

TALKING TEXTS

School and Schooldays

Jeremy Hunter and John McRae

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Dedicated to

ROY BOARDMAN

with thanks for his collaboration in
text selection and performance
and for numerous kindnesses
over the years

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Introduction

The Penguin 'Talking Texts' series is intended as a study aid for students of English language, and of English literature, who want to experience the sound, the imagination and the expression of writers of literature. The unique feature of the Penguin 'Talking Texts' series is the importance placed on the actual listening. Experience has shown that simultaneous reading and listening is a valuable way into the comprehension and the enjoyment of literary texts. Students are invited to approach the written word in the same way as they would attend a theatre or cinema performance.

Listening – a question of focus

Any listening material which is *more* than a communication of information (unlike a news bulletin, or most listening comprehension material) invites the listener to engage imaginatively with what is heard. The material is representational rather than referential: it *shows* rather than simply *telling*. With representational materials the receiver goes beyond comprehension of the basic meaning of what is heard (although that is, of course, a vital step), in order to engage with the communicative intention, the tone, the implications, the subtext, the interplay of voices and of voice and silence, the intonation and rhythm, of the spoken text.

How to listen

You can listen to the texts in many ways, and you should try as many ways as possible.

All the way through

This gives you the whole effect, and you can listen while following the texts in the book, or just for the sound. This *global* listening can be done at any time – before, during or after any class work on the texts.

Text by text

This more *intensive* way of listening can be taken when you want to listen closely to single items – while you are working on the accompanying exercises or just to build up your understanding of how the texts link with each other.

Single texts

This kind of listening helps you to deepen your understanding of one text, concentrating on single words or phrases, rhythm, rhyme, intonation (which you might want to imitate, discuss or comment on), characterisation and effects. *Interpretation* is important here; does the performer on the cassette interpret the text the way you would? Feel free to criticise and evaluate aspects of the performance, and to try out your own performance at any time!

In class/on your own

It is perfectly possible to use the Penguin 'Talking Texts' series for individual study and appreciation of literature. Naturally, in a classroom situation everyone can listen at the same time, especially if everyone is working on the same text or discussing the same topic. But the advantage of everyone having a cassette is that you can listen to a text or texts at any time on your personal stereo or 'Walkman' and different groups in the same class can work on different parts of the performance at the same time, without problems.

Listening activities

Here are some of the specific kinds of listening activity you will find in the text:

- for information
- for gist
- intensive listening
- for main points
- for interpretation
- to check predictions/intuitions
- to identify words
- to identify speakers
- to identify tone and attitude
- to pick out specific items
- for pronunciation
- to initiate discussion

Most of the texts are accompanied by three sections, Listening, Reading and Discussion, so that the listening activity is always developed for a fuller understanding of the text, as well as relating to the performance of the text. Some of the very brief texts which link the longer texts have just one or two questions – they serve as a bridge, a stimulus between aspects of the subject.

How the cassette relates to the book

The texts are printed in the order in which they are performed, so that you can follow the development of the presentation, moment by moment. You can stop listening and look more closely at a single text, and work through the questions and tasks exactly as you wish.

The exercises accompanying each text are designed to help clarify problems like vocabulary, syntax, effect, and so on. They are principally intended to add to your enjoyment of the performance, by helping your understanding and giving you points to ponder and possibly discuss.

Character is important in how you react to the readings – very often a character reveals himself or herself in his or her own words, and the audience realises the character's qualities and defects. Feel free to judge the characters – not just to understand their words, but also what the words reveal about them!

Because the performance might arouse your interest in the texts or the author(s), a few very brief details are given at the back of the book. Use these, if you wish, as a starting point to find out more about, or read more of, an author or a text you have found particularly interesting.

Every time you listen to the texts you will understand them a little differently. Working with the book, the whole performance will take on a clearer shape in your own mind, as the sounds you hear give more and more meaning to the texts you read. The listening is the first part of the enjoyment of exploring these texts and the whole subject they discuss. But it is also the last, and *lasting*, part of the pleasure of the performance – a theatrical event, a 'show' you can listen to over and over again, act along with, and even perform yourself.

School and Schooldays

In the 1940s, a dramatist called John Dighton wrote a very successful play called *The Happiest Days of Your Life*. It was set in a school.

Does Dighton's title agree with your impression of *your* school and schooldays? Think of some adjectives which best describe your reactions to your past or present schooling. How have your reactions changed since you started, or finished, your days at school?

With these texts – in the reading and listening – you will find reactions which are happy, sad, bitter, thoughtful, comical . . . and maybe just factual.

School and schooldays occupy a very large part of the youth of authors – and of everyone else! The years we spend at school, while we learn about life and grow to maturity, give us memories we will never forget for the rest of our lives.

As you go through these texts, try and recognise situations or opinions that coincide with your own, and write down your reactions in note form.

1. Quotations

Listening

As you listen to these 'one-liners', which of them strikes you most? As you read and listen, tick the ones you agree with (✓) and put a question mark (?) beside any quotations which are not clear to you.

For each quotation, try and describe the speaker's tone of voice, using one or more adjectives; for example, humorous, cynical, bitter, etc.

Reading

C. S. Lewis: *Surprised by Joy*

Term, holidays, term, holidays, till we leave school, and then work, work, work till we die.

- a) Which words does Lewis repeat? Why?
- b) What is Lewis's message? There are only sixteen words; can you make an even shorter summary of what he meant?

Patrick White: *The Solid Mandala*

I forget what I was taught. I only remember what I've learnt.

Find four verbs in this quotation. The verbs 'forget' and 'remember' are opposites. Are the other two verbs opposites as well? In what tense are these verbs?

Oscar Wilde: *The Critic as Artist*

Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

- a) Does Wilde approve of 'education'? How would you define 'education'?

b) Complete the following table:

Verb (infinitive)	Past participle	Noun	Agent(s)
to educate	educated	educator/teacher
.....	teaching
.....	learning	learner/student
.....	memory	
.....	knowledge	

George Bernard Shaw: *Maxims for Revolutionists*

He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.

- a) From these two sentences, a main verb is missing – after 'can' and after 'cannot'. Which verb would you place there?
 b) What, in your opinion, is Shaw's view of teachers?

Philip Larkin: *The Winter Palace* (The rest of this poem appears on page 54.)

Most people know more as they get older:
 I give all that the cold shoulder.

I spent my second quarter-century
 Losing what I had learnt at university

And refusing to take in what had happened since.

- a) Approximately how old is the poet? Give a minimum age.
 b) What is he 'losing' (line 4)? What phrase does 'refusing' (line 5) refer back to?

Max Beerbohm: *Going Back to School*

Undergraduates owe their happiness chiefly to the consciousness that they are no longer at school.

- a) Try and think of, or imagine, a few differences between being a university student and being a schoolboy or schoolgirl; for example, in terms of discipline, maturity, etc.
 b) Is, or was, being 'at school' a totally negative experience? Why, or why not?

Evelyn Waugh: *A Little Learning*

School was merely an interruption of the hobbies and affections of home.

Describe in your own words what Waugh missed when he went to school. What do the words 'merely an interruption' tell you about how strongly he missed these things?

Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

LADY BRACKNELL: I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit, touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever.

- a) Does education in England have any effect on 'natural ignorance', according to Lady Bracknell? Sum up Lady Bracknell's attitude in a few words.
- b) Ignorance is close to naïvety or innocence. Are these qualities important for you? Why, or why not?

Charles Dickens: 'Sentiment' from *Sketches by Boz*

Minerva House, conducted under the auspices of the two sisters, was a 'finishing establishment for young ladies,' where some twenty girls of the ages of from thirteen to nineteen inclusive, acquired a smattering of everything, and a knowledge of nothing.

Imagine you are a pupil of Minerva House. Say why you are studying there, who your teachers are, and how much you think you are learning.

2. Muriel Spark: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

I am summoned to see the headmistress at morning break on Monday ... I have no doubt Miss Mackay wishes to question my methods of instruction. It has happened before. It will happen again. Meanwhile, I follow my principles of education and give of my best in my prime. The word 'education' comes from the root *e* from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education. I call it intrusion, from the Latin root prefix *in* meaning in and the stem *trudo*, I thrust. Miss Mackay's method is to thrust a lot of information into the pupil's head; mine is a leading out of knowledge, and that is true education as is proved by the root meaning.

Listening

As you listen, try and decide what the speaker's profession is. Who do you think she (or he) is speaking to?

What pronoun occurs most frequently in the passage? Does this tell you anything about the speaker?

Reading

- a) Who is Miss Mackay? What is her relationship to the speaker?
- b) Miss Brodie is speaking. Do you think she approves of Miss Mackay? Give as many examples as you can from the text. For example, 'I am summoned ...' may indicate that Miss Brodie is reluctant to attend a meeting where her presence is required.

Discussion

- c) Miss Brodie thinks she is in her 'prime'. She is between 30 and 40 years old. Think of your teachers, past or present. How important to you is the teacher's age during a student's time at school?
- d) What other good or bad qualities should a teacher recognise in herself or himself?
- e) Can you explain the distinction between 'education' and 'intrusion' in your own words?

- f) Is Miss Brodie justified, in your opinion, in making this distinction?
- g) What do you think Miss Mackay wants to say to Miss Brodie? Will Miss Mackay enjoy the meeting?

3. Walter Pater: *Marius the Epicurean*

If our modern education, in its better efforts, really conveys to any of us that kind of idealising power, it does so (though dealing mainly, as its professed instruments, with the most select and ideal remains of ancient literature) oftenest by truant reading.

Discussion

- a) A 'truant' is a pupil who deliberately avoids going to school. What, therefore, do you think Pater means when he says that 'truant reading' is often the best source of education, or the best means of communicating a 'kind of idealising power'?
- b) What kind of reading materials does Pater suggest were being used in the schools of the late nineteenth century?
- c) Does Pater like 'ancient literature'? How can you tell?

4. John Buchan: *Memory Hold-the-Door*

At my various schools I had my ups and downs, but they mattered little and were forgotten in an hour. My interest in the world at large was not checked by any artificial conventions, and, though I was afraid of many things, I had none of the social fears and resentments of the traditional schoolboy.

Yet, looking back, I seem to have enjoyed my schools enormously. There I mixed on terms of comradeship and utter equality with children from every kind of queer environment. At my village school my chief friend was the son of a notorious local ne'er-do-well, and the two of us captained a gang of barefooted ragamuffins who waged ceaseless war against the local 'gentry', the sons of well-to-do manufacturers . . .

We were of [the] opinion that the greatest pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do, and the consequence was that we were an anxiety to our parents, and often, owing to bodily damage, an affliction to ourselves. At my later schools this foolishness abated and I fell more into the normal habits of youth, but even then school played but a small part in my life. It was an incident, an inconsiderable incident; a period of enforced repression which ended daily at four in the afternoon.

Listening

As you listen, decide whether the following statements about John Buchan are true (T) or false (F).

he had no ups and downs	T / F
he had no social fears	T / F
he did not enjoy his school and schooldays	T / F
he had many friends	T / F
he enjoyed doing things he should not have done	T / F
he later became more normal	T / F
school played only a small part in his life	T / F
schooldays ended at half-past four	T / F

Reading

- a) Rewrite the first paragraph, using the following phrases:
successes and failures
restrained by a false need to conform
difficulties of being with other people
- b) In the second paragraph, find words or phrases which mean approximately the same as:

close friendship
criminal
led
poor children

upper-middle class
wealthy
without end
without shoes

- c) Buchan gives two negative consequences of 'doing what people say you cannot do'. What are they? How many more can you think of?
- d) Compare the first sentence of the second paragraph (line 6) with the last sentence of the passage. Do you find a contradiction here? If not, say why not. Compare the first and second sentences of the final paragraph, and comment on the relationship between 'the greatest pleasure in life' (line 12) and 'this foolishness' (line 15).

Discussion

- e) If you did not have to go to school, would you go anyway? Why, or why not?