

Inside Meaning

Proficiency reading comprehension

Michael Swan

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Preface

This is a new kind of comprehension course. Its purpose is not simply to provide practice material, but to *teach*, progressively and systematically, the various skills which are necessary for successful reading comprehension. The book contains:

Nine teaching units. These provide lesson material (explanations and short exercises) on various aspects of comprehension work, such as basic reading technique, summary-writing, and the appreciation of a writer's use of language.

Twenty-six practice units. These contain texts and comprehension questions designed to give systematic practice on the points dealt with in the teaching units.

Twelve practice tests. These are similar in style to the comprehension tests in the Cambridge Proficiency examination; they can be used for pre-examination practice, for assessing students' progress, or for general revision.

The course is designed for advanced students of English as a foreign language. This book assumes a starting level about midway between the Cambridge First Certificate and the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency. It includes a complete preparation for the various comprehension tests contained in the Proficiency examination, and can be used in the last year of a two-year Proficiency course, or in the last 3-6 months of an intensive course. However, it is not by any means intended only for examination work, but is designed for use as part of any advanced English course.

The texts cover a wide range of different types of modern English writing, and have been specially selected for the interest and variety of their subject matter and style. Most of them can be used not only for comprehension work, but also as a basis for other language-teaching activities such as class discussion or intensive vocabulary work.

A detailed description of the purpose and structure of the book, together with suggestions for its use, is given in 'Notes for teachers'. These notes are extended in the accompanying teacher's book which gives information about the authors, contexts or cultural background of the texts where this seems desirable; it also provides answers to all the questions set on the texts and suggestions for follow-up work such as writing and discussion.

Those texts which lend themselves to oral exploitation have been recorded on cassette. The teacher's book suggests ways to use the recording, for example, for global or detailed listening comprehension, pronunciation work or as an aid to oral presentation of a text intended for intensive language study.

M. S.

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Notes for teachers

What exactly is 'reading comprehension'?

If we say that a student is 'good at comprehension', we mean that he can read accurately and efficiently, so as to get the maximum information from a text with the minimum of misunderstanding. We may also mean (though this is not quite the same) that he is able to show his understanding by re-expressing the content of the text – for instance, by writing sentences or paragraphs in answer to questions, or by summarising the text.

Language is not the only factor in successful comprehension: some students who speak and write English very well are poor at this kind of work, and of course people may be bad at comprehension even in their own mother tongue.

Some of the reasons for failure in comprehension are connected with defective reading habits. Not all students read efficiently, even in their own language, and there are several things that can go wrong:

- a) Some students find it difficult to 'see the wood for the trees'. They may read slowly and carefully, paying a lot of attention to individual points, but without succeeding in getting a clear idea of the overall meaning of a text.
- b) Other students (especially those who read quickly) do not always pay enough attention to detail. They may have a good idea of the general meaning of the text, but misunderstand particular points. Sometimes, by overlooking an important small word (for instance a conjunction, a negation, a modal verb) they may get a completely false impression of the meaning of part of the passage.
- c) Some students are 'imaginative readers': especially if they know something about the subject, or have strong opinions about it, they may interpret the text in the light of their own experience and viewpoints, so that they find it difficult to separate what the writer says from what they feel themselves.

Other types of comprehension problem arise directly from the text. Even when a student is familiar with all the words and structures in a passage, complexities in the way the writer expresses himself may present obstacles to efficient comprehension.

- d) Long and complicated sentences are difficult to cope with in a foreign language; even when the words are easy, syntactic complexity may cause a reader to lose the thread.
- e) Some writers favour a wordy and repetitive style; practice is needed to be able to 'see through' the words to the (often very simple) ideas which underlie them.
- f) A writer may express an important idea indirectly. In order to understand some texts, one needs to be sensitive to the implications of a remark: to draw the necessary inferences from what is not stated directly. This is of course particularly difficult in a foreign language.
- g) Words and expressions which the student does not know obviously present a problem

(unless he is working with a dictionary). However, students do not always realise how easy it is to guess many unknown words simply by studying the context. Some students, indeed, are so disturbed by unfamiliar vocabulary that their comprehension of the whole passage suffers.

Finally, some 'comprehension' examinations test skills which go beyond the limits of comprehension proper. (For instance, the ability to summarise, or to comment on a writer's use of language.) Most students, even those who are good at reading and understanding, need additional training to be able to cope with tests of this kind.

In this book, the various problems referred to above are separated out, and specific training is provided in each of the skills involved. The teaching units contain explanations and exercises designed to help students to read accurately (seeing both the overall plan and the details of a text), to guess unknown words, to draw inferences, and to deal with complex sentences and 'wordy' writing. Special sections of the book cover 'open-ended' comprehension questions, including summary, and 'perception of the effective use of English'.

Structure of the book

The book contains four main sections (for a detailed plan see the list of contents). These are:

Section A Basic reading technique and multiple choice tests

Section B Open-ended tests and summary-writing

Section C Perception of the effective use of English

Section D Practice tests

Each of the first three sections contains two or more teaching units. A teaching-unit is designed for classwork, and contains introductory explanations and exercises on a specific element of comprehension technique (e.g. accurate reading, writing summaries, appreciation of a writer's use of language).

Each teaching unit is followed by a number of practice units (suitable for classwork or homework), containing texts and questions. The practice units give further work on the point dealt with in the teaching unit, together with general comprehension practice and revision of points dealt with earlier.

The fourth section contains twelve practice tests, similar in form to the comprehension tests in the Cambridge Proficiency examination; these can be used as a 'run-up' for candidates in the last weeks before the examination, or for other purposes (such as assessing students' progress).

How to use the book

Obviously the exercises and materials in this book can be used in various ways, and experienced teachers will adopt whatever approach is best suited to their style of teaching and the needs of their classes. The following notes are intended merely as suggestions.

- a) Since the book is progressive (both the texts and the exercises are graded roughly in order of difficulty), it is on the whole advisable to work through the teaching units 'from left to right' – that is, in the order in which they come in the book. Section A, in particular, provides a basic training in reading technique (as well as practice in multiple choice tests), and if students spend plenty of time on this part they will find it easier to cope with the more advanced problems that arise in sections B and C.
- b) After doing a teaching unit, there is no need to do all the practice units which follow. One at least should be done straight away (either for homework or in the next comprehension lesson); if time allows and more practice is needed on the point involved, teachers may wish to do two practice units before going on to the next teaching unit.

Other practice units can be dropped, or used for revision at a later stage (the last practice unit in each group is often more difficult than the others, and therefore more suitable for revision work). Note that in the section on writing summaries there are more practice units than usual in order to give adequate work on this point, which some students find especially difficult.

- c) Handling a teaching unit in class. As well as introductory exercises on the point being taught, the teaching units contain explanations addressed directly to the students. These are not, of course, intended to replace the teacher's lesson on the point: their purpose is to provide students with a simple guide which they can refer to when preparing or revising the work done in class. Teachers will decide for themselves how to present and work through the teaching unit material; three possible approaches are as follows:
- (i) Begin by giving your own lesson on the relevant point (modifying or supplementing the teaching apparatus in the book to suit your own approach and the needs of your class). Then work through the exercise material with the class. This can be done orally, or students can write their answers and then discuss them. Group work can be very effective with some of the exercises: students can work together to produce answers to the questions, or they can write their answers individually and then join together into groups to compare and discuss what they have written.
 - (ii) Ask the students to prepare the lesson by reading the teaching unit at home before the class. Class time can then be devoted to doing the exercises and discussing the problems which arise.
 - (iii) If class time is short, simply give a brief lesson on the point dealt with in the unit, and ask the students to read the unit and do the exercises for homework.

Note that the teaching units vary in length; with some of the longer ones, it may be necessary to spend two classes on the unit, or to begin the unit in class and ask the students to finish it for homework.

Some of the teaching units cover, at a more advanced level, comprehension topics which have been dealt with in *Understanding Ideas*. Students who have successfully worked through *Understanding Ideas* may not need to cover the same ground again in class, and can go straight on to the practice units.

- d) On the whole, it is advisable for students to do their comprehension classwork and homework without dictionaries. Dictionaries are not allowed in most language examinations, and it is, in any case, important for advanced students to get used to dealing confidently with unfamiliar vocabulary (see teaching unit 2, 'Guessing unknown words'). Where a text contains a difficult word or expression which could prevent comprehension of the whole passage, the meaning is explained in a footnote.
- e) For examination candidates, timing is important and there is often a good deal of work to be done in a short time. As the examination approaches, it is a good idea to give time limits for the practice units, reducing these progressively until students are able to work efficiently at speed. Shortly before the examination, it is very valuable for students to do some practice examination papers under strict examination conditions: the practice tests at the end of the book can be used to provide the comprehension sections of these.

Beyond comprehension

The exercises in the book are designed particularly to give students training in reading comprehension. However, many of the texts deserve more than this. It would be a pity, for instance, to study the description of bewildered working-class children starting grammar school (page 132) without asking students if they have had similar experiences. Again, if one has read Abbie Hoffman's amusing instructions for undermining the capitalist

Notes for teachers

system (page 109), one will obviously want to ask students for their reactions. Once a passage has been understood, it can be used (among other things) for intensive vocabulary work, semi-controlled composition, and in many cases discussion. The following suggestions may be helpful.

Intensive vocabulary work. The best approach here is probably to select for teaching a limited number (perhaps 10–20) of words and expressions from the text. These should obviously be items which the students cannot yet use correctly (though they may already understand them), but they should be common and preferably useful for speech as well as writing. If the students are going to do writing or discussion work related to the text, the words and expressions ought to be chosen with this in mind. When these words and expressions have been explained and practised, give the students time to study them and then (perhaps in the next lesson), give a ‘recall test’ – that is to say, ask questions to which the answers are the items that were studied.

Semi-controlled composition. Vocabulary is not usually learnt very effectively unless it is actually used to express something. A good approach is to follow up intensive vocabulary work with a composition exercise. In this, students are asked to write about a subject similar to that of the text, so that they can use the new words and expressions to convey their own ideas. (For example, after studying *Traveller’s tales*, p. 90, students could write an imaginary dialogue between a native of their own country and an Englishman who has never been there but thinks he knows all about it.) Make sure that students understand that they are expected to use words and expressions from the text, and that they realise why this is important.

Discussion. Some of the texts can be used as a basis for discussion. This is probably most effective after vocabulary study and writing work have been done, so that students are familiar with some of the words and expressions they will need.

Grouping texts. In order to facilitate discussion and composition work, two or three texts on similar subjects can be studied in combination. Texts which could be grouped in this way are:

Grammar school (p. 132), *Adolescent students* (p. 63) and *Education: a father’s experience* (p. 61)
The bohemian marijuana smoker (p. 56) and *Legalising pot* (p. 127)
Teaching speech (p. 69), *Received pronunciation* (p. 70) and *Washoe* (p. 57)
Violence (p. 64), *The causes of conflict* (p. 81) and *Gun control* (p. 66)
Bat Dongin (p. 28), *A car chase* (p. 25) and *Gunfight in Pickering City* (p. 134)

Note: contracted forms

Students are sometimes told that contractions such as *don’t*, *it’s*, *they’ll* are only used in writing down direct speech. This is not, of course, true: contractions are common in informal written English of all kinds, and they will be found in many of the texts in this book. The instructions to students in the teaching units are deliberately written in a casual, informal style, and these too contain contractions. However, students who use the book should perhaps be warned not to use contractions themselves when a more formal style is appropriate: they should realise clearly that contractions would be out of place, for instance, in a job application or a serious essay in an examination.

Section A:
Basic reading technique
and multiple choice tests

Teaching unit 1: How to read a text

In this unit you are going to practise the technique of reading a text so as to understand the meaning as clearly as possible. It is generally a good idea to read a comprehension passage at least twice: once to get an overall impression of what it is about, and then a second time to concentrate on the details. Read much more slowly than you would read a novel or a newspaper article – most people read comprehension texts far too fast. Time spent reading is saved later, because you can answer the questions more quickly and accurately.

First reading

Read this text once, not too fast, and then do the exercise which follows.

Graduates

The new prestige of the British graduate is the more spectacular because in the past Britain has been much less interested in universities and degrees than other advanced countries – or even some backward ones. In 1901 Ramsay Muir observed that Britain had fewer universities per head than any other civilized country in Europe except Turkey. A UNESCO survey in 1967 showed Britain still close to the bottom in Europe, in terms of the proportion of the age-group from twenty to twenty-four who were enrolled in higher education. Most continental countries in the last decade have expanded their higher education faster than Britain. University statistics are notoriously difficult to compare, because of the different implications of the word ‘student’; in most continental countries anyone who passes his final school exam – the *baccalauréat* or *abitur* – is entitled to go into the university on the principle of ‘laissez-passer’*; but he has no guarantees of tuition or personal attention. Partly as a result there are far more drop-outs and ‘ghost students’; in France half the students never become graduates. A comparison of graduates, as opposed to students, shows Britain in a more favourable light, for most British students take a degree. But even in terms of graduates, Britain is still low in the Europe league.

Going to university is a much more solid ambition among the sons of the bourgeoisie in France or Germany than in Britain; many of the British middle-classes – particularly the shopkeepers and small-business men – have tended to be sceptical, if not actually hostile, to university education for their children, and there are still rich and quite intelligent parents who will prefer their children to go straight from school into the city, to the army or to farming. But the attractions of a BA or an MA have penetrated into areas, both among the rich and the poor, where they would not have been felt twenty years ago; and there are far-reaching social repercussions in the high proportion of

* *laissez-passer*: French for ‘let him pass’

students who are first-generation undergraduates, who come from homes without a university tradition. Here, too, Britain is in marked contrast to the continent: the UNESCO survey of 1967 showed Britain with a much higher proportion of working-class students (a quarter) than any other western European country.

From *The New Anatomy of Britain* by Anthony Sampson

Exercise a

Answer the following questions without looking at the text. You can answer in a word, a short phrase, or a complete sentence, just as you like. If you have a lot of difficulty with the exercise, it probably means that you read the text too fast.

- 1 In general, what is the passage about?
- 2 According to the passage, is there a new attitude to degrees in Britain today or not?
- 3 What did Ramsay Muir say in 1901? (Give the main idea; it does not matter about the exact words.)
- 4 Does Britain have more or fewer students (in proportion to her population) than most European countries?
- 5 Does Britain have more or fewer graduates (in proportion to her population) than most European countries?
- 6 Does Britain have more or fewer working-class students (in proportion to the whole student population) than most European countries?
- 7 What sort of attitude to university education has traditionally been found among the British middle classes?
- 8 Is this changing?

Second reading

Now read the text again. This time, read even more slowly, and pay special attention to points that seem difficult. Do not read a sentence until you have understood the sentence before as well as you can. If there is a word you do not know, do not waste too much time worrying about what it might mean. Look at what comes before and after, make an intelligent guess at the meaning, and then go on.

When you think you are ready, try the next exercise.

Exercise b: Same or different?

Some of the following sentences say the same thing as part of the text; others have a different meaning. Write the numbers of the sentences, and put S (= same) or D (= different) after each one. You can look at the text if you want to.

Example:

a) In 1967 UNESCO carried out a survey on higher education. Answer: 1S.

b) Britain has more universities than most European countries. Answer: 2D

- 1 British graduates are more spectacular than they used to be.
- 2 In 1901 Britain had more universities, in proportion to her population, than Turkey.
- 3 Ramsay Muir suggested that some countries in Europe were uncivilised.
- 4 The UNESCO survey carried out by the Ministry of Education in 1967 showed that Britain had a low proportion of adults in higher education.
- 5 British higher education has grown relatively slowly in the last ten years.

- 6 The word 'student' does not mean exactly the same in all countries.
- 7 Many French students never graduate, but in Britain most people get a degree.
- 8 British middle-class attitudes to university education are mixed.
- 9 Wide social changes are being caused by the large number of 'first-generation' university students.
- 10 A quarter of British working-class students go to university.

Check your answers (you may like to discuss them with other students first). If you got several wrong, it means that you did not pay enough attention to detail: be careful to look very thoroughly at *all* the words, both in the text and in the questions.

Implication

Writers do not always express things directly – sometimes they imply them. That is to say, they suggest things in a roundabout, indirect way, so that you have to think carefully to see what they mean. It can be difficult to grasp implications in a foreign language: the following exercise will give you some useful practice. Read the text slowly twice, and then try to answer the questions.

'The Hollywood Indian

The Indian smelled. He smelled clear across the little reception room when the buzzer sounded and I opened the door between to see who it was. He stood just inside the corridor door looking as if he had been cast in bronze*. He was a big man from the waist up and he had a big chest. He looked like a bum.

He wore a brown suit of which the coat was too small for his shoulders and his trousers were probably a little tight under the armpits. His hat was at least two sizes too small and had been perspired in freely by somebody it fitted better than it fitted him. He wore it about where a house wears a wind vane. His collar had the snug fit of a horse-collar and was of about the same shade of dirty brown. A tie dangled outside his buttoned jacket, a black tie which had been tied with a pair of pliers in a knot the size of a pea. Around his bare and magnificent throat, above the dirty collar, he wore a wide piece of black ribbon, like an old woman trying to freshen up her neck.

He had a big flat face and a high-bridged fleshy nose that looked as hard as the prow of a cruiser. He had lidless eyes, drooping jowls, the shoulders of a blacksmith and the short and apparently awkward legs of a chimpanzee. I found out later that they were only short.

If he had been cleaned up a little and dressed in a white nightgown, he would have looked like a very wicked Roman senator.

His smell was the earthy smell of primitive man, and not the slimy dirt of cities. 'Huh,' he said. 'Come quick. Come now.'

I backed into my office and wiggled my finger at him and he followed me making as much noise as a fly makes walking on the wall. I sat down behind my desk and squeaked my swivel chair professionally and pointed to the customer's chair on the other side. He didn't sit down. His small black eyes were hostile.

'Come where?' I said.

He snorted and his nostrils got very wide. They had been wide enough for mouseholes to start with.

* *bronze*: a metal