

Talk About Literature

David F. Clarke



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General Introduction

I would put a child into a library (where no unfit books are) and let him read at his choice. A child should not be discouraged from reading any thing that he takes a liking to, from a notion that it is above his reach. If that be the case, the child will soon find it out and desist; if not, he of course gains instruction; which is so much the more likely to come, from the inclination with which he takes up the study.

Samuel Johnson

Unfortunately we English teachers are easily hung up on this matter of understanding. Why should children understand everything they read? Why should anyone? Does anyone? I don't, and never did. I was always reading books that teachers said were 'too hard' for me, books full of words I didn't know. That's how I got to be a good teacher.

The Underachieving School, John Holt

Contents and purpose of the book

Talk About Literature is intended for students of English as a second or foreign language at the intermediate or upper intermediate level. This material can be used as a core course where reading and speaking are of central interest but it can also be integrated within a general English course when a variety of textual input is required.

The book is a collection of literary texts, poetry, prose and drama, arranged in five theme areas relating to the following subjects:

- 1 childhood
- 2 school and education
- 3 work and employment
- 4 money
- 5 the natural world.

Literary texts have been chosen in order to provide an extra dimension in a language course which perhaps contains little to engage the learner at an

emotional level. The texts offer varying approaches to the different themes, which have been selected because of their potential relevance to the experience of the learners. After working with one or two of the texts provided, most learners should be able to say something about their experience of childhood or their attitude to work and money.

There are six or more texts within each of the theme areas, which are divided for convenience of use into several Parts. Each of the texts is accompanied by a number of tasks or activities which lead learners to investigate different aspects of what they are reading. Some of the prose passages are a good deal longer than a single paragraph, the intention being to provide a substantial amount of reading material and not to focus on short texts in excessive detail. The theme-based structure was thus selected in order to allow time and space for the development of an extended and meaningful context for reading and discussion.

Unedited authentic texts, as used in *Talk About Literature*, will inevitably produce some linguistic difficulties. However, since the book's intention is to provide fairly extensive reading, learners are advised to ignore those details which are difficult and are not explained because they are not relevant to the completion of the suggested tasks. The activities or tasks accompanying the texts can be undertaken without complete understanding of every word in the texts. General appreciation of the texts is also perfectly possible without having to solve every lexical or syntactic problem.

Rather than simplifying texts, therefore, the procedure has been to select a series of tasks or activities which will draw learners' attention to the most important aspects of each text through a process of discovery. The use of tasks has been chosen in order to avoid asking blunt and often unanswerable questions about the texts. The texts are thus not treated as excuses for asking numerous "comprehension questions" but rather opportunities are provided to explore different aspects of what the text contains. When questions are asked about the text, it is hoped that the preceding tasks will have put the learners in a reasonable position to respond to them.

Following the five theme areas, a Key is provided to facilitate self-study and self-correction, either in or outside the classroom. Suggested responses to the tasks are provided in most cases. Those tasks which have no Key comment have self-explanatory responses or involve uncontrolled discussion and exchange of opinion.

Use of the book and methodology

A flexible approach

As indicated, *Talk About Literature* has been designed so that it can be used according to different requirements, either in a classroom situation or for self-study. A large variety of texts and tasks have been included in the book. While a chronological approach to the material could be taken, it is intended

that the book can also be used in a more flexible way. Within the theme areas it is not *necessary* to read all the texts and undertake all the tasks. Depending on the time available, teachers are invited to make a selection based on the interests of the learners. While most of the texts do form specific links with those nearby, and indeed with those in other sections, there is no reason why they cannot be treated separately. Theme areas have been divided into Parts to create smaller blocks of work, and each Part contains texts with particularly close links with each other. It will probably be useful to keep the Parts intact but otherwise there is no reason why certain texts, tasks or whole Parts should not simply be omitted in the interests of economy. It is hoped, however, that learners' curiosity might lead them to explore other texts within a particular theme area.

Just as the texts can be selected as required, it is likewise not necessary that all tasks should be attempted. Selection can be left to the discretion of the teacher or perhaps to the learners themselves on some occasions. Alternatively, a teacher may add to the list of tasks if it seems appropriate by taking examples of task types from other texts and adapting them.

Working Methods

The rubric to each of the tasks provides a format which may be followed but may, again, be changed according to different classroom circumstances. There are three basic formats or rubrics:

1. It is sometimes suggested that learners work in pairs to attempt the task in order to generate more ideas.
2. It is frequently suggested that learners work in two sets. This simply involves the teacher dividing the class into two sections, A and B. Whenever the "Work in two sets" instruction occurs, the two sections of the class can attempt different tasks. Within the large sets, learners are asked to work in pairs, but this can be altered to "work alone" if a teacher sees this as a preferable mode.

The procedure of working in two sets is partly one of economy, so that more exploration of the text can take place in less time. More importantly, however, the process allows certain learners to become "expert" on certain aspects of the text, thus allowing genuine communication with the other set about what they have discovered. Each set can either report its findings to the other set (who can be asked to note down what they are told about) or they can ask members of the other set questions about what they have discovered. In this way, learners are not always working in "lock-step", thus providing a greater degree of variety.

3. Sometimes it is indicated that the whole class should attempt a particular task as individuals.

It is of course possible to adapt or dispense with the suggestions offered in the rubrics. It might be seen as desirable, for example, for pairs to work through the tasks of both sets A and B, or indeed for an individual learner

to go through them in a self-study situation. Again, it can be left to the teacher to decide which mode is preferable. The A and B tasks have been provided to allow a differentiated approach if this seems suitable.

Handling of specific tasks

In many of the tasks learners are asked to make lists in pairs. These lists might be of words and phrases which learners find in a text or they might be summaries of their personal opinions and ideas. The tasks then often request the learners to "report their ideas to the class". At this report stage, teachers might find it useful to collate on the board the suggestions made in order to provide a summary of what has been done. This is particularly useful in the case of prediction activities when the suggested predictions will be compared with what actually occurs in the text.

A number of vocabulary tasks involve learners being asked to check that they know the meaning of a list of words prior to reading the text from which the words come. This process can involve the learners discussing the meanings in pairs, using a dictionary (as is usually suggested) or asking the teacher as she walks around the classroom. Indeed, all three sources of information can be employed together or singly at the teacher's discretion. There should then be a follow-up stage, using either L1 or L2 to check that the learners have managed to discover the meaning of the words in the list. If the task has been done in two sets, then this monitoring procedure is operated by members of one set asking members of the others about the meaning of unknown words.

A number of tasks involve the use of taped material and of course the number of playings of each text must be left to the discretion of the teacher. The teacher can also decide whether the tape should be played while the learners are reading or whether it should be used as a pure listening activity. In cases where songs are used, the teacher can attempt to obtain a recording of the original songs to use in the class.

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B1

Theme 1 The Golden Gates of Childhood

Part 1



Text A Introductory Texts

- a. Let the little children come to me; do not try to prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

The Bible

- b. I'd give all the wealth that years have piled,
The slow result of life's decay,
To be once more a little child
For one bright summer's day

Lewis Carroll

- c. Let dogs delight to bark and bite,
For God hath made them so:
Let bears and lions growl and fight,
For 'tis their nature too.

But, children, you should never let
Such angry passions rise;
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other's eyes.

Isaac Watts

- d. Any man who hates dogs and children can't be all bad.

W.C. Fields

- e. They had gone forth together into their new life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had forever closed behind them.

Mill on the Floss, George Eliot

- f. Children should be seen and not heard

Victorian advice

- g. PETER: Would you send me to school?
MRS DARLING: Yes.
PETER: And then to the office?
MRS DARLING: I suppose.
PETER: Should I soon be a man?
MRS DARLING: Very soon.
PETER: I don't want to go to school and learn solemn things. No one is going to catch me, lady, and make me a man. I want always to be a little boy and to have fun.

Peter Pan, J.M. Barrie

Glossary

cares: worries

thorny wilderness: dangerous wild place

solemn: serious

3 Talk About Literature

1.1 Discussion

Work in two sets, A and B. Within the sets, work in pairs. Look at the short texts above.

Set A should find out:

- which text matches the picture
- which texts say that childhood is a wonderful period of life

Set B should find out:

- which text is intended to be humorous
- which texts say something about the behaviour of children

Report to the class what you have discovered.

1.2 Looking at vocabulary

The first main text is a poem called "The Echoing Green" by William Blake. This poem presents another view of childhood. Before you read the poem check in pairs that you know the meaning of the words below. Use a dictionary if necessary.

echo folk youth weary



1.3 Deciding on the mood of a text

Listen to the first verse of the poem and see if you can tell what mood the poem seems to have: happy or sad, positive or negative.

Text B The Echoing Green

The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring
5 The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around
To the bell's cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
10 On the Echoing Green.

Now listen to the complete poem.

Old John, with white hair,
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.

- 15 They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say:
“Such, such were the joys
When we all, girls and boys,
In our youth time were seen
20 On the Echoing Green.”
- Till the little ones, weary,
No more can be merry;
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end.
25 Round the laps of their mothers
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest,
And sport no more seen
30 On the darkening Green.

William Blake (1789)

Glossary

Green: open area of grass. The village green is the open area at the centre of many villages

9 *sports*: games

25 *lap*: when you are seated, your lap is between your waist and your knees. Children sit on their mothers' laps

1.4 Looking at language and meaning

Work in two sets, A and B. Within the sets, work in pairs. Find out the following things.

Set A

List all the **sounds** or **noises** you can find in the poem. Look for the two different speakers in the poem.

Set B

Look for the two main contrasts or opposite ideas in the poem. In the last verse the sun goes down and the green becomes dark. Try to think of any possible extra meaning for these ideas.

Report to the class what you have found.

“Echo” is also used by Blake with an **extra meaning**. The sounds of the children playing might echo on the green. But there is also the echo of the memory of childhood experienced by the old people.

Part 2

2.1 Making a class survey

How far can you remember back? How long ago is your earliest memory?

Count how the class votes on these questions:

Is your earliest memory a person or a thing?

Are smells an important part of your early memories?

Are your early memories mostly pleasant or unpleasant?

Text C is taken from *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. Near the beginning of the book David tries to remember as far back into his childhood as he can. David's father is dead and Peggotty is a woman who helps his mother with cooking, cleaning and looking after David.

2.2 Deciding on the mood of a text

As you read, decide which of these words best describes the mood of Text C.

happiness fear sadness anger worry humour

Text C

What else do I remember? Let me see?

There comes out of the cloud, our house – not new to me, but quite familiar, in its earliest remembrance. On the ground-floor is Peggotty's kitchen, opening into a back-yard; with a pigeon-house
5 on a pole, in the centre, without any pigeons in it; a great dog kennel in a corner, without any dog; and a quantity of fowls that look terribly tall to me, walking about, in a menacing and ferocious manner. There is one cock who gets upon a post to crow, and seems to take particular notice of me as I look at him through the kitchen
10 window, who makes me shiver, he is so fierce. Of the geese outside the side-gate who come waddling after me with their long necks stretched out when I go that way, I dream at night: as a man envired by wild beasts might dream of lions.

Here is a long passage – what an enormous perspective I made of
15 it! – leading from Peggotty's kitchen to the front-door. A dark store-room opens out of it, and that is a place to be run past at night; for I don't know what may be among those tubs and jars and old tea-chests, when there is nobody in there with a dimly-burning light, letting a mouldy air come out at the door, in which there is the
20 smell of soap, pickles, pepper, candles, and coffee, all at one whiff. Then there are the two parlours: the parlour in which we sit of an evening, my mother and I and Peggotty – for Peggotty is quite our

companion, when her work is done and we are alone – and the best parlour where we sit on a Sunday; grandly, but not so comfortably. 25 There is something of a doleful air about that room to me, for Peggotty has told me – I don't know when, but apparently ages ago – about my father's funeral, and the company having their black cloaks put on. One Sunday night my mother reads to Peggotty and me in there, how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. And I am 30 so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take me out of bed, and show me the quiet churchyard out of the bedroom-window, with the dead all lying in their graves at rest, below the solemn moon.

David Copperfield, Charles Dickens (1850)

Glossary

- 6 *fowls* : chickens
- 7 *menacing* : threatening, looking dangerous
- 8 *cock* : male chicken
- 10 *shiver* : shake with fear
- 14 *perspective* : distance
- 17 *tubs* : large round containers
- 19 *mouldy* : stale, not fresh
- 25 *doleful* : gloomy, sad
- 29 *Lazarus was raised up from the dead* : a reference to a story in *The Bible* where Jesus Christ causes a dead man called Lazarus to live again
- 30 *obliged to* : forced to

2.3 Guessing the meaning of words

In pairs, try to guess the meaning of the following words by looking at where they are found in the text.

pigeon dog-kennel ferocious parlour

2.4 Finding out how mood is created

Work in two sets, A and B. Within the sets, work in pairs.

Set A

List all the things which frighten David.

Set B

List all the words connected with being frightened.

Ask members of the other set about what they have discovered.

Does Dickens successfully create the mood of childhood fear? Is there anything in the text which reminds you of your own childhood?

2.5 Looking at verb forms

Which verb form, present or past, would you use for telling a story?

Now work in two sets, A and B. Within the sets, work in pairs.

Set A

Count how many verbs are in the present form in the first 15 lines.

Set B

Count how many verbs are in the present form in the last 18 lines.

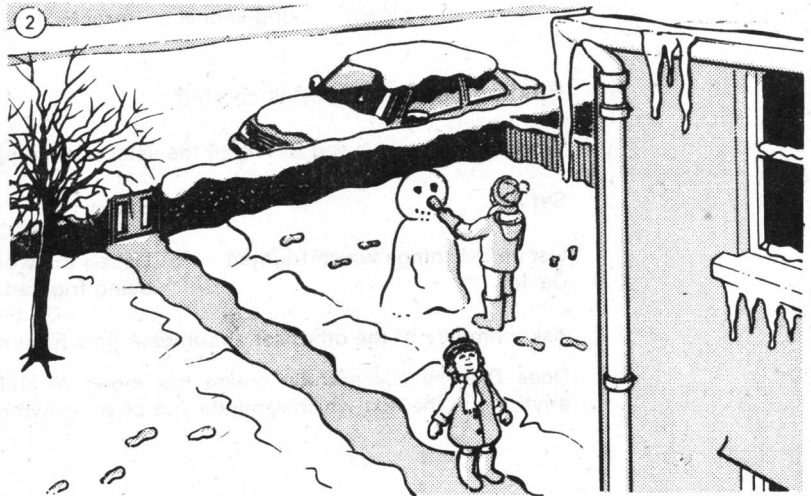
- Are there any examples of the past form being used? Why do you think Dickens uses so many present forms?
- Imagine that Dickens had used the past forms for all his verbs. Do you think the story would sound better?

2.6 Discussion

Work in pairs and list the things which frightened you as a child. Compare your ideas with the class.

Part 3

Peggotty in Text C was not David Copperfield's mother but she looked after him and was very kind to him. A woman who looked after the children in a family was sometimes called a "nurse", as in Text D.



3.1 Looking at a picture and predicting

What are the happiest and most exciting times of the year for a child? Does the picture give you any idea about which of these might be mentioned in Text D? What else do you think this text might be about? Make a list on the blackboard.

3.2 Looking at vocabulary

Before you read Text D, look at some of the words you will find in it. Work in two sets, A and B. Within the sets, work in pairs. Match the words with the explanations below. Use a dictionary if necessary.

Set A plumber, icicle, selfish

Set B frost, wire netting, choke (verb)

- metal material used for making fences you can see through
- not being concerned about the needs of others
- a person who mends pipes and water systems
- a long thin pointed piece of ice
- a white substance which appears on very cold days
- having difficulty with swallowing, which causes coughing

Ask members of the other set if you do not know the meaning of any of their words.



3.3 Listening and comparing

Listen to the poem and look again at the picture. Note down which things in the picture are mentioned in the poem.

Text D Plumbers

I knew that in winter it would snow,
 For my brother had told me.
 I knew that snow was white
 And soft

5 And altogether wonderful,
 But how white and soft and wonderful

I did not know,
 Being too young to remember
 Winter.

10 One day snow fell;
 And the garden
 Was a new garden;