Less is more

Robert Buckmaster

exploits minimal texts for maximum benefit.

any writers, including
Scott Thornbury, Martin
Parrott and Alan Maley,
have argued for the use of
short texts in language teaching. This
article shows a way of exploiting such a
text in a lesson.

But first, why should texts be short?

- They should be short so learners don't get bored with them.
- They should be short so that the whole text and all its parts can be dealt with completely.
- They should be short so that not a lot of time is spent on reading, but a lot of time is spent on learning.

Texts should be many and various, of different genres, woven in connected strands throughout the course and of intrinsic interest to learners. They should be dealt with intensively so that at the end of the lesson, as Scott Thornbury has suggested, the learners are in a 'state of grace' vis à vis the text: that is, they understand it completely – all the grammar, all the lexis and all the collocations and colligations.

PURPoseful texts

Not all texts need to be dealt with in the same way, with the same sequence of activities: different texts will lend themselves to different types of activities. The key is to deal with all the salient aspects of a particular text in the best and most appropriate way.

There is, however, a basic four-stage process that can be used with all them: PURP.

Prepare for the text.

Understand the text.

Respond to the text.

Process the text.

A text with a PURPose

What follows is an example of a short text lesson with a commentary. Note that the text is a specially written version of a news item about an armed robber who made his getaway by floating downriver on an inner tube. The information was drawn from several sources on the internet and was written to challenge students of intermediate level and above. The text is in the box below

Escape by tube

Seattle police are looking for an armed bank robber who used an inner tube to get away from the scene of the crime.

The man stole a money bag from a security guard outside a bank and then raced across the car park to a nearby creek and floated away on the inner tube.

The robbery happened near a branch of the Bank of America on US Route 2 in Monroe, Seattle.

According to police spokeswoman Debbie Willis, the robber, wearing a surgical mask, walked up to the guard, who was carrying two canvas money bags, at about 11 am on Tuesday as he walked from the bank to an armoured car parked outside.

He sprayed the guard with pepper spray then grabbed a bag of the money and ran to the creek. Some witnesses say that he got into an inner tube or an inflatable boat and floated downstream towards the Skykomish River.

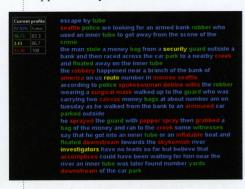
Investigators have no leads so far, but believe that accomplices could have been waiting for him near the river. An inner tube was later found 200 yards downstream of the car park.

Analysing the text

It is good to know your text intimately before you use it. The vocabulary profiler at *The Compleat Lexical Tutor* (www.lextutor.calvpleng) can help you analyse your chosen text. You paste the text into the profiler and submit it. It compares the words in the text with lists of the most common words of English (1–1,000; 1,001–2,000) and an Academic Word List (AWL). You can then see the text with the words colour-coded according to the list they occur

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in. This gives you a really good visual idea of which words are in which list and their distribution in the text. You can then judge the level of difficulty of the text and decide which words, if any, you will need to pre-teach, and also which words you might sensibly ask the learners to guess from the context. When I entered my text, I found that almost 73% of the words occur in the list of the most common 1,000 words, about 13% of the words are in the second most common list (1,001-2,000) and under 2% are in the AWL. This leaves just under 13% which do not appear in any of these lists.



Exploiting the text

Task 1: Prediction

Write the text title (Escape by tube) on the board and ask the learners what they think the text will be about. Elicit ideas from the learners and write them on the board.

Commentary

This task prepares the learners for their first encounter with the text. By making predictions, their schemata are activated and they have an investment in reading the text to find out if their predictions were correct. They have taken the first step towards bridging the information gap which exists between their current state of knowledge prior to reading the text and their knowledge after reading it.

You might want to pre-teach some vocabulary at this stage, though preteaching vocabulary is an implicit admission that your learners don't have enough vocabulary for the text. Alternatively, you might want to activate the learners' schemata further



through some text vocabulary. One way to do this is to use a word cloud. Above is a word cloud for this text (created at www.wordle.net).

This word cloud could also be used in a later lesson as a prompt for a text reconstruction task: give the learners the cloud and ask them to rewrite the text.

Task 2: Listening

Read the text aloud to the class (this is analogous to someone reading an interesting newspaper article aloud to a friend). The learners listen to see if their predictions were correct and to answer the questions which a newspaper article should answer: who, what, where, when, why and how.

Check whose predictions were closest and the answers to the what, why, etc questions.

Commentary

This first encounter with the text is based on meaning. The learners use their current knowledge of English to complete the task as best they can, guided by their predictions and the tasks of seeing if their predictions were correct and answering questions.

Task 3: Reaction

Ask the learners for their reaction to the text: Was it interesting? Were you surprised? What do you think about the thief and his plan? Do you think he will be caught?

Commentary

These questions allow the learners to respond to the text and express their feelings and ideas about it.

Task 4: Reconstruction 1

Give pairs or small groups of learners the text cut up into sentences or paragraphs and ask them to reconstruct it.

Monitor, prompt as necessary and check as a class. Ask the learners to justify their choices, and check

grammar and vocabulary, the structure of the text, the choices the writer made, the subjects of the sentences, etc in detail. You will have to be completely familiar with the text itself and know what you want to focus on in this stage.

Commentary

This task focuses on the structure and the language of the text. During the checking of the task, problems with grammar and vocabulary can be cleared up. Grammatical choices are analysed, eg Why is 'the' used here? Vocabulary meaning and collocation and colligation are focused on. The learners will notice points of the language with which they are already familiar, and may be exposed to structures they are not familiar with.

Task 5: Reconstruction 2

Collect the slips of paper with the cut-up text so that the learners no longer have a record of it. Then give them a copy of the text with gaps (see below) and ask them to complete it. This gap-fill focuses on single items, eg verb forms or prepositions, etc. Monitor and help the learners to complete the task. Check answers with the class.

	_	_	_		_	by	_ #	1	-	_
_	_	_	9	n	_		<i>,</i> т		n	

who was (9)

Seattle police a	re looking fo	or an
(1)	bank robb	er who used
an inner tube to	(2)	from
the scene of the	e crime.	
The man sto	ole a (3)	bag
from a security	guard outsid	de a bank
and then raced	across the	car
(4)	to a nearb	y creek and
(5)	away on th	ne inner tube.
The robbery	(6)	near a
(7)	of the Ban	k of America
on US Route 2	in Monroe, S	Seattle.
According to	o police spo	keswoman
Debbie Willis, th	ne robber, (8)
a surgical mask	, walked up	to the guard,

two canvas

money bags, at about 11 am on Tuesda
as he walked from the bank to an
(10) car parked outside.
He (11) the guard with
pepper spray then grabbed a bag of the
money and ran to the creek. Some
(12) say that he got
(13) an inner tube or an
inflatable boat and (14)
downstream towards the Skykomish
River.
Investigators have no
(15) so far but believe that
(16) could have been
waiting for him near the river. An inner
tube was later found 200 yards

of the car park.

Commentary

This task focuses on the language of the text while giving most of it as support. The learners have to complete the text using their knowledge of English, what they noticed in the previous text reconstruction task, any notes they made and their memory. (If your learners are anything like my teenage learners, then they will not want to make notes, but if you do this task sequence several times, they will come round to the idea and realise that reading and understanding are not enough for learning: they have to process the text.)

Task 6: Reconstruction 3

Collect the completed gapped text and give the learners another version of it which has some phrases highlighted in bold, but with the words in those phrases mixed up (see below). Tell them to reorder the words so that they make sense in the sentences and that these reconstituted sentences make sense in the wider text.

Escape by tube

Seattle police are looking for an armed bank robber who used an inner tube scene get away from to the crime of the.

The man bag a bank stole guard a a security money from outside and then raced across the car park to a nearby creek and floated away on the inner tube.

The robbery happened a of Monroe America near the Bank in of on US Route 2, Seattle branch.

According to police spokeswoman Debbie Willis, the robber, wearing a surgical mask, who up to the, was carrying Tuesday walked about two bank bags, at walked money 11 am on guard as he from canvas the to an armoured car parked outside.

He sprayed spray money with bag the then grabbed guard a pepper of the and ran to the creek. Some witnesses say that he got into an inner tube or towards River floated and boat downstream the an Skykomish inflatable.

Investigators have no leads so far but believe that waiting near could for river him been the have accomplices. An inner tube was later found 200 yards downstream of the car park.

Commentary

This task focuses on longer stretches of language than are normal. This means that word order, collocation, noun modification and colligation can all be dealt with. Such exercises have an extremely valuable part to play in language learning. Learners again have to activate their knowledge of the language and their memory of the text to complete the task. This is in-depth processing of the language in the text.

Task 7: Summary

Ask the learners to summarise the key information in the text in one sentence. For example:

A man robbed a bank guard in a car park in Monroe and escaped by floating down a creek in an inner tube.

Commentary

This task focuses the learners' attention on the essential information of the text and how this is presented. They have to deal with the text on a word-by-word basis and make decisions on what to include in their summary and how present this in coherent English. This is a very powerful exercise.

Task 8: Speaking

Ask the learners to discuss some of the questions and do some of the activities described below.

- Is this a serious crime? Why? Why not?
- 2 Why do criminals commit crimes?
- Was it a good plan? Why? What were the risks?
- 4 What do you think the guard felt as he was approached by a man in the car park?
- 5 Do you think the police will catch the thief?

- What punishment should the thief get if he is caught and convicted? Why?
- 7 Do you know any similar crime stories? Tell the class.
- Imagine you are the thief tell your friend how you committed the robbery. Include as many details as you can: How did you prepare?
 What exactly did you do? How did you feel?
- 9 What do you think the guard said to the police? Roleplay the conversation.
- 10 Imagine you are a police investigator: write a report about the robbery.
- 11 Prepare a Wanted poster.
- 12 Search the internet for more information about this crime and report to the class on your findings.

Commentary

These activities extend beyond the text into speaking activities. The text is now being used as a springboard for other language work.



This very intensive way of dealing with a short text focuses the learners' attention on all aspects of the text – its meaning and grammar and vocabulary. The learners have to use their memories and focus on connected text to complete the tasks. All classroom texts should be dealt with in a similar way: if you read texts in a superficial manner with your students, then they are missing out on a great deal of language learning and practice. It is not enough just to ask some comprehension questions and focus on a language point or two. Too much reading in class is undertaken with a minimal-success approach. We need a 'complete text' approach to language learning, and the PURP sequence and the kind of activities outlined here are one way of providing it. ETD



Robert Buckmaster is the Director of Studies at International House, Riga, Latvia. He has been teaching and training in eastern Europe and central Asia for over 20 years and is working on a new pedagogical grammar of English.

robert@rbuckmaster.com