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GRADED COMPREHENSION FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

DAVID FISHER & JAMES DAY

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David Fisher & James Day

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Passages and question papers
on aspects of English life and institutions

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General Introduction

This book has three principal aims. Firstly, we hope that the style and vocabulary in the passages chosen and the questions in the papers set on them will help to prepare students for such examinations as the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English, giving them practice in language and comprehension work and generally helping them to express themselves clearly and competently in English. Secondly, we hope, by the use of selected passages, each dealing with a different aspect of English life and culture, to help foreign students to understand something of the life and institutions of this country. This we regard as an important subsidiary aim of the study of English, not only because it helps students to pass examinations, but also because it helps them to understand the English people as well as the English language. Thirdly, we hope that the facts and ideas presented in the passages will be provocative enough to stimulate lively oral discussions in class, and to suggest to the teacher suitable subjects for free composition.

We do not want to set out a rigid scheme for using the book, but we should like to make some suggestions which may be useful. It will be noticed that we have normally chosen the passages and set out the comprehension papers in groups of three, classifying each passage and paper as 'A', 'B', or 'C' level. We hope that passages at level 'C' will be suitable for classes above Lower Certificate level who are seriously beginning preparation for the Certificate of Proficiency; those at level 'B' are for classes actually intending to take the examination, and those at level 'A' for students above Proficiency level. Each passage has a short introduction and a set of up to eight questions, divided into language questions—précis, vocabulary work, etc.—and comprehension questions and suggested

discussion topics. These questions may be answered orally or in writing.

Of course the passages are not all of equal difficulty, even within the same general divisions. We have graded them firstly according to their linguistic difficulty, and secondly according to the depth of their theme, the detail in which they treat it, and the type of comprehension question to which they best lend themselves. It may thus be justifiably argued that, linguistically, some level 'C' passages are more difficult than some at level 'B'. But it will be found that the former probably treat their theme in much less detail or depth than the latter, which is why we have graded them as we have.

It is not intended, therefore, that the teacher should start at Passage 1 and slog mechanically through the book to Passage 45. Such a procedure would be both absurd and harmful. It is not even intended that he should start at Passage 1 and work through passages 4, 7, 10, 13, and so on, beginning again at number 2, continuing with 5, 8, etc., until the whole book has been covered. What we would suggest, however, is that any student wishing to understand English life and institutions *should* know, first of all, what he means for example by such terms as 'democracy' (Passage 1), the character of the English (Passage 17), the character of a good constitutional monarch (36), and that these themes could, and should, form part of a progressive course introducing the student gradually into the complexities of English life. It is left to the individual teacher to decide on the order in which themes should be treated.

We do not think that a student of English life and institutions should be ignorant of English literature, art, music, or philosophy. Nor should we like to feel that the book is useless to 'CPE Lit.' candidates. Consequently, we have divided it into two sections: one, for the more general class, entitled 'Life and Culture'; the other, directed principally at Life and Institutions candidates, entitled 'History and Institutions'. We regard the two as interdependent, and consider that it is as pointless to

cram foreign students full of recondite details about the British Constitution In All Its Glory without informing them a little about, say, Turner, or Hogarth, or Dickens, or Vaughan Williams, as it is to expect 'Eng. Lit.' candidates to understand Shaw without knowing a little about Butler and Nietzsche, Fabianism, Darwin, and Ibsen. It may with some justice be argued that a student many thousands of miles from England can hardly be expected to divine what 'Rain, Steam, and Speed' looks like. Here, surely, the enterprising teacher can take advantage of the facilities offered by the British Council.

Finally, may we perhaps suggest a method of tackling the most difficult of all comprehension exercises: précis-writing? It is unlikely that we have any new suggestions to offer, but the basic principles need to be stated in a book where most of the passages have been chosen to help to develop the pupil's skill in this craft.

Suggested procedure for writing a précis:

1. Read the passage through carefully three times, noting—
   At the first reading, what the general theme of the passage seems to be, and what a suitable title might be.
   At the second reading, how the sections of the passage join naturally together, and where the author changes from one topic to another.
   At the third reading, what words and phrases in the passage seem significant, novel, unusual, or unnecessary.
2. Having divided the passage up into coherent sections, take notes on the topic discussed by the author in each of these sections. Use, as far as possible, your own words, and avoid long lists of illustrative examples.
3. Reconstruct the main argument of the passage from your notes, making sure that your précis is lucid and coherent.
4. Check your précis, answering the following questions—
   (*a*) Does my passage read as a coherent argument?
   (*b*) Does it reproduce *all* the relevant factors in the original?

(*c*) Is it free from grammar mistakes and possible ambiguities?

(*d*) Have I used lucid, precise words, and have I used the most economical possible constructions in my sentences? Or have I just used vague meaningless phrases ('nice', 'and that sort of thing', 'getting good') and slavishly copied the syntax and vocabulary of the original?

We append an example of what we mean:

A golden summer has brought us a golden harvest. The quiet satisfaction evident in the main wheat-growing centres appears to be more than justified. In some areas harvesting is almost completed, and in others the work will be over by the end of next week. Rarely have crops been brought in so easily and so quickly. Yields, too, have been excellent, some districts showing an improvement on last year of as much as 25 per cent. an acre. Moreover, the recent short but heavy rainstorms do not seem to have injured crops which are still standing, and have improved the dry pasture-land.

This is a picture in which we can all rejoice. Human nature always responds when Nature herself has proved bounteous. We find ourselves thinking of harvest celebrations, and there is not one among us who will not feel some stirring of pride and satisfaction at the farmers' achievement. The benefits will be spread. Farming is still the largest single industry in the country, and the farmers' prosperity will be felt throughout the whole economy. They will have more to spend on capital goods, such as farm implements or new barns, and the shops will have their share of the countryside's spending. Some imports can be reduced, and this in turn will improve the country's trade balance of payments.

This sounds like a windfall for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but that is not how the Government planners will regard the farmers' success. A year or two ago, the farmers were urged to step up the production of wheat, but now the emphasis of the policy-makers is on meat production, and good supplies

of hay, oats and other cattle-feeding stuffs would be more welcome than an abundance of wheat, of which there is a glut all over the world.

This passage, set in the Cambridge Proficiency English Language paper of December 1960, is to be reduced to 110 words 'taking care to give the main ideas in a connected sequence and to use (your) own words as far as possible'. Most teachers of English to foreign students would, we think, agree that quite apart from misinterpretations and false emphases—faults bound to occur because of vocabulary difficulties—there are two besetting sins when writing précis. They are: simply rearranging the words of the original, leaving out a few for luck, and presenting the main ideas correctly enough, but presenting them just as a string of sentences, only very loosely hanging together, if at all.

Examining the above passage, we find that the author has two main themes—the fine harvest of 1959, and its effects on agricultural policy. A suitable title might therefore be 'The Effects of a Bumper Harvest'.

The three paragraphs are concise, and do not readily subdivide, so it is probably best to summarize them as entities in themselves. Words or phrases that might offer difficulty would vary according to the native language of the candidate, of course, but the examiners asked for an explanation of the following words or phrases in Question 2 of the paper:

a quiet satisfaction, stirring of pride, windfall,
to step up the production, emphasis.

To this list we might add:

yield, acre, bounteous, glut.

Taking notes, as suggested, on the content of the three paragraphs, we might summarize them somewhat like this:

Paragraph 1:

Superb wheat harvest, unspoilt by recent rain. Crops heavy, better than in previous year, easily and quickly gathered.

Paragraph 2:
Worth celebrating, both in itself, and because of pride and satisfaction in agricultural prosperity. Agriculture still largest national industry. Thus farmers, earning more, will spend more, increasing general prosperity. This will reduce imports and help balance of payments.

Paragraph 3:
This picture not completely satisfactory. Agricultural policy-planners now required higher meat-production; this demands cattle-feeding crops, not wheat. In recent years, demand has been for wheat, but now there is surplus of it all over the world.

And a suggested version:

Thanks to the fine summer, we have an unusually abundant wheat crop. Most is already gathered and that still standing is undamaged by the recent rainstorms needed by grazing land. Such liberality of Nature evokes widespread rejoicing and, agriculture being the largest national industry, many benefits will result. Increased spending by prosperous farmers will stimulate the general economy, some imports can be reduced and Britain's trade balance improved. Whilst this may gratify the Treasury, the Government's agricultural planners will take a different view: until recently, their policy encouraged wheat-growing but it now favours cattle-feeding crops in order to develop meat production and avoid increasing the world-wide surplus of wheat.

(109 words)

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The Ethics of Democracy
passages 1–3

The first three passages deal in general terms with the nature of such concepts as 'freedom' and 'democracy' as they are understood by different English writers. In Passage 1, Lady Rhondda argues that in this country we have tried to strike a balance between authority and freedom, without allowing the one to become tyranny and the other to degenerate into anarchy. This ideal forms the basis of the British attitude to political power. Power must be correctly and fairly exercised, and individual freedom controlled so that it does not become abused. This attitude both explains and underlies the gentle tolerance which often attracts and sometimes infuriates foreign visitors.

PASSAGE & COMPREHENSION PAPER 1 [C]

Lady Rhondda, from The Pattern of Government

Plato's real objection to democracy was the same as that of many moderns. What he feared was a democracy which insisted on discarding the element of hierarchy. But we have never in this island denied the value of authority in political government. The experiment we have long been attempting here, that close interweaving of the hierarchical and democratic pattern in a democracy which is also a kingdom and a kingdom which is also a democracy, was unknown in the days of Socrates. This experiment of ours is something new in the history of the world. English history is littered with examples of the struggle to wring freedom from Authority and yet to retain that Authority. Again and again we have asserted the rights of the individual against a State which, grown overstrong (as States are apt to grow in troublous times), was trying to overstep the limits of what we regarded as its just power. But we always accepted that—within limits—the power was just.