

Sketch Reading and Summary Writing for Short Attention Spans

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One might note with a mixture of indignation and resignation that secondary and college-level language learners seem to have increasingly short attention spans. There are a number of reasons for this, such as email, instant messaging, *Gameboy*, cable news briefs, MTV and short-play radio one-hit wonders, but the fact is that attention deficit disorder (or ADD) affects or afflicts approximately one in twenty American adults (Rich and Shapiro 1999, Weiss and Hechtman 1999). What may be of equal or greater concern is the propensity for middle-aged instructors to lose part of their memory power and, thus, some of their effectiveness in the language classroom as well. In other words, hyper-stimulation or high-tech dependency on the part of the learner and absent-mindedness/general forgetfulness on the part of many a professor can create a considerable communication gap and reduce overall productivity in our language teaching classrooms. Regardless of the instructor's age or educational background, it is to his/her advantage to use learning activities in class that effectively address the short(ened) attention span of our ESL charges. Needless to say, time is a primary concern of many language development instructors, and the following is designed to stretch, if not maximize, its effective use.

Dialogue-based sketches are one means this researcher has discovered of helping activate student interest in a particularly general or potentially philosophical topic, such as time or money. Often times, teachers present students with journal or in-class writing topics based on famous quotations, proverbs, and the like. At one good-sized Southern California community college, advanced ESL students are required to go to the Writing Center each week and write a page on a pre-selected topic (in a set, weekly order) at the school library's Writing Center. In going over a number of these on the aforementioned topics (time and money), this instructor/writing tutor noted that many students were unable to address the topic clearly. For example, when presented with a famous quote by Carl Sandburg, "Money buys everything

except love, personality, freedom, immortality, silence, (and) peace” many students would instantly focus on their material needs and spend virtually the entire time writing about the difficulty of living in the modern world without money. The few students who actually considered the abstract terms that Sandburg mentions often misconstrued their meaning or confused them with words that looked similar. Needless to say, it was both amusing and confusing to consider the prospect of money not being able to buy immortality! Seriously, it was disconcerting to have to read composition after composition that merely focused on money’s material aspects. Thus, it was refreshing in my eyes to find Kenneth Koch’s irreverent and somewhat controversial *One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays* in the U.C.L.A. library one day. Therein, I discovered a short sketch featuring two characters entitled “The Cowries.” In this five-stanza sketch, an explorer-like figure (Edmundson) encounters a native islander (Ogon) and tries to buy his boat for seven shells. The dialogue is relatively simple and unadulterated, and students can read it in a matter of minutes. More important, they sense that there are certain things that money cannot buy in a much more direct and meaningful way than what Sandburg the historian-poet was trying to convey. Another dialogue-based sketch in *1000 Plays*, “Permanently,” seemed especially suitable for a small, advanced ESL discussion class, their acted-out performance later to be captured by a camcorder. This sketch focuses on grammatical parts of speech and contains a tongue-in-cheek morality play. In it, nouns are used to represent fixed conventions or standard modes of behavior, while adjectives and verbs present a modification or challenge to the established order. Even if not interpreted on this level, the students had fun acting out the lines. The school principal, a major noun figure, insists on order, but one of the student leaders (a “verb with a car waiting at the curb”) moves them away toward the end. In a punctuation point conclusion, a “kiss” is shown to have transformative power, the

reader being led to realize that sentences without interesting main verbs or modifiers are basically just taking up space.

Not every teacher can avail himself or herself of this particular book, which is published by A.A. Knopf, an outfit mostly associated with literature or foreign language-based reading materials. The Internet, however, provides a number of websites that contain sketch-like material that might easily be adapted for ESL classrooms. One of these is “espressostories.com,” which requires that all submissions be 25 words or less. Rather than grade these particular stories, the instructor can give extra credit to any student whose submission is selected, and in turn displayed on the website for future contributors’ reading pleasure.

More practical yet, Smith and Greenberg (1996) have come up with an inventive way of using excerpts from literature to stimulate student writers. They call these “artifacts” and use them in various topic-centered chapters in their groundbreaking textbook, *Everyday Creative Writing: Panning for Gold in the Kitchen Sink*. The format moves from familiar topics > *Around the House* to less familiar topics > *Down the Street* to a final section entitled *In the Gold Mine*. The authors include artifacts in connection with a dazzling array of writing topics, a number of which feature unconventional but familiar subjects, such as “the spice rack,” “the elements” (including rare gems), “the evil twin,” and the so-called “family normal.” Short poems, such as Hughes’s “*Dream Deferred*,” Plath’s “*You’re*,” and Roethke’s “*Papa’s Waltz*” are interspersed with passages, mostly a paragraph in length, from well-known short stories. I have enjoyed particular success with the last of these (poems), as students invariably come up with and express both positive and negative feelings about the father. To some students, he’s a drunken and possibly abusive threat to the welfare of the child whom he’s spinning around, while to others the moment is considered quite precious and the child is enjoying himself

immensely. In either case, I found the students' reactions to be both thoughtful and original and a vast improvement over the often strained comments I have received in connection with more complex writings on parenting, notably Grace Paley's "Mother" and Andrew Malcolm's "Dad," which are included in a number of anthologies. Especially in the case of ESL students, who very often come from traditional, non-nuclear families, even broaching the subject of a dying or deceased parent can be exceedingly uncomfortable. More important, many of the excerpts or artifacts from *Everyday Creative Writing* are bite-sized and do not place a burden in terms of the amount of time they consume in or outside of class. In short, reading assignments do not have to be extensive or expansive to be meaningful in an advanced (writing) class.

Turning to listening-based writing practice, this instructor/researcher has long used CNN video clips as the basis for in-class summary writings. These video clips are mostly provided by Thomson Learning/Heinle & Heinle in association with a number of ESL publications. They can readily be used to complement study of compositional modes and key grammar points and are designed for these particular purposes in *Refining Composition Skills* (5th ed.) and *Writing Clearly* (2nd ed.) Produced in a compelling and clear 3-minute format, each video clip is based on a topic of current interest. These range from narrative episodes (i.e. the passing of Princess Diana) to comparing/contrasting male/female communication styles in the workplace to the benefits of elderly people practicing *taichi*. In both EFL and ESL teaching contexts, I have been able to adapt worksheets for each video topic and have students go over key vocabulary and guide questions designed to help them form their one-paragraph summaries. What is especially gratifying about the final product is that students are able to write a complete paragraph, using their worksheets as writing aides, in 25-30 minutes. Even more gratifying to the ever-busy, overextended instructor, none of the summaries is ever exactly alike. In an age when news

becomes old quickly and is transferable at the press of a button, the time and attention that is paid to it tends to be shortened as well. This time constraint factor much applies to the teaching of reading as well. While teachers could once plan to get through an entire novel or anthology in the course of a single semester, they increasingly seem to be turning to short stories and human interest articles to capture and keep their students' attention. Similar to the world of entertainment, then, as our "audience" becomes more demanding and time-sensitive, we need to be versatile enough to keep our students engaged in the learning process. Fortunately, with sketch-based humor, artifacts from literature, video clips, and the like, we can cope with adult attention deficit disorder (or tuned-out learners) in a meaningful and relatively painless way.

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More information on adult ADD can be found at the following resources and websites

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