Helping teenage learners through text

Introduction

First of all, my apologies for getting this handout to you slightly late – it took a little longer putting together than I had expected. I think you should find a comprehensive description of all the ideas we looked at on it though.

In the session we looked at the importance of **context**, how to provide students an **entry point to penetrate text**, more ways they can work with that text to **process** it and finally some ideas for their **own extensive reading**, probably of graded novels.

The first principle that I mentioned was this one:

If you ask a person to do something with nothing, you create stress

In the 1967 film Cool Hand Luke, after he's just bluffed his way through a card game, Paul Newman's character says: 'Sometimes nothing is a real cool hand.'

In language learning, I think the opposite is true. Not knowing anything can be frustrating, annoying and even intimidating. If we ask our learners to complete a task for which they don't have the required linguistic resources, then we can create all of those emotions.

The second principle was:

If you don't provide support to your learners at the outset, you'll end up needing to dig them out of trouble later.

So it's about support, support and support. And one of the biggest ways we can help with that is the area of context.

Part I Context

Context is key.

Having **background information and knowing the bigger picture** is so important to understanding a text.

Technique #1

So my first practical technique is to create some context by just telling them what the text is about – summarising it. And the first way we can do so, is in the easiest way possible – in their first language, or the language of their everyday life. I asked you to imagine your students were about to read a text about a chap who stops using soap. Before even seeing the text, we could summarise it for our students.

"Deze tekst gaat over een man die een jaar lang zijn haar niet wast. In de eerste alinea zegt hij dat hij het voor een weddenschap deed. In de tweede alinea zegt hij dat zijn hoofd een tijdje jeukte en erg stonk. In de derde alinea zegt hij dat zijn haar weer normaal werd."

Yes, we have just told them what it means, in Dutch. They won't mind. *But Christopher, you're spoiling the surprise.* No you're not. There's no surprise if you don't understand something.

In English language teaching, and in teaching in general, I think we are guilty of creating lots of little artificial power imbalances to get through our day to day – or because that's what we imagine the default blueprint for teaching should be. *Sometimes* we can just give them the answers and move to the important stuff.

Technique #2
My second suggestion is perhaps more radical than the first. Class comes in. We say: "Sit down. *Don't* open your books. I'm going to read to you a text in Dutch. It's going to take about two minutes but I'm going to read it as fast as I can. You can make no notes, you just have to listen. And at the end of it, I'm going to ask each and every one of you to tell me something that you heard – be it a word, a phrase, a complete sentence or any other such detail."

Then we rattle out a word for word translation of the whole text.

They won't expect this. They've not had it before. And they will be attentive. And they will be soaking up the context and the overall meaning of the text and the residual lexis, semantics, even syntax, will be kicking around for when you then ask them to turn to the page number and look at the text in English.

Technique #3
Another option, if you're trying to work under an English-only paradigm – is to give the class a quick spoken summary in English, in the target language. But it has to be simplified.

Technique #4
Another 'shortcut' is to turn to the actual text with the class and provide a slower, line-by-line translation into Dutch as they are looking at it, occasionally pausing and letting them help you with word choice.

Technique #5
Carol Anne Tomlinson, whose videos are on YouTube, and the first of which is here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ornsytb0NrI

working from a mainstream US education perspective, talks about *differentiation* and the production of tiered tasks. This might be, for example, when we make one version of

a task for our advanced learners, and one for the struggling students. Obviously there is a limit to how much time we can spend on materials preparation but, if you are ever working with a text that is really important, you could pre-print a reduced, simplified version of the very same text, and provide your struggling students with that. If they read the simplified text first, they can then use it as a reference point to springboard into the more difficult one. An (invented) example of an original text and a simplified one is below.

Having bet his friends that he could go 3 months without once washing his hair, Brian went on to abstain from using shampoo for another two years. In fact, he avoided not only shampoo but a whole range of commercial cleansers including soap, shower gel, skin cream and hand sanitizer.

Brian said to his friends he didn't need to wash his hair – for 12 weeks. They said it wasn't possible. After the 12 weeks he didn't wash his hair again for two more years. He stopped using any type of soap.

We have maintained all the essential info but removed 30% of the most difficult lexis and structures What you guarantee here is that the struggling learners will not have major misconceptions about the text - just little ones, perhaps.

Technique #6
The next activity involved using Wikipedia for a 'sentence-grab' activity to provide context. The example text I mentioned involved a park ranger from Ohio tracking down vandals in a campervan. Before reading, we send off our students to retrieve a key sentence about the duties of a park ranger from Wikipedia. Once everyone has grabbed a sentence, we share some of those and then hunt for another key concept – in this case, Ohio itself. In this way, by briefly researching three, four or five key concepts from the text, students build up their background knowledge before reading.

A version of this activity can also be run offline. If you print out a couple of copies of each of the relevant Wikipedia pages for each core concept you want your students to investigate, you can then have them stuck around the walls of the class and your students hunt for the information manually.

Technique #7
With lower levels, and with access to devices and the internet, you could ask your students to each collect an image, rather than a sentence, related to each of the core concepts of the text they are about to read. That way, the 'movie-in-their-heads' (as Earl Stevick termed it) that plays as they read the text with be that much visually richer.

Technique #8
My next point was that the trend, over the last few decades, seems to have been towards coursebook authors basing their texts on real stories. As a result, one can often find YouTube footage about many of the subjects covered in our coursebook texts. Another default teacher setting, that I would challenge, is the feeling we might have that it is better to cover the reading in the book first *then* watch the video. By watching the video first, we allow our students to get that essential global understanding about the context of the story and we also may well expose them to some key vocabulary that will repeat in the text.

Techniques #9 & #10
If we ask our students to watch related YouTube footage a second time, while doing so, they can write down vocabulary items they hear that they also expect to encounter in the text they will later read. During the workshop, I suggested asking them to put those words in a bingo style grid so that when they do read the text, they can cross off the words if and when they encounter them, giving them, hopefully, more motivation to engage with the text itself.

Part II Penetrating text
We then moved on to look at how to give learners an entry point into texts, that is, how to get them actually heads-down and reading the lines of it.

Technique #11
I call this technique an 'as-you-go-comprehension' and in the session, demonstrated it using a text about John Lennon. With this technique, nobody reads the text out loud. Rather, the teacher and students start reading the text to themselves at the same time, with the teacher providing improvised verbal comprehension style questions sentence by sentence, with students needing to read to the end of each sentence to provide the answer. In this way, the teacher leads the class through the text little by little. If you are reading this but couldn't make the workshop, you may wish to ask someone who was at one of the sessions to demonstrate the technique. In addition, this technique is described in my first book: *Understanding Teenagers in the ELT Classroom* (2018).

Technique #12
I call this technique a 'loctation'. With a traditional dictation, if a student doesn't know a word or phrase, that's them finished. With this variation, we provide them with a short text (or specify one paragraph from a larger text in the coursebook) and ask them to find and circle a word that means…[L1 translation or synonym] and to number that word 1. We then ask them to locate another word and number it 2 and so on. In this way, even if they can't think of a word straight off, they have the context of the whole text and a closed set of words to choose from, thus giving them a fighting chance of locating the word and also of learning from the activity rather than just being tested by it.

Teacher says: "Find a word than means the same as 'bekend als' then circle it and label it with a number 1."

Pontefract cakes (also <u>known as</u>¹ Pomfret cakes and <u>Pomfrey</u> cakes) are a type of small, roughly circular black sweet measuring approximately 3/4" (<u>2 cm</u>) wide and 1/5" (<u>4mm</u>) thick, made of <u>liquorice</u>, originally manufactured in the Yorkshire town of <u>Pontefract</u>, England.

"Now find a word that is a synonym of 'sort' and 'kind'."

Pontefract cakes (also <u>known as</u>¹ Pomfret cakes and <u>Pomfrey</u> cakes) are a <u>type</u>² of small, roughly circular black sweet measuring approximately 3/4" (<u>2 cm</u>) wide and 1/5" (<u>4mm</u>) thick, made of <u>liquorice</u>, originally manufactured in the Yorkshire town of <u>Pontefract</u>, England.

…and so on.

This text was taken from the Wikipedia entry for Pontefract cakes.

Technique #13
The next activity involves giving learners a set of colours each and asking them to underline each sentence of a text in the colour that *they* feel best represents that sentence. This is purely interpretative but it does require them to reflect on the description, imagery or emotion in each sentence. By the end of the task they should have a text underlined in a range of colours.

Technique #14
We can then provide them with a short script, put them in pairs and ask them to explain their choices to one another. You will see below that there are also a few supporting phrases at the bottom. These can be added to as the teacher overhears one or two pairs speaking.

A – So, why did you choose _____ for this sentence?

B – I chose _____ because ….

it reminds me of…   I think it best represents   it's the colour of…

Technique #15
We could also provide lower-level learners with a short text and leave large square brackets at the end of each sentence. If we give them access to paints, they can read each sentence then dip their thumb into the paint, or mixture of paints, that best represents the colour of that sentence as they see it in their head. I call this: colour 'thumbprinting' a text. The example text below is one I created for a group several years ago. I suggest you take a text from your own syllabus, so that you are covering course material at the same time as experimenting with methodology.

Sauron is a bad wizard who wants the ring [   ].
He searches for it day and night using 'the eye' [   ]. First, a hobbit called Bilbo finds the ring but he loses it [   ]. Then a river person called Smeagol finds the ring [   ]. Slowly, it turns him into a monster [   ]. Finally, Frodo, another hobbit, finds the ring and goes to Mordor to throw it into the River of Fire [   ]. Frodo goes with his friend Sam and is guided by a good wizard called Gandalf [   ]. It's a dangerous and exciting journey through Middle Earth [   ].

Technique #16
At Iatefl Exeter, back in 2008, I fielded the idea of inserting square brackets into a text to allow your learners to express their comprehension of it, sentence by sentence. For this, they will need a key similar to the one below:

Understanding Index

Wh?! = What?! I understand NOTHING NOTHING NOTHING!
?   = I'm not so sure about this sentence.
☺   = I understand this sentence though there are some words that are new.
          Or// I understand all the words but I'm not so sure about the meaning.
100% = I understand this sentence completely.

They then read their text, inserting a code at the end of each sentence:

The branch manager recoiled in horror [   ]. The mere logic of the calculations on Pete's balance sheet was enough to bring out the veins at his temples [   ]. Pete put his head in his hands [   ]. He wanted to offer a glimmer of hope at least [   ].
"I could always Tipex over the third column." [   ]
It was probably at that point the manager stopped breathing [   ].

Again, here, the rationale is that if a learner needs to react to a sentence, they are more likely to engage with it. In addition, when going over the text with your students, this will help you the teacher home in on those students who need help with a particular part.

Teacher: "Okay, for the next sentence, who's got a *Wh?!* or question mark?"
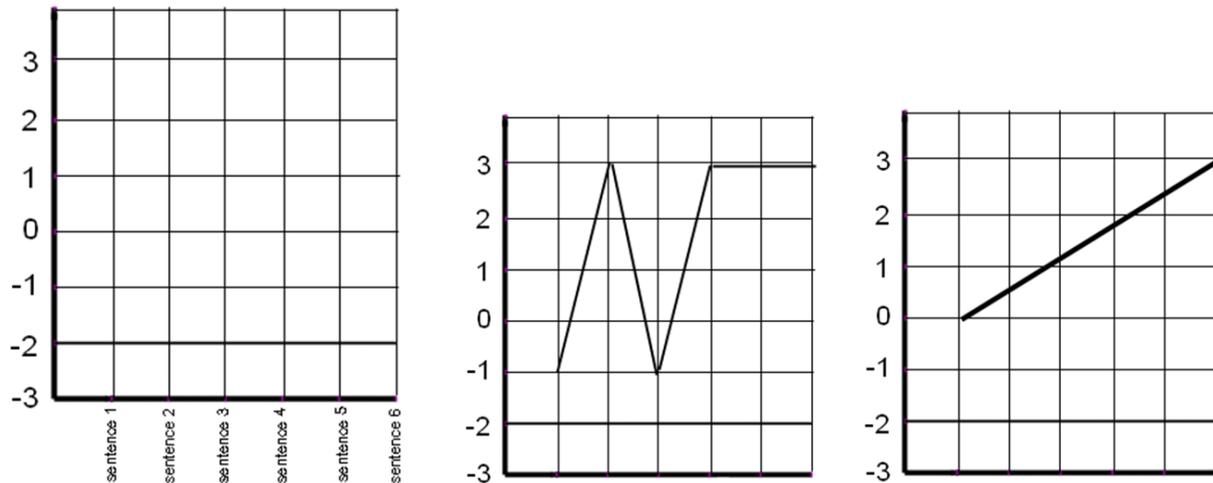
Technique #17
I called this group of techniques Sentence Response Thumbprints (SRT's for short) and the next variation again involves inserting square brackets into a text but this time to allow your students to respond by expressing their *interest* level/reaction in and to each sentence. The key is here:

Interest Index
 3 = A hugely interesting sentence and high point of the story.
 2 = Very interesting. Made me want to read on.
 1 = This sentence was interesting enough to make me want to read the next.
 0 = Left me feeling indifferent.
-1 = Bored me. Made me yawn.
-2 = Made me want to stop reading.
-3 = Nearly made my head fall off with boredom.

As an extension activity, they could then plot their interest over the course of the text in a graph. This technique is particularly good for getting your students to critically analyse a literary narrative.

Part III Processing text

Our next challenge is to get our learners to work with the text they have just read so that they are repeatedly exposed to the new language in it.

Technique #18

Once students are familiar with a text – ie once we have checked for understanding and tricky words and gone through it together – then we can put our learners in pairs and ask them to read the text to each other, with Partner A reading the first line and Partner B the second etc, *but* changing one word in each sentence as they do so. For example, if the original text, which we shall use as example for the next two techniques, reads:

Before Bilbo entered the cave, the dwarves asked him to steal the Arkenstone. Smaug was sleeping when Bilbo first arrived. While Bilbo was wearing the ring, Smaug couldn't see him. Smaug said that he had never seen a hobbit before.

Then Partner A might change their sentence to:

*Before Bilbo entered the cave, the dwarves asked him to **recover** the Arkenstone.*

…and Partner B might change their sentence to:

*Smaug was **having a rest** when Bilbo first arrived.*

Technique #19

In a similar way, we might ask learners to read the text they have already looked at to each other in pairs, sentence by sentence, but as they do so, to add something each time. This might sound something like:

Partner A: *Before Bilbo entered the cave, the dwarves asked him to steal the Arkenstone* ***because it was originally theirs.***

Partner B: *Smaug was sleeping when Bilbo first arrived –* ***under some treasure.***

Technique #20
Most coursebook readings come complete with some sort of comprehension questions. If we ask our students to record their answers to these, in full sentences, on a separate sheet of paper, what we can then do, once we have gone over the text and the answers in the conventional way, is to ask them to roleplay an exchange, one more time, in pairs, where one of them is the teacher (asking the original comprehension questions as they are phrased in the book) and the other is the student (responding with the answers they have written down).

This prepared exchange will give students one more chance to tie together questions, answers and any target language therein contained.

Techniques #21 and #22
With tweens, we can ask them to convert a text into comic book format. If we do this, however, it is a good idea to specify first how much textual narrative we want there to be in their comic page. For example, we might ask them to include at least three commentary/narrative boxes per page, at least 9 vignettes and at least one speech bubble per vignette.
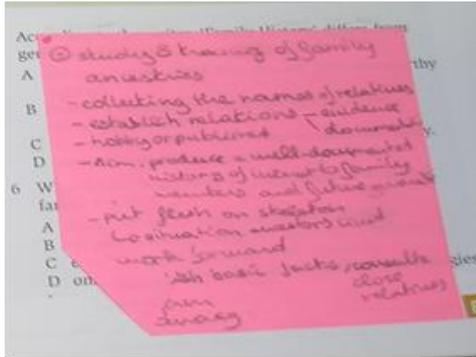
Technique #23
This technique involves allowing our students to create poster style pages where they replace some of the words in the text they are reading with images, either cut out from magazines or printed from online searches.

If your learners have access to PC's, one can dictate the text to another who types it up before printing. This will give them yet another pass at the text. If not, they can work with photocopies and scissors and glue. Once finished, they can practise reading their posters to other students or the teacher.

Technique #24
Students can be given a Post-It note and asked to write down, in order, the three most important words in each sentence for a given paragraph of a text. Once they have done this, they get to look at the text one more time before closing their books and trying to reconstruct the text, verbally, to a partner, using only the prompts on their Post-It.

This technique works quite nicely when you have several paragraph-long texts in one reading, all dealing with a different topic. Students can be put in pairs or groups and each given a paragraph and a Post-It, and become responsible for retelling their part to their partner/s. If you have different coloured Post-It notes, you can use some sort of colour-coding whereby everyone who is making notes on paragraph one gets a pink Post-It, everyone doing paragraph two gets a yellow one etc – which will help you the teacher keep a track of who is doing what.

Technique #25
'Eyes up' is a little technique where we ask students to read a text to each other in pairs but say to them that they may only speak when they are looking their partner in the eyes. They may, of course, look down at the text as many times as they need to. This involves a closer scrutiny of the text and a more detailed processing of it.

Part IV Extensive reading
In the final part of the session, we looked at how to encourage your learners to engage with graded readers.

Techniques #26 and #27
The first two techniques involve helping each of our students to choose a reader that is most suitable for them. This might involve us just asking to have a quick look at the reader they have chosen when they come back from the library and checking with them that it is graded to the correct CEF level and that the topic or genre of the reader is one they actually like. It might also involve us asking them to read the first page to themselves to make sure that they actually like how the story starts.

To this end, I have created a template which students can fill out, and which I will send you as a separate document. This template also has a planner box where students propose the days they are going to read and how many pages they are going to try to get through per day.

Technique #28
I then argued the benefits of in-class reading phases, where everyone brings their reader to class and we all have 5 minutes silent reading. This, I claimed, is good for three reasons. Firstly, it allows you the teacher to check that each student does in fact

have a current reader. Secondly, it will help move any student who has become stuck with their reader along by a couple of pages. Thirdly, as an exercise in classroom management in itself, getting a roomful of teens to focus for a few minutes on a text is a worthy undertaking. I mentioned in the session that the first couple of minutes are normally a write-off as it takes students that time to settle down into their reading. You may only end up with two minutes out of 5 actually spent on reading productively but you will certainly have a more centred class afterwards.

Technique #29
Next I showed you the reading chart I am using with my current teenage groups.

I mentioned how they are working from left to right, with their names transliterated into both Cyrillic and Arabic scripts to add a level of novelty to the chart – which is not necessary, just an added touch I put in. Each time they read ten pages, they get a sticker and write on it the page they are on and the name of their reader. That way, the row next to their name acts as a bar chart.

Technique #30
One question is: *How do we know our learners are actually reading their readers?* The first option we have is to do nothing and trust that they are. And, as I said in the sessions, I think that is a very real and reasonable option.

Technique #31

The second option is, once every so often, to ask each learner to tell us about what has been happening in the story they are reading, up till now, in class. Just a short minute's worth of chat like this will enable them to tell us a little bit about how the story they are reading is going.
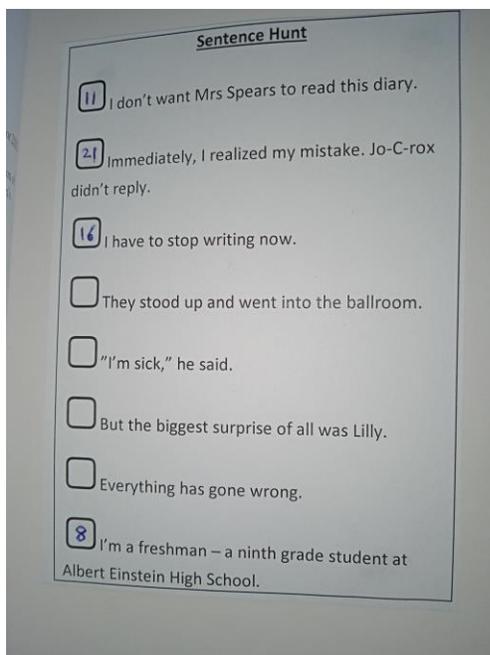
Technique #32

Another technique is to ask each student to tell the class, in turn a) what they are reading, b) what is happening in the story and c) why they are enjoying or not enjoying the story.

Technique #33

Another option is to give them a pack of mini-Post-It notes and for each page, ask them to write a two or three sentence summary on one of the Post-Its and stick that to the page. These Post-Its could even be left in the reader for the next student, who could be given a different coloured pack of Post-Its and asked to add one more sentence to their predecessor's summary.

Technique #34

The next technique involves creating a type of sentence treasure hunt for each reader, consisting of 5-10 sentences taken from various pages, stuck into the back of the book. As the student reading that story works their way through the book, they write in the page numbers that they find each sentence on.

This is a novelty activity, but it does mean that the student needs to have engaged with the text and provides some evidence of them having done so.
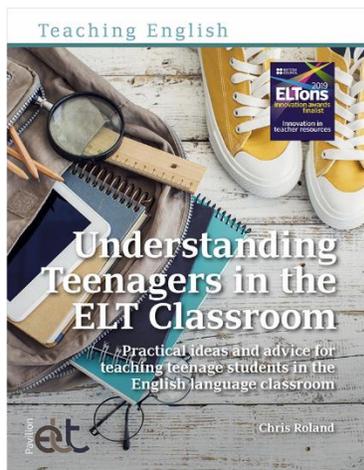
Technique #35
My final recommendation was to have students read to each other, from their readers, once in a while or even to set up some sort of buddying system whereby older students come to a class of younger students and act as assistant teachers, letting one or two of the younger students read to them, from their readers.

Thanks and further reading
Thank you to the Gomarus team for inviting me and to Erwin especially for making initial contact with me and helping organise my trip. Thanks to John Hughes the teacher trainer and materials writer for putting us together and thanks to my current institution, ELI, which is a language school in Seville, for arranging substitutions for my own classes while I was with you. Thanks also to all of you teachers who attended my sessions. I had a lovely time sharing these ideas.
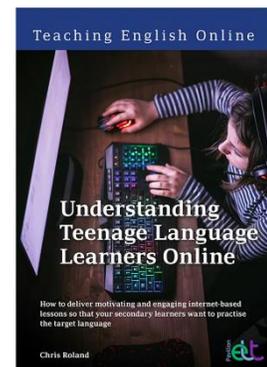
I have two methodology books on teaching teens.

This is the main book, which you can find here:

https://www.pavpub.com/pavilion-elt/teaching-english/understanding-teenagers-in-the-elt-classroom

and this is the book for online/remote teaching, which you can find here:

https://www.pavpub.com/pavilion-elt/understanding-teenage-language-learners-online

All the very best with your teaching and I hope to see you all again in the future!

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