

Less is more

Robert Buckmaster
exploits minimal texts for
maximum benefit.

Many 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.lex tutor.calvp/eng) 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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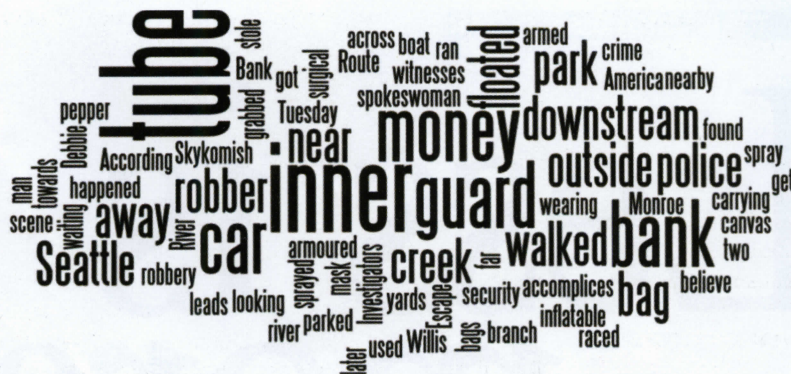
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72.53%	Current
10.71	83.3
8.43	86.7
15.36	100

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 number in monroe seattle according to police an armed robber wearing the robber wearing a surgical mask walked up to the guard who was carrying two canvas money bags at about number 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 number yards downstream of the car park

Task 1: Prediction

Commentary

You might want to pre-teach some vocabulary at this stage, though pre-teaching 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



Task 2: Listening

Commentary

Task 3: Reaction

Commentary

Task 4: Reconstruction 1

Commentary

Task 5: Reconstruction 2

Escape by tube

According to police spokeswoman
Debbie Willis, the robber, (8) _____
a surgical mask, walked up to the guard,
who was (9) _____ two canvas

money bags, at about 11 am on Tuesday 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 (17) _____ 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.

- 1 Is this a serious crime? Why? Why not?
- 2 Why do criminals commit crimes?
- 3 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?

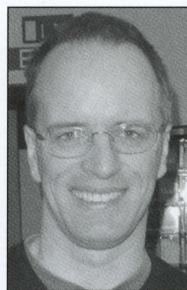
- 6 What punishment should the thief get if he is caught and convicted? Why?
- 7 Do you know any similar crime stories? Tell the class.
- 8 Imagine you are the thief – tell your friend how you committed the robbery. Include as many details as you can: How did you prepare? What exactly did you do? How 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. **ETP**



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