simply choosing
words to pre-teach on the basis of their rareness does not guarantee that these
words will hold the 'key' to understanding the text. They may be of marginal
importance in terms of the overall understanding of the text, or they may be easily
deducible from context. A more 'scientific' approach is to choose the *key words* of
the text, that is the words that occur with a *statistically significant* frequency.
Software programs are available, such as WordSmith Tools[79], which can quickly
display the words that occur in a text with a frequency that is more than their
frequency in the language as a whole. These will represent 'what the text is about'.
For example, in this section on pre-teaching, the key words are:
frequency
words
text
pre-teaching
key
these
that

Notice, for a start, that key words are usually nouns. Notice, too, that the key
words give you a fair idea of the topic. (Even without a key word program, most
teachers should have a good sense of which words are central to the
understanding of a text and which words are not.) As preparation for a text,
learners could be given these words and asked a) to look up any of the words on
the list that they don't know, and b) to hazard a guess as to what the text is about.

brainstorming

Another pre-reading or pre-listening activity is to ask learners to brainstorm what
they already know about the topic. This helps them activate background
knowledge, making them better prepared to understand what the text is about.
For example, if the learners are told they are going to read a text about *bees,* they
can brainstorm any facts they know about bees and report these to the rest of the
class. This, in turn, will require them to access theme-related words (*honey, pollen,
hive, queen,* etc) that are likely to come up in the text. This has the advantage over
simply pre-teaching words in that the words are chosen by the learners
themselves, so they are likely to have greater significance and hence be more
memorable. Moreover, because they are all theme-related, they seem less random
than the words selected for pre-teaching often are.

predicting

Again, in order to activate both background knowledge and the most likely *schema*
that underlies a text, learners can be encouraged to predict the content and
organization of the text on the basis of verbal clues – such as headlines, titles, etc –
and non-verbal clues, such as accompanying illustrations or diagrams. Given a
title such as *Dog bites man,* learners can collaborate in working out various possible
scenarios for the story and reporting these to the class. Again, this is likely to
trigger the need for appropriate vocabulary, by-passing the need for extensive
pre-teaching. Learners are also likely to be curious to see whether their

predictions are fulfilled, adding an extra motivation for reading the text. With recorded listening texts, playing a few lines at the beginning can help establish the context. Alternatively, a drawing or photo of the speakers in the situational context (such as in a bank or a shop) may be sufficient to prompt good guesses as to what they are saying. Video can be used effectively to situate the text: playing a sequence with the sound off is a good way of preparing learners for subsequent combined viewing and listening.

initial skimming

An extension of predicting is asking learners to skim the text quickly in order to get a general idea of its gist, before a more leisurely read through. Setting a time-limit, with or without some very general questions, such as *Who is writing to whom, about what and why?*, discourages intensive reading at this stage. Skimming can help activate background and schematic knowledge, making subsequent readings easier. Skimming without subsequent intensive reading, however, is not likely to improve reading skills. Good skimmers are often poor readers. Moreover, learners whose curiosity about language extends to wanting to read classroom texts intensively and analytically will be frustrated with a constant diet of skimming. The listening equivalent of skimming is to play the recording through once, setting a very general task, eg *Who is talking to whom, about what and why?*, before going back and listening to all or parts of the text more intensively.

while-reading and while-listening tasks

Giving learners something to do while reading or listening can help make sense of a text and ease the load, but only so long as the task is well suited to the text type. For example, if the text has a fixed sequence, as in the case of a narrative or a set of instructions, learners can be asked to put pictures in order as they read or listen. Pictures that might accompany text 6.5 above (*Dog bites policeman*) could include those that illustrate the main events of the story, plus one or two 'red-herring' pictures that illustrate events that didn't occur at all.

A sequencing task is not appropriate, however, for a text that presents information non-sequentially, as in many encyclopedia entries, for example. In this case, filling in details on a grid may be the best way of helping learners make sense of such texts. For example, a while-reading task for the texts on *tea*, *tobacco* and *silk* in the last chapter (pages 95–96) might involve completing the following table:

	source	place of origin	cultivated in	products
tea				
tobacco				
silk				

It's important to note that grid-filling tasks, or sequencing tasks, are not intended as a test of the reader's comprehension so much as a framework to help them organize their developing understanding of the text. In this sense, such tasks are not so much *comprehension tasks* as *comprehending tasks*.

Discovery activity 6.5   *Designing tasks*

Go back to texts 6.10 to 6.13 on pages 113–114 (the texts you ranked according to difficulty). Taking into account their differing degrees of difficulty, what strategies – either adaptation or task-design – could you use in order to alleviate the difficulty?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here are some suggestions for how the reading load could be eased:

text	adaptation	task-design
6.10	• provide a map of the relevant area • replace the final *did* with *cross the Bridge* • add a more complete ending	• use the map to predict the best route to the motel in question
6.11	• provide the letter to which this one is a response • add a subject line, eg *Your Debit Card Application* • simplify some language, eg change *the destination requested* to *your home address*	• ask learners to brainstorm words relating to *bank card* • set gist questions for initial skimming: *Who is writing to whom about what?*
6.12	• simplify text by substituting high-frequency words in place of low	• give learners the first sentence and ask them to predict the rest of the article • skim the text for *problem* and *solution*
6.13	• change 'teen talk' vocabulary to more standard expressions, eg *fab* to *fabulous, snog* to *kiss,* etc.	• pre-teach *nan* • discuss their own embarrassing teen stories involving older relatives • brainstorm vocabulary associated with *going to a disco* • sequence pictures of the main events in the narrative ■

So far we have been talking about ways of compensating for text difficulty, in order to make the text easier for learners to understand. But it's worth pointing out that sometimes there is value in *increasing* the difficulty of a text. If reading or listening is always made easy for learners, they will be unprepared for meeting unsimplified texts in non-classroom contexts. At times, learners need to be challenged to draw on and extend their *text-attack strategies*. For example, by having to deal with texts on subjects about which they know absolutely nothing, learners are forced to mobilize bottom-up processes (eg focusing on grammar and vocabulary), rather than depending solely on what they already know about the topic. Likewise, depriving learners of key contextual information (such as who is writing to whom about what and why) compels them to read 'between the lines' in order to fill in these gaps in

their knowledge. And *not* pre-teaching vocabulary will encourage learners to work out meaning from context. The amount of challenge you want to incorporate into a reading or listening task will depend on your assessment both of the text's difficulty and the learners' capacity to overcome any difficulties on their own. Either way, the factors that influence text difficulty (listed on page 116) provide a useful reference when considering how to calibrate text-based activities.

TAVI vs TALO

As we have seen, the main reason that texts like 6.1 (the Roger and David text) or 6.9 (the fake David Beckham text) are the way they are is because their primary purpose is not to inform or entertain us but rather to display features of the language that have been pre-selected for teaching purposes. The not-so-hidden agenda for the Roger and David text is to contrast present continuous and present simple. The fake-Beckham text is used to contrast present tense forms (*They have lived in their new home since April, They like watching TV on Saturday night*) and past tense forms (*They met after a football match*). When the aim is solely language display, then texts don't need to be true or interesting.

But there is the other – skills-development – reason for reading or listening to texts in the classroom. Learners need to become more efficient readers and listeners in their second language. Part of being an efficient reader/listener is having the capacity to extract information from a text, especially the information that you need or are interested in. It follows that learners need to hone their reading and listening skills by using texts that are truly informative and where the information is of a type that learners may be motivated to seek out. Hence, not only should learners be exposed to texts designed to display pre-selected language features, that is, *texts-as-linguistic-objects,* or TALOs, but they should also learn to cope with *texts-as-vehicles-of-information,* or TAVIs.

For the first purpose, ie TALO, it used to be thought that contrived texts of the Roger-and-David type would do. We now know that these kinds of texts tend not to be sufficiently representative of language 'as it is really used'. For the second purpose, ie TAVI, authentic texts were felt to offer the best training for real-life text processing. However, authentic texts, as we have seen, are often too difficult for learners to deal with, and rather than developing fluent reading or listening, they may actually inhibit it.

The solution? Combine the two purposes in the one text. The text can be simplified – in the interests of intelligibility – but also informative. Moreover, it can be re-jigged so as to include pre-selected language items. Or, better, it can be chosen because it *already* includes pre-selected language items. And the tasks that accompany the text can focus both on its content (ie TAVI-type tasks) and on its linguistic forms (TALO-type tasks).

Discovery activity 6.6   *How useful is the text?*

Here is a text from a contemporary coursebook[80]. It has been adapted from an authentic newspaper text. Assess its usefulness as both a *text-as-vehicle-for-information* (TAVI) and a *text-as-linguistic-object* (TALO). Design tasks that would support each of these purposes.

6.14

TINA I first met Will when I was looking for someone to share the house I was renting. I put an advertisement in the local student newspaper and he was one of the people who answered it. When we met, we hit it off straightaway and I told him he could move in.

Living with Will was fun. We soon found out that we had a lot in common and quickly became close friends. We always had really good discussions about everything that was important to us at the time: politics, the environment, literature and other less important things like cooking. We also liked the same music and that's important when you're sharing a house. We fell out a couple of times about the housework. Will thinks I'm untidy but I think life's too short to worry about things like that.

When we graduated three years ago, we went our separate ways and since then our lives have been very different. I went back to my home town and got a job as a production assistant for art exhibitions. I like my job because I'm helping young people to get involved in the arts. I'm living with my parents because I'm not earning very much. Will thinks I'm crazy because money is very important to him now, but I get a lot of personal satisfaction from my job. He's earning a lot of money, but he doesn't have time to spend with his family and his friends. I don't see him very often now. When he comes down for the weekend we have a laugh, but our lifestyles are so different now that we don't have very much to talk about.

WILL Tina and I got on very well together at university. When we first met, we clicked straightaway and we ended up sharing a house for nearly three years. We had the same attitude to the important things in life and the only thing we argued about was the housework. I'm a Virgo so I'm very tidy whereas Tina's the opposite. I don't think she ever found out where we kept the vacuum cleaner!

When I left university, I moved to London and got a job in a finance company. I have to work long hours and I don't really enjoy what I'm doing but I earn a very good salary. I'm very ambitious and I want to get to the top of my profession. I enjoy spending money on CDs, clothes, a nice car and going out to good restaurants. Tina's working really hard as well, but she's not earning much. I don't understand why she's doing it. I think she's having a holiday - it seems very idealistic to me. Anyway, it means that our lifestyles are very different now so we've drifted apart. We haven't fallen out or anything. We still talk on the phone and when I go down to visit her, we have a laugh. I know she'll always be there for me.
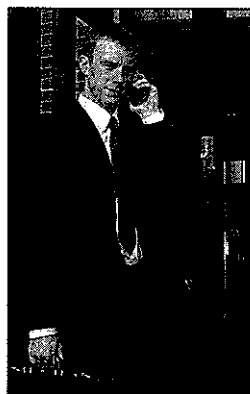
Commentary ■ ■ ■

As information, the text has general, human interest, but not a great deal more. Unless you know Tina and Will personally, there is not a lot here that you will be motivated to study intensively. Most readers, however, will find something to relate to, since the text documents a fairly universal aspect of the human condition, that is, the gradual detachment from one's former friends. Therefore, it has lots of potential as a springboard for generating learner text in the form of anecdotes, reminiscences, even letters. And the photos add faces to a text that would otherwise be a bit disembodied.

The photos are exploited in the coursebook pre-reading task, which aims to stimulate learners' curiosity in the text, by asking them to make predictions:

> Look at the photographs of Tina and Will. Do you think the following statements are true or false?
>
> a) Tina and Will had similar interests when they were at university.
> b) They chose similar careers when they finished their studies.
> c) They have similar lifestyles now.

Some students might respond, a little cynically perhaps, *How am I supposed to know?* but they will at least have a little more motivation for reading the text now than had it been simply 'served cold'.

The corrected version of the statements above could then usefully serve as a rubric for a closer reading of the text with a view to 'peeling' off further layers of meaning from it, but still treating it as a 'vehicle-of-information', ie TAVI. For example:

> What interests did Tina and Will share at university?
> How did their career paths differ?
> How are their lifestyles different now?

The text may not be gripping reading, but as a linguistic object it is extremely rich and exploitable. At the lexical level, the text is rich in language relating to the processes of getting to know someone and becoming friends: *we hit it off, we clicked, we … became close friends, we fell out, we've drifted apart,* etc. This is, in fact, the focus that the coursebook develops:

> Tina and Will use several expressions to talk about their friendship.
> Complete as many of these expressions as you can from memory.
> Compare them with a partner. Then look at the article again to check.
>
> a) Two expressions that mean 'we liked one another immediately'
> *We clicked… We hit …*
>
> etc.

There's also a fair bit of vocabulary relating to housing and domestic chores and to careers and lifestyle. And, because the essence of the text is a contrast between *then* and *now,* there is lots of opportunity for a contrastive tense focus, not only between past and present simple, but between past and present continuous (*the house I was renting, I'm helping young people*). Learners could be sent on a simple 'grammar hunt': find five statements about the past and five statements about the present. (This could be turned into a race, for more competitive-minded students.) Likewise, the hunt could be narrowed to continuous forms.

Apart from the continuous forms, there are also a variety of other uses of the *-ing* form: *Living with Will was fun… things like cooking… we ended up sharing… I enjoy spending money….* Again, learners could be set the task of finding all the *-ing* words and classifying them.

Even more interesting, perhaps, is the wide variety of uses of the verb *have:* as a lexical verb (*he doesn't have time, we don't have very much to talk about);* as a de-lexical verb, ie part of a verb-plus-noun expression where the verbal meaning is expressed by the noun, such as *we have a laugh, we always had really good discussions;* as a modal verb (*I have to work long hours*) and as an auxiliary verb (*we haven't fallen out*). A task to draw attention to these different uses of *have* might be to ask learners to use the text to make their own *concordance.* That is, they search the text for examples of *had/have,* etc and organize them vertically, along with their immediate contexts:

> we **had** a lot in common
> we always **had**   really good discussions
> our lives **have**   been very different
> he doesn't **have**   time to spend with his family
> we **have** a laugh
> we don't **have**   very much to talk about
> I **have** to work long hours
> she's **having**   a holiday

Learners can then attempt to classify the different uses of *have.* This kind of focus on the short, often overlooked, high-frequency words in a text is a particularly effective way of re-visiting 'old' grammar under the guise of vocabulary, and the discovery approach, using 'home-made' concordances, respects learners' ability to seek out patterns themselves. And, of course, any text can be used for this purpose, since any text will have a representative selection of high-frequency function words in it. ∎

Finding appropriate texts

I said above that, rather than re-writing a text to include targeted language items, it might be better if the texts were chosen because they *already* included such items. The integrity (even sanctity) of the text is not threatened, its authentic flavour is retained and, on top of that, the targeted item is displayed to best effect. This is because the fact that *text X* embeds *grammar item Y* is seldom a chance thing. As we saw in the discussion on genre, in order to realize their context-specific purposes, different kinds of texts encode distinctive clusterings and patterns of linguistic forms. The fact, for example, that the passive is used in an encyclopedia text, or that subject pronouns are ellipted (ie left out) of tea packet instructions, is not arbitrary. The choice of linguistic form is influenced by the genre. This means that, given a specific genre, it's normally possible to predict the specific language forms that will constitute it. And, vice versa: given a specific language form, it is often an easy matter to predict in which text types that form will be prominent. The predictability of this interrelationship between text and forms is a boon to course designers, in that it offers clues as to where to find exploitable texts and relieves them of the need to invent their own.

Discovery activity 6.7   *Choosing authentic texts*

In what kinds of texts would you expect to find the following language forms?

- comparative and superlative adjectives (such as *faster, best, most expensive*)
- prepositions of place (such as *in, behind, next to*)
- present tense with past reference
- intransitive verbs (ie verbs that don't take objects)

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Comparative and superlative adjectives, especially ones with positive connotations, are likely to occur in advertising texts. A quick scan of the ads in *Glamour* magazine[81], for example, threw up the following:

> **GQ**   THE MOST STYLISH MEN'S MAGAZINE IN THE WORLD

> **It's a fact.** With Clarins, life's more beautiful.

> It shaves you so close, your skin stays smoother, longer.

> Now there's an easy way to enjoy a healthier lifestyle – with Twinings' Herbal and Fruit Infusions every day. Using only the finest ingredients and most experienced blenders, Twinings create tantalizing infusions of mouth-watering fruit flavours and healthy herbs…

Prepositions of place are bound to be fairly concentrated in instructions and directions (eg how to change the toner in a photocopier, how to reach a specific destination), as well as in descriptions of buildings, such as those found in guide books or in real estate advertisements. Here, for example, is an extract from a guide book[82], with the place prepositions underlined:

> **Talismán & Ciudad Hidalgo**
> The road <u>from</u> Tapachula heads 9km northeast <u>past</u> Izapa to the international border <u>at</u> Talismán bridge, <u>opposite</u> El Carmen, Guatemala. A branch south <u>off</u> the Talismán road leads <u>to</u> another cross-border bridge <u>at</u> Ciudad Tecún Umán. There are hotels and places to change money <u>at</u> both borders.

Present tense with past reference occurs in narrative genres of the *synopsis* type, eg descriptions of the plots of plays, operas and films; and in *jokes*, both spoken and written: *A sandwich goes into a bar, and the barman says, 'I'm sorry, we don't serve food here.'*

Finally, intransitive verbs often occur with significant frequency in texts that describe events or processes that aren't deliberately caused, or whose causes are best not mentioned, as in factual or scientific writing:

> The Earth <u>came</u> from a cloud in space. Scientists think the Earth <u>formed</u> from a huge cloud of gas and dust around 45000 million years ago. A star near the cloud <u>exploded</u>…[83]

> A war fought in many different parts of the world is known as a world war. The first, known as World War One, <u>broke out</u> in 1914 and <u>did not come to an end</u> until 1918. World War Two <u>broke out</u> in 1939 and <u>lasted</u> until 1945….[84]

Choosing texts that display grammar items in prototypical ways helps learners become familiar both with the text type (the genre) and with the specific grammar items themselves. ∎

Text-based syllabuses

The interdependence of text and grammar suggests a more central role for texts in the design of language courses. Normally the process of course design begins with a list of pre-selected grammar items, such as *the past continuous, the second conditional, adverbs of frequency,* etc. Texts are then found – or created – that have these items embedded in them. Next, tasks are designed to exploit the texts as *texts* (TAVI-type tasks) and to tease out their language features (TALO-type tasks). The process can be summarized like this:

design grammar syllabus → write or find texts → design tasks

An alternative, more radical, approach to course design is to start not with the grammar items, but with the *texts*. Texts are selected and then analysed for their characteristic language features. These features are then taught not as entities in themselves, but as components of the high-order structures of language, ie texts. The process of course design can be represented like this:

find texts → extract grammar syllabus → design tasks

Such an approach prioritizes texts over grammar and targets only the grammar that is necessary to produce and interpret particular texts. But what is the rationale for text-driven course design? One argument is that, as one scholar put it, 'Language always happens as text, not as isolated words and sentences.'[85] That is to say, people use language not to trade grammatical structures back and forth, but to produce coherent text – both spoken and written. A knowledge of discrete items of grammar is no guarantee that learners can produce whole texts. Whereas a familiarity with whole texts does entail some kind of grammar competence – not as an end, but as a means.

Moreover, the meaning and use of many grammar and vocabulary items are simply not inferable at the level of the sentence. (The use of the words *whereas* and *does* in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph is a case in point.) By basing a course on texts rather than sentences, it is argued that teaching and learning are more firmly grounded and have a better chance of success.

A text-based course is particularly suited to learners whose textual needs can be clearly identified, for example, a group of learners preparing to study a specific subject at an English-speaking university. Or a group that has to interpret instruction manuals for the machinery that their company has invested in. Where specific purposes can be identified, a text-based syllabus would seem to be the direct route, as opposed to the scenic, grammar-based, one.

Even with general English it's not impossible to imagine a text-driven course where texts are selected and graded on the basis of such criteria as:

* frequency: how common is this text type?
* usefulness: how likely is it that the learner will need to produce or interpret this text type?
* difficulty: how difficult are texts of this type, on the whole?

So long as the range of text types chosen is sufficiently broad, including both spoken and written ones, and the example texts are sufficiently representative, then learners should be getting all the grammar they are likely to need. They will also be getting exposure to all the text types they are likely to meet. With a purely grammar-driven syllabus, however, such a wide-ranging exposure to different kinds of texts occurs accidentally, if at all.

As I said, such an approach represents a radical departure from conventional course design and it may simply not be feasible in contexts where a traditional grammar syllabus is imposed from above. Even so, teachers may still be able to select their own texts, or some of them. In which case, they should at least try to select texts that not only meet the syllabus requirements – by embedding instances of the target grammar, for example – but that also expose learners to a range of different text types and of topics, so that the chances of incidental learning are maximized. Moreover, if the texts are at least notionally relevant to the learners' own needs, experiences and interests, there is a better chance, perhaps, that they will engage with these texts in ways that encourage a deeper level of language processing.

Discovery activity 6.8   *Text types*

The following list of text types comes from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF)*, a document that provides exhaustive descriptions of what is involved in language mastery. Examine the coursebook you are using or one that you are familiar with. Which of these text types are represented?

Spoken, eg:
public announcements and instructions
public speeches, lectures, presentations, sermons
rituals (ceremonies, formal religious services)
entertainment (drama, shows, readings, songs)
sports commentaries (football, cricket, boxing, horse-racing, etc)
news broadcasts
public debates and discussion
interpersonal dialogues and conversations
telephone conversations
job interviews

Written, eg:
books, fiction and non-fiction, including literary journals
magazines
newspapers
instruction manuals (DIY, cookbooks, etc)
textbooks
comic strips
brochures, prospectuses

leaflets
advertising material
public signs and notices
supermarket, shop, market stall signs
packaging and labelling on goods
tickets, etc
forms and questionnaires
dictionaries (monolingual and bilingual), thesauri
business and professional letters, faxes
personal letters
essays and exercises
memoranda, reports and papers
notes and messages, etc
databases (news, literature, general information, etc).

Commentary ■ ■ ■

On the whole, coursebooks include a fairly narrow range of text types. Most listening texts are of the 'interpersonal dialogues and conversations' type, fleshed out with telephone conversations and service encounters (oddly, not included in the *CEF* list). Longer, monologue-type texts, such as lectures and presentations, are rare. As for written texts, many contemporary coursebooks now favour magazine-article-type texts, probably on the grounds that these are intrinsically more interesting than, say, brochures and prospectuses. However, the rather restricted register of coursebook texts, and their ephemeral nature, has come under criticism. One writer, for example, decries the current fashion for 'coursebook-as-magazine' and suggests 'returning to books and good writing as a source of language texts that are deeply rewarding to read'[86].

Although books written for more specialized markets, such as business English, usually have a more representative range of text types, the range offered by general English courses is relatively limited. ■
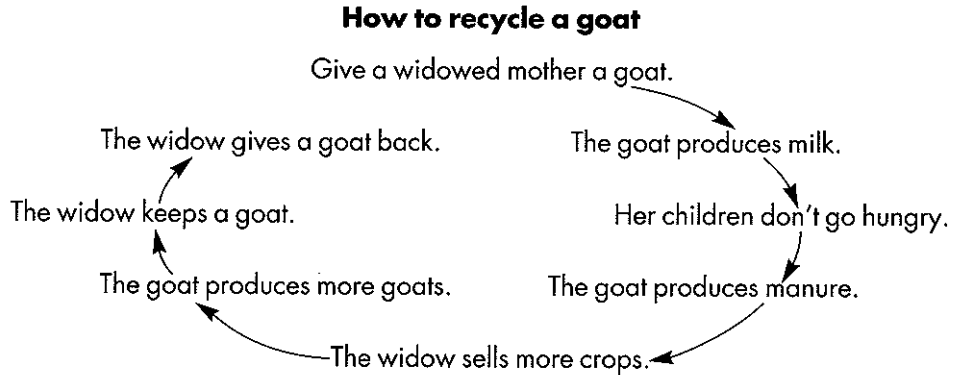
Classroom applications

Whether or not you adopt a text-driven syllabus, the ability to exploit texts both as *texts* (ie as vehicles of information) and as *linguistic objects* will stand you in good stead. For a start, you will be developing learners' text-attack skills, such as how to work out word meaning from context, or how to infer the writer's point of view. And you will also be raising awareness about the linguistic features of the text: its grammar, vocabulary, cohesive devices, and so on. Also, the ability to exploit a text thoroughly can save lesson preparation time, in that one text can form the basis for a whole lesson, providing both a grammar and a vocabulary focus, as well as practice in a variety of skills. And, as we saw in Chapter 1, the text doesn't have to be long in order to yield a *lot* of grammar. In fact, the advantage of short texts is that they require less processing, allowing more time for language focus and subsequent practice.

Discovery activity 6.9   *Exploiting authentic texts*

Here, for example, is a short authentic text[87]. How could you exploit this text, at an elementary level, to productively fill an hour's lesson?

6.15

How to recycle a goat

Give a widowed mother a goat.

The widow gives a goat back.   The goat produces milk.

The widow keeps a goat.   Her children don't go hungry.

The goat produces more goats.   The goat produces manure.

The widow sells more crops.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

There are many possible ways that this text could be used in class, both from a linguistic and a language skills perspective. With regard to the former, the least interesting aspect of the text (for me) is the use of the present simple. I'm assuming that learners at this level will have had plenty of exposure to it and will not need (another) full-blown presentation. Nor is its use here typical, in that it describes single events, narrative style, rather than routine habits. So, in the ideas that follow, I have chosen not to pay it much attention. More interesting are the verb patterns, especially the two-object verb *give*, and the use of articles. So I have selected these for the language focus.

Here, then, is my lesson (bearing in mind that this is just one of many possible lessons):

1 **Warm-up**
   Give the class instructions which they have to act out. For example,
   José, give Pilar a pen.
   Marina, can you pass Sergio the dictionary, please?
   Sergio, hand Juan the dictionary.
   Pilar, give José back his pen.

   Teach them to say *Here you are* or *There you go*, as they hand the objects over and *Thank you* as they receive them.

   The verbs *give, pass, hand, give back* are written on the board. Students then take turns to give one another similar instructions.

2 **Schema activation**
   Ask the class: what would be the single most useful thing you could give to a widowed mother in an African village? (Take time to explain the meaning of *widowed*.) Let the class discuss this in small groups and then present their ideas, including their reasons. Alternatively, provide a list of items and ask them either to choose an item, or to rank them in terms of usefulness, eg

a bicycle
a tractor
a radio
a goat
a fruit tree
a laptop
a mobile phone
a husband

3 Text: first contact
Learners read the text (6.15) silently, using dictionaries. Their initial task is to decide what kind of text it is. Is it a story? Is it a poem? Is it a news article? They compare their ideas with classmates.

4 Response to text
Establish the text type. (It comes from a charity brochure, appealing for donations.) Ask the class what they think of the idea and provide the following expressions so that they can tell their classmates what they think:
It's a good/nice idea.
I like it.
Yes, but…
What happens if…?
I don't understand this bit…
Can you/anyone explain…?
What does this mean?

5 Text: closer reading
Ask the following questions, one at a time; learners scan the text for answers and write the answers down, then compare.
What does the mother get?
What three things does the goat produce?
What does the mother do with the milk?
What is the manure good for?
What happens to the baby goats?

6 Text: reconstruction
Learners turn the text over and from memory, fill in the gaps:

Give a widowed mother a goat.
The goat produces _____ .
Her _____ don't go hungry.
The goat _____ manure.
The _____ sells more crops.
The goat produces more _____ .
The widow _____ a goat.
The widow gives a goat _____ .

7 Language focus: articles
Again, without looking, learners complete the gaps with either *the* or *a*.

Give _____ widowed mother _____ goat.
_____ goat produces milk.
Her children don't go hungry.
_____ goat produces manure.
_____ widow sells more crops.

_____ goat produces more goats.
_____ widow keeps _____ goat.
_____ widow gives _____ goat back.

Ask learners what they think the rule is. They can then test their understanding of the rule using this text (which could be dictated):

Last night I felt like seeing _____ film. I bought _____ ticket. I put _____ ticket in my pocket. Then I met _____ friend outside _____ cinema. He didn't have _____ ticket so I bought another one. Unfortunately, _____ film was not very good.

8 Language focus: verb patterns

Write the following grid on the board:

1 Give	2 a	3 widowed hungry	4 mother child	5 a goat some food

Using dictionaries, learners work together to think of more words that could go into columns 3, 4 and 5.

They read out their sentences and comment on them, using prompts such as:
Why? – Because...
That's an interesting idea.
What does ... mean?

9 Writing

Learners work in pairs to produce a brochure (like *How to Recycle a Goat*). They write a text of at least six sentences. The following sentences are written on the board, as possible ideas, but learners are also invited to think of their own.

Give a lonely person a mobile phone.
Give an unemployed youth a bicycle.
Give a smart child a dictionary.
Give a poor family a garden.
Give a disabled person a laptop.
Give a homeless person $10.

They then read each others' texts and decide which one makes the best campaign.

10 Listening and speaking

Tell a short anecdote about something that you were given that proved really useful, or totally useless. Ask learners to think of similar stories of their own and provide prompts on the board:

Once, someone gave me a ...
It was the best/strangest/worst present.
It is (not) very ...
I love/don't like/hate it.
I keep it in/under/on...
I use/wear/put/ it ...

Learners tell their stories in small groups and volunteers tell their story (or their classmate's story) to the class.

For homework, they can write up their, or a classmate's, story.

Conclusion

Texts have always been an integral part of language learning, but the purposes for which they are used, and hence their nature, have changed over the years. Generally, they serve one of two main purposes:

- as contexts for pre-selected language items
- as material for skills development.

The two purposes can, of course, be combined in the same text, in which case tasks need to be devised that target one purpose or the other. And for both purposes authentic texts have many advantages: they provide attested, as opposed to invented, contexts for language study and they provide more realistic preparation for subsequent out-of-classroom text encounters. They are not without their problems, however, not the least being their potential difficulty. But with a little ingenuity these difficulties can often be overcome. The texts themselves can be adapted without sacrificing all of their more exploitable features; and the tasks that are designed to mediate these texts can be selected and sequenced so as to get the most out of them. When texts are thoroughly exploited both for their informational content and their linguistic features, there is a case for proposing a text-based syllabus, that is, a syllabus where texts are the central organizing feature and not just an add-on. Even when this is not possible, texts should be chosen that not only demonstrate the 'structure of the day' but that can be used for a range of purposes, not the least being to 'turn up the heat' in the classroom and thereby (to paraphrase a famous marketing campaign slogan that was used to sell beer) 'to reach the parts that other texts do not'.

One kind of text that demands a level of engagement deeper than that demanded by more traditional classroom texts is the literary text, and that is the focus of the next chapter.