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USING THE CRYPTOGRAM: A TEACHING AID FOR GRAMMAR, DICTION, AND USAGE

Most college teachers recognize that persistent problems often follow international students throughout their studies of English. In particular, troubles with verb tenses and forms, article use, prepositions, idioms, and phrasal verbs seem to haunt the speech and writing of second-language learners, no matter how well these students may score on grammar tests, per se. A popular technique reinforces correct usage by employing the cryptogram word puzzle to stimulate spatial reasoning in solving a language prompt. ESL students seem to crave this "gaming" approach to language problems and clamor for more. Instructors can adapt this technique to any level class by simplifying or complicating the puzzle's sentences and clues. The coded sentences usually prompt group discussion that will reinforce vocabulary and grammar further. Because the puzzles can be designed quickly and easily, instructors can tailor them to any lesson or area of study.

The Cryptogram

The cryptogram is an encoded word puzzle that employs simple letter-to-letter substitution for its solution. In such a puzzle, each puzzle letter stands for an actual alphabet letter, as in solving ALM PC XON XPSN…(A = *n*, L = *o*, M = *w*, P = *i*, C = *s*, X = *t*, O = *h*, N = *e*, S = *m*—) to reveal "*Now is the time…*"

The students may be given partial clues—a few of the letter values, for instance; and by substitution, recognition of word patterns, sentence patterns, and gist of the message, they are able to find all the letter equivalents and solve the puzzle.

Some examples of ESL applications of the cryptogram follow. The first two illustrate the system. The second two could be presented to a class.

Illustrating the System

• **Low intermediate level**

A n a p p l e a d a y k e e p s t h e d o c t o r a w a y.
XO XSSZC X WXB ACCSF EKC WRMERQ XPXB.

Suggested clues: (Puzzle letter = "*real*" letter)

O = *n*	B = *y*
A = *k*	P = w
W = *d*	K = *h*
M = c	S = *p*

With clue letter substitutions, the student begins:
-n -pp— - d-y k—p- -h- d-c— -w-y.

Stages of solution:

X = *a* (from *d-y*, single space -)
E = *t* (from *-h-*)
C = *e* (from *th-*)
Z = *l* (from *app-e*)
R = *o*, Q = *r*, F = *s* (from elimination and recognition of word and sentence patterns)

Learning targets:

1. Article use: a, an, the

[Articles, because of their positioning, and with some clue reinforcement, soon become major focuses for decoding, and thus they seem to become more easily familiar to the student, who learns to look for them specifically.]

2. **Third person singular, present tense**: keeps

3. **Content topic potential**: Nutrition, discussion of vitamins and balanced diet, related vocabulary

• **High intermediate level**

L u c k i s g o o d, h e a l t h i s b e t t e r, b u t l o v e i s b e s t.

AXPD FQ SYYN, KBRACK FQ WBCCBM, WXC AYHB FQ WBQC.

Suggested student clues: (Puzzle letter = "real" letter)

X = *u* P = *c* D = *k*
W = *b* S = *g* N = *d*
Q = *s* M = *r* H = *v*

After letter substitutions, the student has***: -uck -s g—d , h——h -s b——r, bu-*** —v- -s b-s-.

Stages of solution:

C = *t* (from *bu-*)
B = *e* (from *b-tt-r*)
F = *i* (from *–s*)
Y = *o* (from *g—d*)
A = *l* (from *–uck* and *–ove*)
R = *a* (from elimination)

Learning targets:

1. Comparative: good, better, best
2. Contrast logic conjunction: but
3. Content: use of abstracts: luck, health
4. Content discussion: the "truth" of that saying and additional vocabulary of abstractions

Presenting the Cryptogram to the Class

• **Low advanced level**

Be careful: if something is too big a steal, it may be stolen.

SX KJOXGYN: BG QRCXYZBAT BQ YRR SBT J QYXJN, BY CJM SX QYRNXA.

Suggested student clues:

S = *b* N = *l*
K = *c* Z = *h*
O = *r* A = *n*
G = *f* T = *g*

Learning targets:

1. Idiom use: to be a steal
2. Conditional and subordinating conjunctions: if...may be
3. Use of quantifying adverb: too [Many students confuse *too* with *very*, so stressing the concept of excess is valuable.]
4. Conversation topics: Fraud, marketing ploys, and their attendant vocabulary

• **Advanced level**

It's difficult to get along with people whonever go along with you.

PR'A WPSSPMYZR RQ TCR XZQJT FPRE GCQGZC FEQ JCLCK TQ XZQJT FPRE MQY.

Suggested student clues:

A = *s* W = *d*
M = *c* S = *f*
E = *h* F = *w*
L = *v* M = *y*

Learning targets:

1. Idioms and phrasal verbs: get along with, go along with
2. Contractions: it's [Contractions, like articles, quickly become important decoding focuses, thus subtly becoming reinforced by such puzzle use. The same is true of possessives that use *'s*.]
3. Discussion topics and cultural comparison: conversation vs. contention [Some students from cultures that value vociferous argument among peers have difficulty understanding why some Americans react unfavorably to loud contradiction. On the other hand, other cultures may need to discuss the value of polite dispute in open discussion. The idioms themselves are particularly good at stressing a cultural mode that values both cooperation and individuality. Such discussion helps de-mystify some interactions with Americans.]

These puzzles can be adapted to fit a wide array of teaching situations—as breaks in a long day of study, full session's work activities, subjects of group work, games promoting friendly competition, and topics encouraging discussion. They can prompt students to create their own puzzles and generate learning targets themselves. They even work well as additional assignments for second-language learners in non-ESL developmental courses.

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