

Lessons

Writing Reproductions

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This article by Anara Alimbekova, which was first published in the journal *Russian Language and Literature in Schools in Kyrgyzstan*, was received enthusiastically by teachers seeking new directions in education. The article is reprinted here in a slightly abridged form.

In order to develop language fluency, students are taught to summarise and retell what they have read. According to widely accepted methodological principles, these “reproductions” enable students to present their ideas using standard forms, to enrich their vocabulary, promote the development of logical thinking and curiosity, widen their horizons, teach them to work independently and help them to overcome learning difficulties.

These reproductions are undoubtedly of great importance, as they help learners develop skills. Why then are students so unenthusiastic about this work?

“Why do most students hate writing reproductions?” This is the question I asked myself every time I began preparing for a speech development lesson. The answer was clear: school reproductions are boring, and students feel that they are being asked to clone someone else’s ideas.

The task varies very little: restate the text briefly, in detail, or in part ... but essentially the task remains the same: students are asked to reiterate *somebody else’s* ideas, find the main emphasis in somebody else’s text, restate someone else’s plan. In other words, we ask them to follow the already developed logic, and simply follow the teacher’s instructions. No creativity, no imagination. What a bore!

Let us take a closer look at the teaching methods associated with these reproductions. Perhaps the basic idea is not so bad, and we should not dismiss it altogether. Perhaps these older methods can be combined with new strategies. In so doing, perhaps these lessons will be lively and interesting to all students, and not only, as is usually the case, to those who are the most patient and diligent.

When using directed reading strategies in my literature classes, I noticed that children were inspired by tasks such as taking part in the lives of the characters, imagining themselves in the place of either good or bad characters, describing their feelings, and their inner and outer selves. My students thought of themselves as the writers’ co-authors, they became stimulated in their reading activity, their attention, and in their reflections.

And after such lessons, it occurred to me: “Why don’t I try to promote this same kind of involvement when students write reproductions? If they become co-authors,” I reasoned, “not a single student should remain an indifferent outsider. My goal will be to help them realize the meaning of the text in the context of their own ideas.” It was in this way that the idea of the strategy I call “directed reproduction” was born.

While preparing the directed reproduction lesson, designed to increase fluency, the teacher subdivides the text into parts (and marks “stops”). Using Benjamin Bloom’s system of cognition skills, questions are then assigned to each part. The questions should be largely conceptual, in order to stimulate student thinking, and should foster synthesis, analysis, understanding, application and evaluation.

Experience suggests that the questions the teacher has identified are not always the ones that are most the productive. Sometimes student inquiries actually determine the course of the lesson, since student ideas are less constrained and sometimes more original. In other words, teachers should improvise when the need arises, and look for opportunities to let the students lead.

Before offering students such a lesson, it is important to create a special atmosphere, to



fill the classroom with inspiration and trust. To promote this atmosphere, teachers, together with the children, develop “golden rules” for promoting active work in our lessons. The rules are as follows:

- participate actively in all kinds of work;
- listen to each other without interrupting;
- never laugh at each other;
- be tolerant and patient;
- respect different opinions.

I remember the day I first entered the class, inspired by this new idea of mine and announced: “Reproduction”.

My students groaned. I looked out upon a sea of frustrated, disappointed faces and heard them say: “Do we really have to?”

But as soon as I began the lesson the atmosphere in the classroom changed: the children participated, their eyes sparkled, they became deeply engrossed in what was going on. That lesson, as well as those that followed, proved to be a great success. The students were delighted. Now they even look forward to the next reproduction.

You don’t believe it? Well ... try it and see for yourselves!

Here is an example of a “directed reproduction” for the ninth grade. It is based on the text: “Fight at Sea” (after Tatyana Tess). The style of the text is narrative: it contains elements of speculation and description. I have split the text into parts, so that there are several “stops”. The questions were compiled in advance.

At the beginning of the lesson, I read the title of the text and asked: “How do you understand the word ‘fight’? Can you think of any synonyms?”

The children answered with various words: struggle, battle, brawl, quarrel,

attack, duel. Each wrote his/her ideas on a sheet of paper.

Then I read the title once again, “Fight at Sea”, and asked: “What might this text be about? And the children answered: “A fight between man and nature,” “A battle between ships,” “A fight between sea animals,” “The struggle of the sea against human beings,” “A fisherman may fight with a fish,” “A Fight with pirates,” “A battle between submarines,” “A fight against sharks”. When the students began repeating answers, we stopped the process of guessing and sharing.

Now it was time to listen to the beginning of the text. I read:

It was the first voyage of Alexander Kotlyarov as captain, the first voyage he had undertaken since being made captain of the tanker *Rostov*. His first voyage across the Black Sea, calm and kind, breathing summer warmth, sparkling with mighty azure.

The children listened attentively, expecting to find evidence to confirm their ideas. Having reached the first stop, I asked my questions. From this point on our conversation followed a regular pattern: teacher’s question – paired discussion – taking notes on paper – group discussion.

- What does the captain of the tanker look like? In pairs, discuss his appearance. Put your opinion down on your piece of paper. Discuss your answers with your group. (“Young, slender, bearded,” “Tall, bulky, strong,” “Powerful, fair-haired, strong.”)
- What did the sea look like? (“The Black Sea was calm and quiet,” “Kind and azure,” “Peaceful, quiet, powerful.”)
- Who can explain the meaning of the word “tanker”? (“A tanker is a cargo ship

for carrying oil products." "Not only oil products but dry cargo as well.") The teacher produces the correct version: a tanker is a ship designed for transporting liquid cargo without special packing.

- What title can we give to this part of the text? Have we learned anything important from it? (Having discussed the title in pairs, each student has to write down his/her own version; then we discuss their answers with the whole group, getting versions such as: "The first voyage," "A young captain," "Captain Alexander Kotlyarov's first voyage".) The teacher should not write anything on the blackboard; otherwise students may simply use her model, and little independent, creative work will result. My goal is to have the students rely less on the teacher, and more on their own decisions.

- Can you predict what will happen next? ("It is quite difficult but I guess something is bound to happen as it is his first voyage." "The tanker will be attacked by pirates." "There will be a storm." "The tanker will run out of control." "A storm is sure to break out.")

- Then I ask an additional question: "Who knows, or thinks he knows, how ships and boats depart from a port?" ("They weigh anchor and get under way." "They cast off.")

I continued reading until the second stop.

Then the first bell rang out from the foredeck: it meant that the anchor lying deep on the bottom had just been dug out. Then came the second bell: the anchor had left the bottom. It was being hauled out now; and the moment it emerged from the water the third bell would ring out. But all of a sudden there was complete silence. No bell.

I continued talking with the students.

- Why didn't the bell ring a third time? What has happened? ("There was an accident." "Something has gone wrong with the captain, he may have fallen ill or got too excited." "The anchor has dropped back down on to the bottom.")

- Let us write a possible title for this paragraph. ("Moment of expectation," "Getting ready for departure," "The bell is silent.")

I went on reading until the third stop.

The captain waited. But no, the bell was silent. The pause seemed endless. At last the third mate's voice could be heard. The voice was hoarse; the captain heard strange, new tones in it. The third mate reported: "The

anchor is not free. There is an object on it." The anchor had already emerged from the water, and was now hanging like a huge lobster. The object clinging to it was threateningly familiar. The captain recognised the shape: round, rapacious, full of hidden, evil power ...

- What could it be, clinging to the anchor? ("An octopus," "A shark," "A monster," "A mine," "A sea animal," "A bomb," "A squid.")
- What title would you give this paragraph? ("The anchor is not free," "A terrible find," "There is an object on the anchor," "The mate is confused.")

We went on reading to the fourth stop.

There was an aviation bomb hanging from the anchor fluke. In deep thought, the captain looked at its black fins. His tanker had just taken on board thousands of tonnes of petrol. The captain was thinking not only of his ship but also of all the other tankers full of petrol and oil which were docked around them.

The captain went over to the telephone. He had to let the port authorities know what had happened. He picked up the receiver. "How long would it take the bomb disposal squad to come over?" The bomb could explode any minute. Who could predict when an animal would show its fangs? The captain looked at the shore.

And the longer he looked at the peaceful scene, at the boats moored in the port and the carefree people waiting on the quay, the clearer became the decision that was taking shape in his head.

- Describe the object hanging from the anchor. ("Big," "Terrible," "Rapacious," "Malicious," "Full of hidden power," "With black fins," "Barbed," "With hidden wickedness.")
- What will the captain do? ("He will take his ship out to sea, farther from the shore." "He will drop the bomb into the sea and let it sink." "He will unfasten the anchor chain." "He will go out to sea and wait for the bomb disposal squad there." "He will go out to sea and make the bomb harmless.")

We went on reading.

He decided not to wait for the bomb disposal squad from Sevastopol, and instead to leave the port immediately. He would go out to sea, and try to sink the bomb in the open waters.

The tanker went out several miles from the shore. The captain gave the order to

lower the chain gradually, so that the bomb would slowly go below the surface. And then he gave the order to go into reverse. He hoped that the strong current created, once the anchor reached it, would push the bomb away.

And again they started hauling out the anchor. But again the sailors saw the evil face of the bomb appearing from behind the anchor fluke. The guest from the dark did not want to leave.

I asked a question aimed at enriching the students' vocabulary.

- What names does the author give to the bomb? ("The guest from the dark," "The bomb with an evil face.")
- What title would you give the passage? ("Unsuccessful attempt," "The captain's plan," "The guest from the dark does not want to leave.")
- What do you think might happen next? ("The captain will go on trying," "He will cut the anchor chain," "He will tell the crew to leave the ship and stay on board alone," "He will try again," "He will order the crew to get into the lifeboats and will stay to wait for the bomb disposal squad.")

We read the second paragraph from the end.

"Maybe the anchor was lowered too deep into the water?" thought Kotlyarov. "What if we bring it up again closer to the surface?" The deeper an aviation bomb goes into the water, the less the danger it is. But if it remains close to the surface and, thus, close to the ship, when it gets disentangled from the anchor it could easily strike the hull. And then ... But there was no other way out. The captain decided to take the risk.

- What did the captain decide to do? ("He decided to take the risk; there was nothing else to do." "He decided to try again.")
- The titles my students gave to this para-

graph were: "The captain's risk," "Another attempt".

The last paragraph.

And everything was done all over again. The sailors stared at the anchor chain rising out of the water. Yard by yard it was raised. And at last the wet metal anchor flukes appeared from the glistening blue. There was no bomb on them. The anchor was free.

I asked a factual question:

- How did the fight in the sea end?
- The titles suggested by the students for the last paragraph were as follows: "The anchor is free," "The fight is over," "There is no bomb," etc.

I asked the children to think about the captain's character, judging it by his actions (they discussed it in pairs and then in the whole group).

After the discussion I read the whole text for the second time, without stopping. Then the students worked on the final versions of their plans (individually, using the general impression they got from the second presentation of the text). I then asked them:

- Write a reproduction and continue it with a written description on how this episode characterises the young captain.

And the students began writing the reproduction, this time in essay form.

The "step-by-step" reading of the text, questions evoking the readers' prediction, variety of plans reflecting individual perception of the story, the discussion of the ethical and psychological aspects of the story – all this accounted for the success of our efforts. My students worked with great interest. And each of them had his/her own personal feeling and opinion about the collision described in the text.

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Questions from the Editor

1. In a typical Directed Reading Activity we ask students to predict what they think will happen next? Some teachers who have used this strategy wonder if that question somehow diminishes the text. Are we encouraging students who like to be correct to prefer stories that are predictable? How can we as teachers help students understand the pleasure of being wrong, and of not being able to predict?
2. In both of these lessons, the students' enthusiasm for the text is built on their personal connections to the subject matter. How might teachers foster such connections in other content areas, for example history or one of the sciences?