

Teaching the Reading Skill through George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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Abstract:

Starting from authentic texts, excerpts from George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four", this article proposes a number of activities that can be used for teaching the reading skill. The activities are addressed to intermediate students, they do not present high difficulty, and are attractive for their solvers, whom they make enjoy both literature and the English language involved in solving the respective activities. (scrambled paragraphs, cloze, quizzes for reading comprehension, characters' trials a. o.)

Keywords: scan, skim, rearrange, answer, fill in

Introduction

The dystopian novel *One Thousand Ninety-Four* includes many passages that can be used for teaching the skill of reading. At seminars, the reading lesson should be done in two snail-like cycles: the first reading is skimming, or reading for general comprehension, and the second cycle is scanning or reading to search for certain details in the text. In the following activities, I propose exercises feasible at the intermediate level during the seminar.

Reading 1. Rearrange the following scrambled paragraphs to restore Chapter 1:

A. Behind Winston's back the voice from the telescreen was still babbling away about pig iron and the overfulfilment of the Ninth Three-Year Plan. The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision that the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was, of course, no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any

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given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate, they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct, – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised.

B. Inside the flat a fruity voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig iron. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror that formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely. He moved over to the window.: a smallish, frail figure, the meagreness of his body merely emphasized by the blue overalls which were the uniform of the Party. His hair was very fair, his face naturally sanguine, his skin roughened by coarse soap and blunt razor blades, and the cold of the winter that had just ended.

C. Outside, even through the shut window pane, the world looked cold. Down in the street, little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere. The black-mustache'd face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. Down at street level, another poster, torn at one corner, flapped fitfully in the wind, alternately covering and uncovering the single word, INGSOC. In the far distance, a helicopter skimmed down between the roof, hovered for an instant like a bluebottle, and darted away again with a curving flight. It was in the police patrol, snooping into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered.

D. The hall smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it, a coloured poster, too large for window display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty -five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times, it was seldom working, and at present, the electric power was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for the Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift shaft, the poster with the enormous face



gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.

E. It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him. (Orwell 4)

Key 1E, 2D, 3B, 4C, 5A.

Reading 2. Scan the following dialogue and answer the questions:

(O'Brien tortures Winston with electric shocks to make him admit that the Party monopolises the truth)

'It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party. That is the fact that you have got to re-learn, Winston. It needs an act of self-destruction, an effort of the will. You must humble yourself before you can become sane.'

He paused for a few moments, as though to allow what he had been saying to sink in.

'Do you remember,' he went on, 'writing in your diary, 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four?'

'Yes,' said Winston.

O'Brien left up his left hand, its back towards Winston, with the thumb hidden and the four fingers extended.

'How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?'

'Four.'

'And if the Party says that it is not four but five- then how many?'

'Four.'

The word ended in a gasp of pain. The needle of the dial had shut up to fifty-five. The sweat had sprung out from all over Winston's body. The air tore into his lungs and issued again in deep groans which even by clenching his teeth he could not stop. O'Brien watched him, the four fingers still extended. He drew back the lever. This time the pain was only slightly eased.

'How many fingers, Winston?'

'Four.'

The needle went up to sixty.

'How many fingers, Winston?'

'Four! Four! What else can I say? Four!'

The needle must have risen again, but he did not look at it. The heavy, stern face and the four fingers filled his vision. The fingers stood up



before his eyes like pillars, enormous, blurry, and seeming to vibrate, but unmistakably four.

'How many fingers, Winston?'

'How many fingers, Winston?'

Stop it! Stop it! How can you go on? Four! Four!'

'How many fingers, Winston?'

'Five! Five! Five!'

'No, Winston, there is no use. You are lying. You still think there are four. How many fingers, please?'

'Four! Five! Four! Anything you like. Only stop it, stop the pain!'

(...) 'Again,' said O'Brien.

The pain flowed into Winston's body. The needle must be at seventy, seventy-five. He had shut his eyes this time. He knew that the fingers were still there, and still four. All that mattered was somehow to stay alive until the spasm was over. He had ceased to notice whether he was crying out or not. The pain lessened again. He opened his eyes. O'Brien had drawn back the lever.

'How many fingers, Winston?'

'Four. I suppose there are four. I would see five if I could. I am trying to see five.'

'Which do you wish: to persuade me that you see five, or really to see them?'

'Really to see them.'

'Again,' said O'Brien.

Perhaps the needle was eighty-ninety. Winston could only intermittently remember why the pain was happening. Behind the screwed-up eyelids, a forest of fingers seemed to be moving in a sort of dance, weaving in and out, disappearing behind one another and reappearing again. He was trying to count them, but he could not remember why. He knew only that it was impossible to count them, and that this was somehow due to the mysterious identity between five and four. The pain died down again. When he opened his eyes, it was to find that he was seeing the same thing. Innumerable fingers, like moving trees, were still streaming past in either direction, crossing and recrossing. He shut his eyes again.

'How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?'

'I don't know, I don't know. You will kill me if you do that again. Four, five, six – in all honesty I don't know.'

'Better', said O'Brien. (Orwell 286-288)

Answer the following questions:

1. What does O'Brien uphold about the only way to see the truth?



2. What comment had Winston written in his diary?
3. Why does O'Brien not accept Winston's first answer that there are five fingers?
4. When the needle goes uppermost, what does Winston see? Can he still think?
5. How does Winston's attitude evolve: towards dignity or towards humility?
6. The passage is based on repetition. What elements are repeated in the dialogue?
7. Is O'Brien calm or angry in exercising his sadistic act?
8. Is Winston sane or insane at the beginning? How about the end?

Key

1. Impossible otherwise than through the eyes of the Party.
2. 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four?'
3. Because he is still the master of his logic and will.
4. He sees forests of fingers, and his logic stops
5. Because of the unbearable pain, he becomes humble.
6. 'Four'; 'Five'; 'How many, Winston?'
7. Calm
8. In the beginning he is sane. In the end, he is insane.

Reading 3. The students are requested to imagine what might have happened between the starting point of the excerpt above, and what might happen after the end of the excerpt.

Reading 4. The students are requested to propose reasons for the slogans that Winston encounters everywhere:

WAR IS PEACE.

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY.

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.

Does he live in a logical or absurd world.? Why are the slogans exhibited everywhere? What is their effect on collective thinking?

Reading 5. Group work: Debate. The students decide whether the story (or the whole novel) would make a good film. What modifications should it suffer in order to become a good film script? Functions of the activity: discussion, reaching a consensus, drawing (i.e. transfer)

Reading 6. Character trials. Who is guilty? Only the torturer? Should the victim have had a different attitude? Would dignity have been possible to the end? Would shrewdness have saved him the pain?



Reading 7. Read the following text and fill in the blanks with the words in the list. Then answer the questions.

The 1.....ideology abounds with contradictions when there is no practical reason for them. Thus, the Party rejects and vilifies 2..... principle for which the Socialist movement originally stood, and it chooses to do this in the 3.....of Socialism. It preaches a contempt for the working 4.....unexampled for centuries past, and it dresses its members in a uniform which was at one time peculiar to manual 5..... and was adopted for that reason. It systematically undermines the solidarity of the family, and it calls its leader by a name that is a direct appeal to the 6.....of family loyalty. Even the names of the four 7.....by which we are governed exhibit a sort of impudence in their deliberate reversal of the facts. The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with 8....., the Ministry of Truth with 9....., the Ministry of Love with 10.....and the Ministry of Plenty with 11..... These contradictions are not accidental, nor do they result from ordinary hypocrisy: they are deliberate exercises in *doublethink*. For it is only by reconciling contradictions that 12.....can be retained indefinitely. In no other way could the ancient cycle be broken. If human equality is to be for ever averted - if the High, as we have called them, are to keep their 13.....permanently - then the prevailing mental condition must be controlled insanity.

But there is one 14.....which until this moment we have almost ignored. It is: why should human equality be averted? Supposing that the mechanics of the process have been rightly described, what is the 15.....for this huge, accurately planned effort to freeze history at a particular moment in time?

Here we reach the central 16..... As we have seen, the mystique of the Party, and above all the Inner Party depends 17.....*doublethink*. But deeper than that lies the original motive, the never-questioned instinct that first led to the seizure of power and brought *doublethink*, the Thought Police, continuous warfare, and all the 18..... necessary paraphernalia into existence afterwards.

(Orwell 246-247)

official; name; class; sentiment; Ministries; lies; starvation; places; motive; upon; other; workers; war; torture; power; question; secret; every

1. Is this text absurdist literature or political propaganda?
2. Bring arguments for your choice.

Key:

1 official; 2 every; 3 name; 4 class; 5 workers; 6 sentiment; 7 Ministries;



8 war; 9 lies; 10 torture; 11 starvation; 12 power; 13 places; 14 question; 15 motive; 16 secret; 17 upon; 18 other

Conclusion

As it can be seen, a literary text can be used like any other one to build activities on it. Of course, in the case of fiction, reading skills are the first that come to our minds. Moreover, the text is authentic language, and students can benefit from it much more than from an ordinary grammar book. Tens of other activities can be proposed to develop students' reading skills and their taste for reading.

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