Collins Study Skills in English

READING COMPREHENSION COURSE
SELECTED STRATEGIES

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Collins ELT
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UNIT 4 LANGUAGE

Text 1 Language and Human Culture

Exercise 1
A Text I, below, is called Language and Human Culture. Examine the text briefly, and then, under the word LANGUAGE in the box below, write a short list of words you recognise as being related to the word LANGUAGE in the title.

Then scan the text again, and under the words HUMAN CULTURE in the box, write a short list of words you recognise as being related to the words HUMAN CULTURE in the title.

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B Now study the words you have written in the two lists in the box above. Try to predict what possible connection may be developed in the text between the two subjects, language and human culture.

Write your prediction in one or two sentences.

Predicted theme of text:

LANGUAGE AND HUMAN CULTURE
Man is the only animal that can talk (homo loquens) and use symbols such as words and numbers. He alone can bridge the gap between one person and another – in order to convey each person’s thoughts, feelings, desires, and attitudes – and to share each person’s traditions and cultural conventions, knowledge and superstitions. Words are truly understood or misunderstood only by him.

On the essential skill of human language depends everything we call civilisation, because imagination, thought, even self-knowledge, are all impossible without human language.

The indispensable role of speech in human culture may help to explain the surprising fact that fully developed languages are possessed by all known societies, however primitive they may be in other respects. The African Bushman and the Australian
Aborigine each commands a language with an elaborate vocabulary and a complete grammar. In fact the complexity of the vocabulary and grammar would strain the learning capacity of an expert linguist. Indeed, the same complexity and elaboration regularly marks the languages of so-called primitive societies, as much as the languages of European and other developed societies. A high degree of sophistication is needed, it seems, in order to simplify the language of primitive societies.

Human beings have sometimes trodden on the earth virtually naked, material belongings in hand, but they have never been dumb in either sense of the word. To be deprived of the ability to speak is to lack the indispensable prerequisite for a human community. To possess the ability to speak but to be inarticulate; to be relatively inadequate as a ‘verbal communicator’, is a loss for any human being.

IDEAS, EXPANSION OF IDEAS, AND EXAMPLES

A well-constructed paragraph often revolves round a main idea/thought/point. This point can be expanded or supported by secondary ideas related to the same topic and sometimes clarified or illustrated by examples. This can be seen by studying the following paragraph:

Main point: We can educate other people only through educating ourselves.

Expansion (supporting idea): Therefore the question of education being difficult is no longer true, because only the question of life is left. In other words that is to say, ‘How must I live myself?’, because there is not a single act in the education of children which is not included in the education of oneself.

Example: For example, how shall we dress, feed, put to bed, and teach children? Just as we do ourselves. Thus if the father and mother eat and drink in moderation, their children will do the same.

Exercise 2
Some of the ideas expressed in Text 1 are given below. In each space below add a supporting idea (expansion) mentioned in the text, which expands the main idea.

Main idea: 1 (a) Man alone can bridge the gap between one person and another using language.

Supporting idea: (b)

Main idea: 2 (a) Civilisation exists because of human language.

Supporting idea: (b)

Main idea: 3 (a) Even most primitive societies have fully developed languages.

Supporting idea: (b)
Main idea: If a person is deprived of speech, he lacks the prerequisite to participate fully in a human community.

Supporting idea: 

Exercise 3
An idea (mentioned in Exercise 2, item 3 (a) above) is written below. Give the example from the text which supports it.

Idea: Even so-called primitive societies have fully developed languages.

Example: 

Note that the four given sentences in Exercise 2 constitute a short summary of Text 1 because they are the main points of the text.

Text 2  A Note on Verbal Taboo

Exercise 1
Study the title of this text: A Note on Verbal Taboo. The title means 'a note on words that are for various reasons forbidden to be used, or are not normally expected to be used, in certain social situations'.

As the title of a text should indicate what the subject of a text is, you should therefore be able to find words or phrases in the text connected with the subject of verbal taboo.

Now scan (or look briefly) at the text, and note down at least six words or phrases you can recognise which express the idea of taboos on the use of words. Two examples are done for you.

1. Line 1: unmentionable
2. Line 2: cannot be used
3. ________________
4. ________________
5. ________________
6. ________________
7. ________________
8. ________________

A NOTE ON VERBAL TABOO
In every language there seem to be certain 'unmentionables' – words of such strong affective connotations that they cannot be used in polite discourse. In English, the first of these to come to mind are, of course, words dealing with excretion and sex. We ask movie ushers and filling-station attendants where the 'lounge' or 'rest-room' is, although we usually have no intention of lounging or resting. 'Powder room' is another euphemism for the same facility, also known as 'toilet', which itself is an earlier euphemism. Indeed, it is impossible in polite society to state, without having to resort to baby-talk or medical vocabulary, what a 'rest-room' is for. (It is where you 'wash your hands'.)

Money is another subject about which communication is in some ways inhibited. It is all right to mention sums of money, such as 'ten thousand dollars, or 'two dollars and fifty cents'. But it is considered in bad taste to inquire directly into other people's financial affairs, unless such an inquiry is really necessary in the course of business. When creditors send us bills, they practically never mention money, although that is what they are writing about. There are many circumlocutions: 'We beg to call your
attention to what might be an oversight on your part. 'We would appreciate your early attention to this matter.' 'May we look forward to an early remittance?'

The fear of death carries over, quite understandably in view of the widespread confusion of symbols with things symbolised, into fear of the words having to do with death. Many people, therefore, instead of saying 'died', substitute such expressions as 'passed away', 'gone to his reward', 'departed' and 'gone west'. In Japanese, the word for death, 'shi', happens to have the same pronunciation as the word for the number four. This coincidence results in many linguistically awkward situations, since people avoid 'shi' in discussions of numbers and prices, and use 'yen', a word of different origin, instead.

Words having to do with anatomy and sex – and words even vaguely suggesting anatomical or sexual matters – have, especially in American culture, remarkable affective connotations. Ladies of the last century could not bring themselves to say 'breast' or 'leg' – not even of chicken – so that the terms 'white meat' and 'dark meat' were substituted. It was thought inelegant to speak of 'going to bed', and 'to retire' was used instead. In a 1962 presentation of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, Carousel, before the British Royal Family, 'Our hearts are warm, our bellies are full', was changed to 'Our hearts are warm, and we are full'.

These verbal taboos, though sometimes amusing, also produce serious problems – since they prevent frank discussion of sexual matters. Social workers, with whom the writer has discussed this question, report that young people of junior high school and high school age who contract venereal disease, become pregnant out of wedlock, and get into other serious trouble of this kind, are almost always profoundly ignorant of the most elementary facts about sex and procreation. Their ignorance is apparently due to the fact that neither they nor their parents have a vocabulary in which to discuss such matters; the nontechnical vocabulary of sex is too coarse and shocking to be used, while the technical vocabulary is unknown to them. The social workers find, therefore, that the first step in helping these young people is usually linguistic: they have to be taught a vocabulary in which they can talk about their problem before they can be helped further.

The stronger verbal taboos have, however, a genuine social value. When we are extremely angry and we feel the need of expressing our anger in violence, the uttering of these forbidden words provides us with a relatively harmless verbal substitute for going berserk and smashing furniture; that is, they act as a kind of safety valve in our moments of crisis.

**Exercise 2**

Some ideas taken from the text are given below. Which main ideas do they support? Write them down in the space provided.

1 (a) **Supporting**: People communicate about certain subjects by means of euphemisms or circumlocutions.

   (b) **Main:**

2 (a) **Supporting**: Many young people are ignorant of the facts about sex and procreation because they do not have a vocabulary in which to discuss such matters.

   (b) **Main:**
3 (a) *Supporting:* Sometimes the uttering of verbal taboos is a substitute for violence.

(b) *Main:* ____________________________________________________________

**Exercise 3**

Examples provided in the text are given below. Write down the idea each one of them illustrates, in the space provided.

1 (a) *Example:* ‘Lounge’, ‘powder room’, ‘rest-room’, are euphemisms for a place where you ‘wash your hands’.

(b) *Idea:* ____________________________________________________________

2 (a) *Example:* ‘We beg to call your attention to what might be an oversight on your part’ is a polite way of saying ‘you owe us some money’.

(b) *Idea:* ____________________________________________________________

3 (a) *Example:* Words such as ‘passed away’ and ‘departed’ are used as a substitute for ‘died’.

(b) *Idea:* ____________________________________________________________

4 (a) *Example:* ‘Our hearts are warm, our bellies are full’ was changed to ‘Our hearts are warm and we are full’ in the presentation of *Carousel* before the British Royal Family.

(b) *Idea:* ____________________________________________________________

**Exercise 4**

A short summary of Text 2 can be produced from your answers to Exercises 2 and 3. Such a summary will include the main points only.

Try to write such a summary of the main points in about 6 sentences, rearranging your answers in Exercises 2 and 3 as necessary. A more detailed summary would include not only the main ideas but also some of the important supporting material. Examples, however, can be omitted in this exercise.

**Text 3  Language and the Unique Nature of Man**

**Exercise 1**

In the work you have done on Texts 1 and 2 in this Unit, the pre-questions gave you practice in the technique of ‘scanning’, that is, glancing quickly through the text to identify words or phrases you know in order to give you an advance notion of what the text is about.

This exercise on Text 3 gives you practice in ‘skimming’. This is the technique of looking more carefully at a text before reading it in detail, in order to try to identify some at least of the main points of the text.

Now go through the text and try to underline what appear to you to be the key sentences expressing these main points.
The first one has been done for you. Refer to the key afterwards as a check.

To make the task a little easier, some of the more difficult words are explained at the end of the text.

LANGUAGE AND THE UNIQUE NATURE OF MAN

Language is the most diagnostic single trait of man: all normal men have language; no other now-living organisms do. That real, incomparably important, and absolute distinction has been blurred by imprecise use of the word ‘language’ not only in popular speech but also by some scientists who should know better, speaking for example, of the ‘language of the bees’.

Human language is a system of interpersonal communication and a behavioural adaptation essential for the human form of socialisation. Yet human language is absolutely distinct from any system of communication in other animals. That is made most clear by comparison with our animal utterances, which most nearly resemble human speech and are most often called ‘speech’. Nonhuman utterances are, in effect, interjections. They reflect the individual’s physical or, more frequently, emotional state. They do not, as true language does, name, discuss, abstract, or symbolise. They are what the psychologists call affective; such purely affective so-called languages are systems of emotional signals and not discourse. The difference between animal interjection and human language is the difference between saying ‘ouch!’ and saying ‘Fire is hot’.

That example shows that the non-language of animal interjections is still present in man. In us it is, in effect, not a part of language, but the negative of language, something we use in place of speech. But we retain that older system along with our wholly new and wholly distinct system of true language. It is amusing that the human affective interjercational reaction to a bad smell is practically the same as in all other primates, down even to the most primitive.

It is still possible but it is unlikely that we will ever know just when and how our ancestors began to speak. Yet it is certain that this ability depends on physical, structural, and chemical characteristics of the nervous system which evolved from our non-speaking ancestors under the force of natural selection. The capacity for this unique kind of symbolisation is quite general. It does not determine what symbol will be used for a given concept, but that any symbol can be associated with any concept. Thus we are all using exactly the same genetic capacity and symbolising the same concept when various of us say ‘woman’, ‘weib’, ‘femme’, ‘mujer’, ‘zhenschchina’ or ‘imra’, depending on whether we happen to have been raised to speak English, German, French, Spanish, Russian or Arabic. The words do not resemble each other, and even less resemble the concept they stand for. Moreover, they can be written in different ways as in Latin, Arabic or Chinese characters, which do not resemble each other and which have no physical resemblance to the spoken words. They can even be associated with some symbol that is not verbal at all, as in this example with the simplified representation of Venus’s mirror that biologists use to designate females.

Language has become far more than a means of communication in man. It is also one of the principal (although far from the only) means of thought, memory, introspection, problem-solving, and all other mental activities. The uniqueness and generality of human symbolisation have given our mental activities not only a scope but also a quality far outside the range of other animals. It keeps us aware, to a greater extent than can otherwise be, of past and future, of the continuity of existence and its extension beyond what is immediately sensed. Along with other peculiarly human
capacities, it is involved in what I consider the most important human characteristic from an ethical point of view: foresight. It is the capacity to predict the outcome of our own actions that makes us responsible for them and therefore makes ethical judgements of them both possible and necessary.

Above the individual level, language and related powers of symbolisation make possible the acquisition, sharing, and preserving of knowledge far beyond what would be possible for any single individual. That is an indispensable element in all forms of human social organisation and cultural accomplishment, even the most primitive.

Finally, it should be pointed out that although man is a unique animal, and although we properly consider his nature in the light of his peculiarities, he also has many non-peculiarities. Man is not merely an animal, that is, his essence is not simply in his shared animality. Nevertheless, he is an animal and the nature of man includes and has arisen from the nature of all animals. Like other animals, man develops, is born, grows, reproduces, and dies. Like other animals, he eats, digests, respires, moves. He bends the qualities of nature to his own ends, but he is as fully subject to nature’s laws as is any other animal and is no more capable of changing them. Let us not forget those aspects of man’s nature. But let us also remember that man stands upright, builds and makes as never was built or wrought before, speaks and may speak truth or a lie, worships and may worship honestly or falsely, looks to the stars and into the mud, remembers his past and predicts his future, and writes (perhaps at too great length) about his own nature.

Gloss
3 blurred: made unclear
9 utterances: things said
9 resemble: are similar to
11 interjections: exclamations
12 abstract: distinct from what is real or concrete
22 primates: the highest order of mammals (which includes men and apes)
24 ancestors: persons from whom we and our parents are descended
37 designate: mark
40 introspection: examining one’s own thoughts and feelings; self-examination
41 scope: range
51 indispensable: absolutely necessary
58 respires: breathes
59 subject to: obedient to
62 wrought: worked on; shaped

Exercise 2
In Exercise 1 you attempted to identify sentences containing main points of the text, and you checked your answers with the key.

Now read the eight sentences given below. As you read them, decide which sentences express main points from Text 3, and which sentences express either supporting ideas or examples which expand the main ideas.

Here are the eight sentences:

1 Language is, among other things, a means of thought, introspection, problem solving.
2 Nonhuman systems of communication are only interjections, while true language names, discusses, abstracts and symbolises.
3 Like other animals, man eats, digests, respires, moves.
4 The difference between animal interjection and human language is the difference between saying ‘ouch!’ and saying ‘Fire is hot’.
Every human being has a capacity for symbolising concepts by words, though different words can be associated with the same concept.

We are all using the same genetic capacity and symbolising the same concept when various of us say 'woman', 'weib', 'femme', 'mujer', 'zhenschchina' or 'imra', depending on whether we happen to have been raised to speak English, German, French, Spanish, Russian or Arabic.

Although man is a unique animal, he is, nevertheless, an animal and the nature of man includes and has arisen from the nature of all animals.

Language has become also one of the principal means of all mental activities.

Now mark under (a) on the grid below the numbers of the sentences you have just read which express main ideas. Then, under (b), mark those sentences which support or exemplify the main ideas. There are four pairs:

I (a) __  II (a) __  III (a) __  IV (a) __
(b) __  (b) __  (b) __  (b) __

Exercise 3
Look at the following skeleton of Text 3 (its list of topics).

Paragraphs 1, 2, 3: Human language versus animal systems of communication.
Paragraph 4: The unique human capacity for symbolisation.
Paragraphs 5, 6: Specific human capacities in which language is involved.
Paragraph 7: The non-peculiarities and the peculiarities of man.

Now develop the above topics into a summary of about 10 sentences. You may use the following suggestion as a guideline.

Use one sentence to summarise paragraph 1.
Use one/two sentences for paragraph 2.
Use one/two sentences for paragraph 3.
Use two sentences for paragraph 4.
Use one/two sentences for paragraph 5.
Use one sentence for paragraph 6.
Use one/two sentences for paragraph 7.
Reinforcement section

GRAMMAR

THE PASSIVE VOICE OF THE VERB AND ITS USES

1 The passive is not simply an equivalent of the active. The passive form of the verb is preferred if we wish to emphasise what was done to X rather than what Y did.
   e.g. The exhibition was opened last week. (It is important that the exhibition was opened, and not who opened it.)

2 We use the passive when the agent of the action is unknown or vaguely known.
   e.g. ‘I’ve been attacked.’ (Instead of ‘Someone attacked me.’)

3 The passive may be used when we wish to make a statement sound impersonal.
   e.g. Instead of saying: ‘You must tidy up this room’ we can say: ‘This room must be tidied up.’ (That is, you are not asking any particular person to do it.)

4 The passive provides a means of avoiding an awkward change of subject in the middle of a sentence or between two sentences.
   e.g. Children under 16 are not admitted unless they are accompanied by an adult. (You would normally prefer to use ‘they’ rather than change the subject, as in ‘Children under 16 are not admitted unless adults accompany them.’)

5 The passive provides a means of avoiding too long a subject before the verb.
   e.g. ‘The picture was painted by a good friend of mine, whom you haven’t yet met.’
        (Instead of: ‘A good friend of mine, whom you haven’t yet met, painted it.’)

6 In academic writing, for example in legal texts or articles where an objective tone is used, the passive construction is preferred to provide this impersonal tone.
   e.g. In most societies it is assumed that doctors earn well. (This idea would be expressed less impersonally as follows: In most societies people assume that doctors earn well.)

Exercise 1
Complete the following sentences with a passive construction, using the verb given, and in the form suggested.

1 Some words have such strong affective connotations that they cannot _____________ (use) in polite discourse. (Infinitive)
2 Money is a subject about which communication _____________ (inhibit). (Present Simple)
3 The words ‘white meat’ and ‘dark meat’ _____________ (substitute) for ‘breast’ and ‘leg’ of chicken. (Past Simple)
4 The distinction between human language and animal systems of communication _____________ (blur) by imprecise use of the word ‘language’. (Present Perfect)
5 In human language any symbol can _____________ (associate) with any concept. (Infinitive)

Exercise 2
Rewrite the following sentences in the Passive changing the vague subject, ‘People’ or ‘We’, into a construction with ‘it’, as in the example:
   e.g. People assume that doctors earn well.
        It is assumed that doctors earn well.
1 People consider it in bad taste to inquire into your financial affairs.

2 People thought that it was inelegant to speak about 'going to bed'.

3 We should point out that although man is a unique animal, he has many non-peculiarities.

SPECIAL NOTE ON THE PASSIVE VOICE
Sentences with two objects, each one of which can become the subject of a passive sentence, present a special problem, e.g.

John sent Mary a lot of letters.

If the above sentence is changed to the passive, either one of its objects may become the subject of the passive sentence. Thus:

(a) A lot of letters were sent to Mary.
(b) Mary was sent a lot of letters. (A more common way of saying it.)

Exercise 3
Change the following sentences into the passive as in the above example. You may have to rearrange the order of the parts of the sentence.

1 When creditors send us bills, they never mention money.
   (a) ______________________________________________________________________
   (b) ______________________________________________________________________

2 Human symbolisation has given our mental activities a quality far outside the range of other animals.
   (a) ______________________________________________________________________
   (b) ______________________________________________________________________

VOCABULARY
Exercise 4
In each of the following sentences a word has been omitted. This word may often be confused with other words of similar sound or appearance. Choose the correct word from the list. Make sure you understand the meaning of each word in the set.

1 Animal interjections are not true language, but only ____________ systems of communication. (affectionate, affective, effective)

2 Some words cannot be used in polite ____________. (concourse, discuss, discourse)

3 Women often ____________ to feminine tricks to achieve their goals. (resort, resource, restore)

4 Many people are ____________ from talking about their personal problems. (inhibited, inhibited, exhibited, prohibited)
5 When an employee leaves his job, the employer must _____________ someone else for him. (substitute, institute, constitute, destitute)

6 Mary thought she'd never meet John again, but by a curious _____________ they finally met. (incidence, incidents, coincidence)

7 Everybody was surprised at the _____________ similarity between the two cousins. (remarking, remarked, remarkable)

8 Since she didn't have enough money to buy _____________ jewels, she bought artificial ones. (genius, genuine, ingenious, ingenuous)

Exercise 5

In the following passage a number of words or phrases taken from Texts 1 and 3 have been omitted. A list of these words is given below.

Supply the missing words from the following list by referring either to the context of the passage or to Texts 1 and 3. You may have to use the same word twice.

**LIST OF OMITTED WORDS**

- complex
- symbolisation
- associate
- concept
- bridge a gap
- essential
- foresee
- deprived of
- unique
- scope
- acquisition
- convey
- resemble
- indispensable
- experiences

In order to _____________ in communication between himself and another human being, particularly when the message is very _____________, it is _____________ for man to _____________ meaning by language. A person who is _____________ this _____________ capacity for interpersonal communication may be unable to _____________ with other human beings.

The capacity for this unique kind of _____________ is quite general across languages, so that words in different languages which symbolise the same _____________ may not _____________ either each other, or the _____________ they stand for.

The learning, or _____________ of language has given human beings a _____________ of mental activity outside the range of other animals.

For example, it enables man to think beyond what he immediately _____________, and thereby to _____________ the outcome of his own actions.