

- TEXT ATTACK - TAKING THE TEXT BEYOND THE PAGE

Secondary and adult

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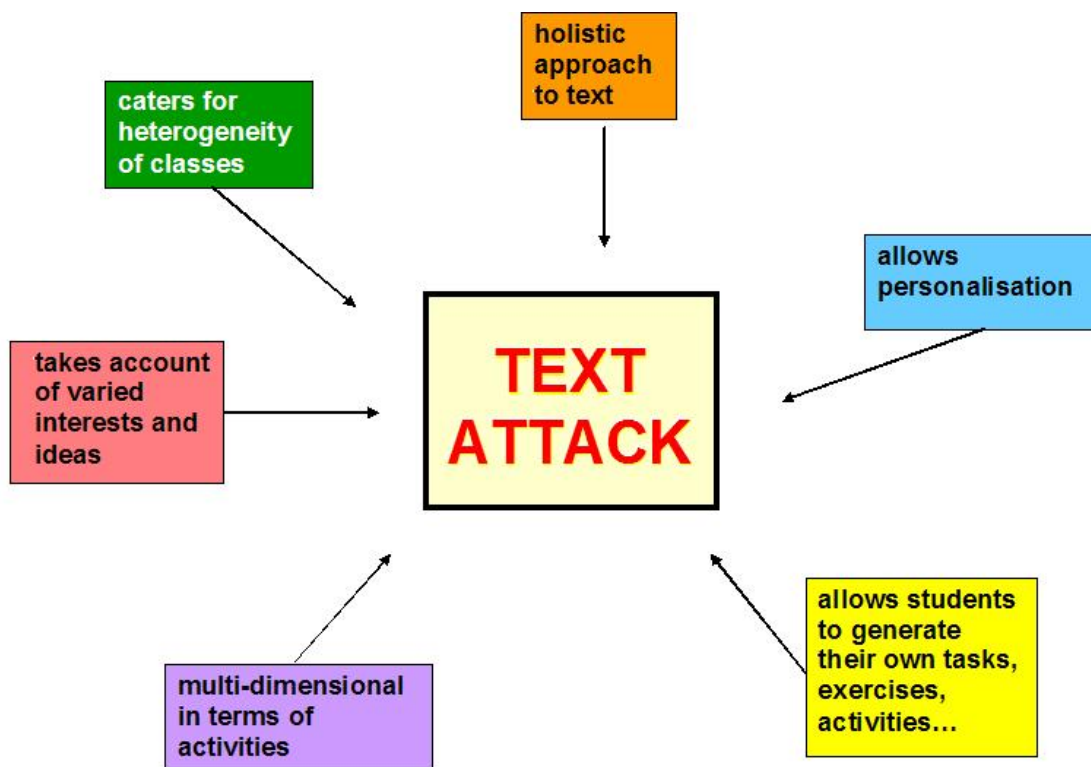
Exploiting new texts with our learners has always been a challenge.

Spending hours choosing the article which will best intrigue them often ends up with half a class interested and the other half bored (If we're lucky!). The fact that most of the EFL / coursebook texts are usually followed by the notorious comprehension questions does not help at all. The issue that seemed to be neglected for a very long time was the one of helping our learners cope with new words and the new amount of information presented. Classroom methodologies have primarily been concerned with products of comprehension rather than exploring and encouraging the processes.

The team of 8 teachers from the Croatian Military Academy attended the syllabus and materials design course at Marjons, in Plymouth. The course was a part of our training as members of the Peacekeeping English Project supported by British Council. This is where we first learned of the “text attack” approach.

We quickly picked up on what seemed to be a great combination of learner independence and task-based learning. It opens new doors of understanding a text with its appeal to primarily visual and kinaesthetic dimensions. It also exploits diverse learning strategies and makes learners more aware of the cognitive and metacognitive in obtaining and retrieving new information.

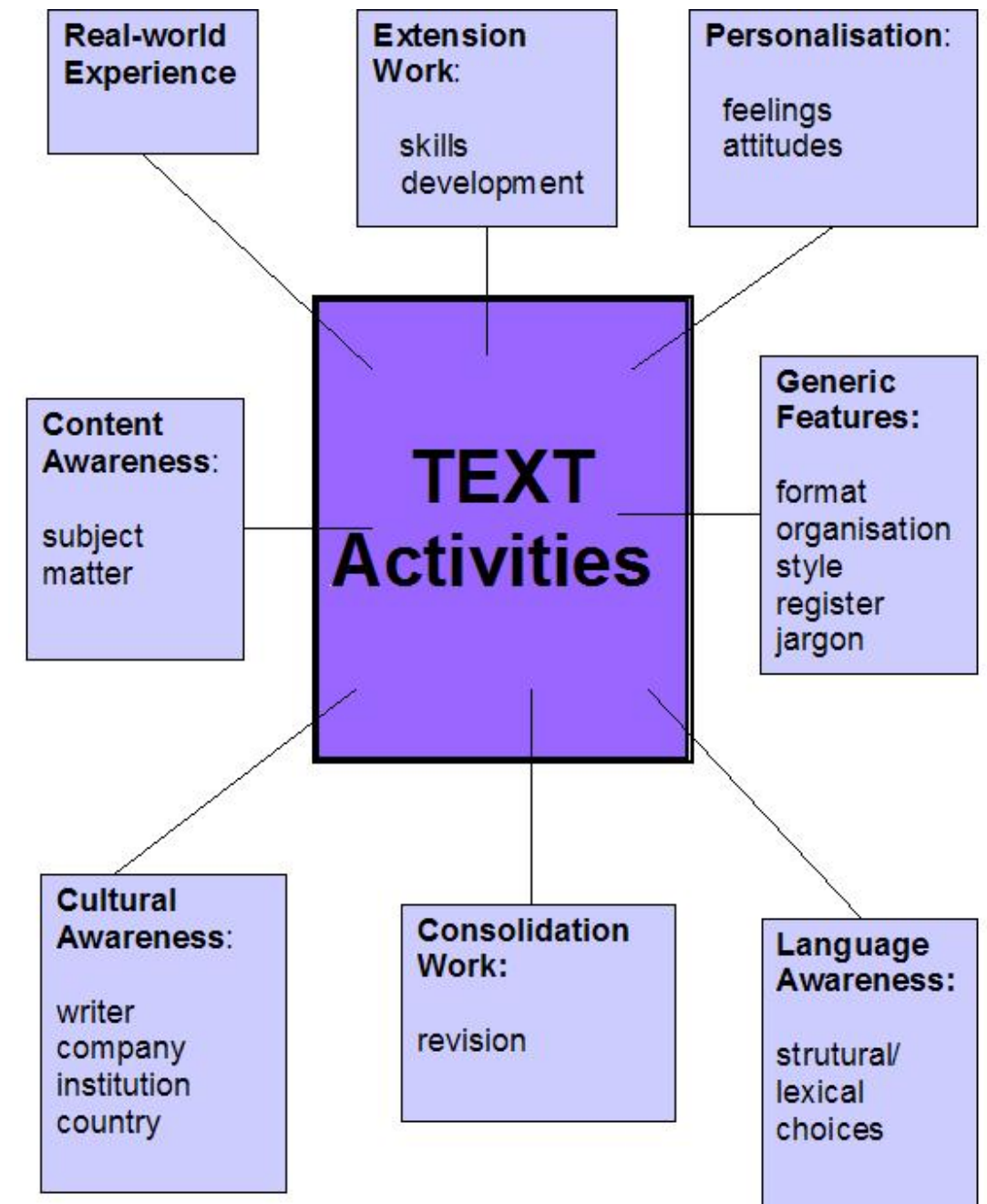
Text Attack overview



Text easification is the method through which the reading is made more enjoyable, more relevant and above all – more realistic. It offers a range of different techniques of helping second-language readers cope with the vocabulary load by defining, illustrating and simply providing clearer context for reading. This is a circular approach to texts as opposed to a linear one that is partly a habit acquired and partly imposed on learners in the classroom. Our previous experience has taught us that we have been boxing in our learners with

predetermined texts. By applying this approach, the text is coming to the learner and lends itself to all the heterogeneity that exists in the classroom.

Text Attack activity focus




By introducing numerous different tasks around the text, learners can “attack” it in whatever way they feel like, instead of the usual and prescribed top-

to-bottom way. (needless to say, any military strategy expert will tell you that full frontal attack is 'history') This holistic approach enables learners to work in groups, pairs, or individually, discuss the issues raised, prepare dialogues, write letters, follow and give instructions, compare, advise, elicit...simply put, they can take any desired direction with it. Text in this way extends beyond the page, becomes personalised and varied interests are taken into account.

Although designing easified texts may sometimes be time consuming, our experience in applying it in the classroom proves to be a very rewarding one. Learners comment that in this way the text reads more easily, tasks are more interesting and relevant and they appreciate the freedom of choice. There is no longer a hovering feeling that the text is but a load of information which will be followed by a set of test-like questions. Learners are given the opportunity to make their own choices which tasks to complete and in which order. It caters for different interests and different levels of your learners. And, in essence, we're not about teaching texts, we're about creating an environment to acquire new strategies and improve language skills.

Creating an easified text - 'Walking Britain' - an example



Walking Britain

Take a walking holiday in Britain and follow in the footsteps of your favourite writers

I. Haworth and the Brontë Moors / mɔː(r) /

The moors above the Brontë's West Yorkshire home were a source of both inspiration and solace in their briefly flourishing lives

1 From the car park, go through gate posts opposite the museum and turn right. The lane soon becomes a paved field path that leads to the Haworth-Stanbury road. Walk left along the road and, after about 80yds (75m), take a left fork, signed to Penistone Hill. Continue along this quiet road to a T-junction.

2 Take the track straight ahead, soon signed Brontë Way and Top Withins, gradually descending to South Dean Beck where, within a few paces of the stone bridge, you'll find the Brontë Waterfall and Brontë Seat (a stone that resembles a chair). Cross the bridge and climb steeply uphill to a 3-way sign.

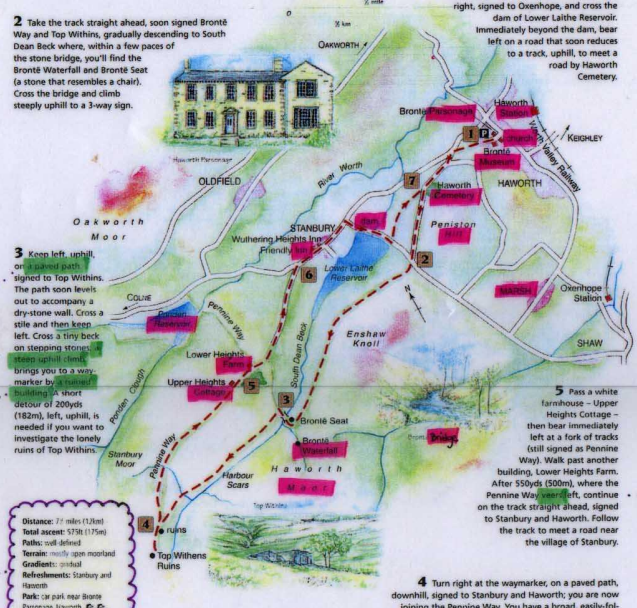
3 Keep left, uphill, on a narrow path signed to Top Withins. The path soon levels out to accompany a dry-stone wall. Cross a stile and then keep left. Cross a tiny beck on stepping stones. These last steps brings you to a way marker by a stone. A short detour of 200yds (182m), left, uphill, is needed if you want to investigate the lonely ruins of Top Withins.

4 Turn right at the waymarker, on a paved path, downhill, signed to Stanbury and Haworth; you are now joining the Pennine Way. You have a broad, easily-followed track across the wide expanse of moorland.

5 Pass a white farmhouse - Upper Heights Cottage - then bear immediately left at a fork of tracks (still signed as Pennine Way). Walk past another building, Lower Heights Farm. After 550yds (500m), where the Pennine Way veers left, continue on the track straight ahead, signed to Stanbury and Haworth. Follow the track to meet a road near the village of Stanbury.

6 Bear right along the road through Stanbury, then take the first road on the right, signed to Oxenhope, and cross the dam of Lower Laithe Reservoir. Immediately beyond the dam, bear left on a road that soon reduces to a track, uphill, to meet a road by Haworth Cemetery.

7 From here you retrace your outward route: walk left along the road, soon taking a stile in the right, to follow the paved field path back into Haworth.



Distance: 7.1 miles (11.3km)
Total ascent: 575ft (175m)
Paths: well defined
Terrain: mostly open moorland
Gradient: gradual
Reflections: Stanbury and Haworth
Park: car park near Brontë Parsonage, Haworth

II. BRONTË'S HAWORTH AND THE YORKSHIRE MOORS

If you have read any of the Brontë sisters' work, then you will probably already have a mental picture of how the Yorkshire Moors should look. Little has changed since the Brontës' time, although it is unlikely that you will encounter quite so ferocious storms that described by Emily in *Wuthering Heights*! The tragic lives of the sisters Anne, Emily and Charlotte, and their brother Branwell are often mirrored in the books they wrote and prove an irresistible opportunity to see the areas they so vividly describe. The sisters achieved considerable literary success with Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Anne's *Agnes Grey* and Emily's *Wuthering Heights* all published in 1847. Haworth itself is a popular destination, with the Main Street buildings relatively untouched by developments since the Brontë era. The local Parish Church crypt is the resting-place for most of the family. Many visit the Brontë Parsonage museum, which was once the home of the sisters and where they wrote their novels. From there you can strike out onto the craggy Pennine fells, giving you the opportunity to experience those same feelings that so inspired Emily to write her work of genius, *Wuthering Heights*. The Brontë walk covers some of the landscapes and places most associated with the Brontë family.

How many words or phrases that refer to roads can you find in the text?

Find 8 phrases used for giving directions in the first part of the text, eg Turn right at the waymarker

Ask your classmate to tell you how you get from the school to his or her home.

change direction suddenly

Look at the highlighted words on the map. How many ways can you classify them? Why?

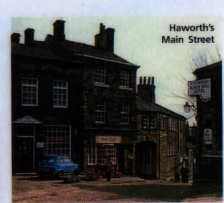
How do you think this word is pronounced? Look it up in a dictionary. What else can be described as ferocious?

ferocious

storm

/fɪz' pɹesəbəl/ very strong

If you would like to discover more about walking in Britain, see the British Tourist Authority website www.visitbritain.com/walking. Here you will find details of festivals and events, other routes, as well as links to accommodation providers and tour operators.



Haworth's Main Street

a paved road

In your opinion, where is this text taken from? What makes you think that?

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Choose one of the following tasks and do them for homework:

*Visit the website and prepare a five-minute report about walking in Britain. The report should include some of the details suggested above. Be ready to report to the class

*A friend from Britain wants to take a walking holiday in Croatia. Choose a place for him to go and in five steps give a detailed description of the route in writing. Have the teacher check your work.

We first began by “easifying” the text, using some of the easification techniques which included cutting and pasting, enlarging parts of the text, explaining more difficult words, and highlighting idioms and collocations. After numbering the lines we placed the text on a larger size paper which made it more 'user-friendly' and also gave us extra space on the margins. We added visuals to help students understand the words and to make the worksheet more attractive and colourful.



EASIFICATION TECHNIQUES

- **add white space (make it part of a larger space or put it on a larger piece of paper)**
- **add a gloss in the margins (explain difficult words; focus on certain areas, etc.)**
- **number the lines**
- **separate the paragraphs**
- **add sub-headings**
- **highlight words, sentences, paragraphs**
- **add visuals**
- **use colours to aid memory**
- **change the font size, enlarge the text, etc.**
- **add comments or questions**
- **add somebody else's text to it**
- **translate difficult words**
- **provide pronunciation of unfamiliar words using the IPA**

The next step was designing tasks around the text. The task types we used were mind-mapping, matching, listing, comparing, classifying, guessing, preparing and conducting an interview. In completing the tasks, learners were encouraged to use their dictionaries. We personalised the text by eliciting opinions and asking questions referring to the learners' previous experience or attitude. Extension work, assigned for homework, included visiting the suggested website and/or working on a project.

There is, in fact, no limit to how to exploit the text. Bearing in mind that the choice of texts and the tasks is guided by your learners' needs, experience and interests.

We've found this approach really motivating for both ourselves and our learners. We hope you'll have a go at it yourselves and would welcome any feedback.

Marijana, Helga and Nine are teachers in Foreign Language School at the Croatian Military Academy in Zagreb. We discovered 'Easification' on a teacher training course on 'Syllabus and Course Design' at Marjons in Plymouth in summer 2001 and our approach to teaching reading has been transformed as we think you will understand through reading this article. We are members of the British Council/UK MOD PeaceKeeping Project English team in Croatia involved in a number of projects such as testing, syllabus design and self-access. If you would like to know more about the PeaceKeeping English Project please take a look at www.britishcouncil.org/english/pep

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