
English for Educational Purposes: A Place for the Instrumental Function of Language in the Classroom

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To state that it is important in any language teaching situation to determine the purposes for which a second language is being learned is not new. However, as trite as the phrase may be, it has still failed to make much of an impact on the teaching of English in many situations where English is used by students to learn in other subject areas.

Functions of English and Language Tasks

English serves four general functions at an international level: instrumental, regulative, interpersonal and imaginative (Smith and Kachru 1985). It is the instrumental functions that are frequently ignored and which are essential to learners who need competence in the language to deal with English for academic purposes.

As teachers of English we must realize that it is essential that we teach to the needs of our students. On an interpersonal function level we would not teach students to barter at the local market in English. It would be a false situation, one that the pupils would not encounter. Yet it would be considered inappropriate not to teach students how to make introductions. However, at an academic level, with English viewed as serving educational purposes, we too frequently fail to teach to the specific types of reading, writing, listening and speaking situations the students encounter. It is like

teaching someone to barter and then expecting that ability to automatically transfer to making appropriate introductions. Learning to read a 'tale' or 'fable' does not equip students to deal with subject texts. Learning to write a letter or narrative does not equip students to write history essays and science reports.

Being aware, therefore, of the language tasks the students actually encounter should enable us to select more appropriate material to teach the types of reading, writing, listening and speaking tasks that students need.

The Problem

The problem is particularly serious with regard to reading comprehension. English teaching in Malawi, which is likely to be similar to that found in many other countries, generally fails to teach students to read a variety of types of materials. The English texts that are in use in the secondary schools deal almost exclusively with tales, myths and legends. Not until late in the third year of secondary school do passages dealing with some aspect of science, history and technology appear.

These passages not only appear too late in students' academic careers to be useful to them but are also written in narrative style, which does not represent the type of writing found in their subject texts.

A Solution

The solution to this problem is not simple. In fact, it can take a number of forms and will probably vary from one situation to another. The suggestions that follow have proven effective in my experience.

One aspect of reading that can enhance comprehension is learning to interpret graphs, charts, tables, diagrams and other forms of illustration that exist in texts. These illustrations present information visually to reinforce the content of the written material and can be used to teach students how to 'read' and interpret them as well as for work on general language development.

Take for example an illustration from *Physical Science: An Introductory Course* (see figure one), a first year science text.

The illustration contains a number of vocabulary items that the students need to know to cope with the science text, such as: *radiation*, *evaporate*, *vapour*, *work* (in a scientific sense), and *mechanical energy*. It also lends itself as a basis for paragraph writing, restating the information in note form, sequencing sentences, relating sentences to various parts of the illustrations, and models to pupils the use of illustrations to enhance reading comprehension.

On a grammatical level the illustration lends itself to practicing a number of important features of English:

- conditional sentences: *If water is not heated..., ...unless it is heated.*
- tenses: specifically the use of present tense to describe a 'general truth'.
- conjunctions: *Because of the force of gravity..., ...because of the loss of heat.*
- time clauses: *The sun must heat the water*

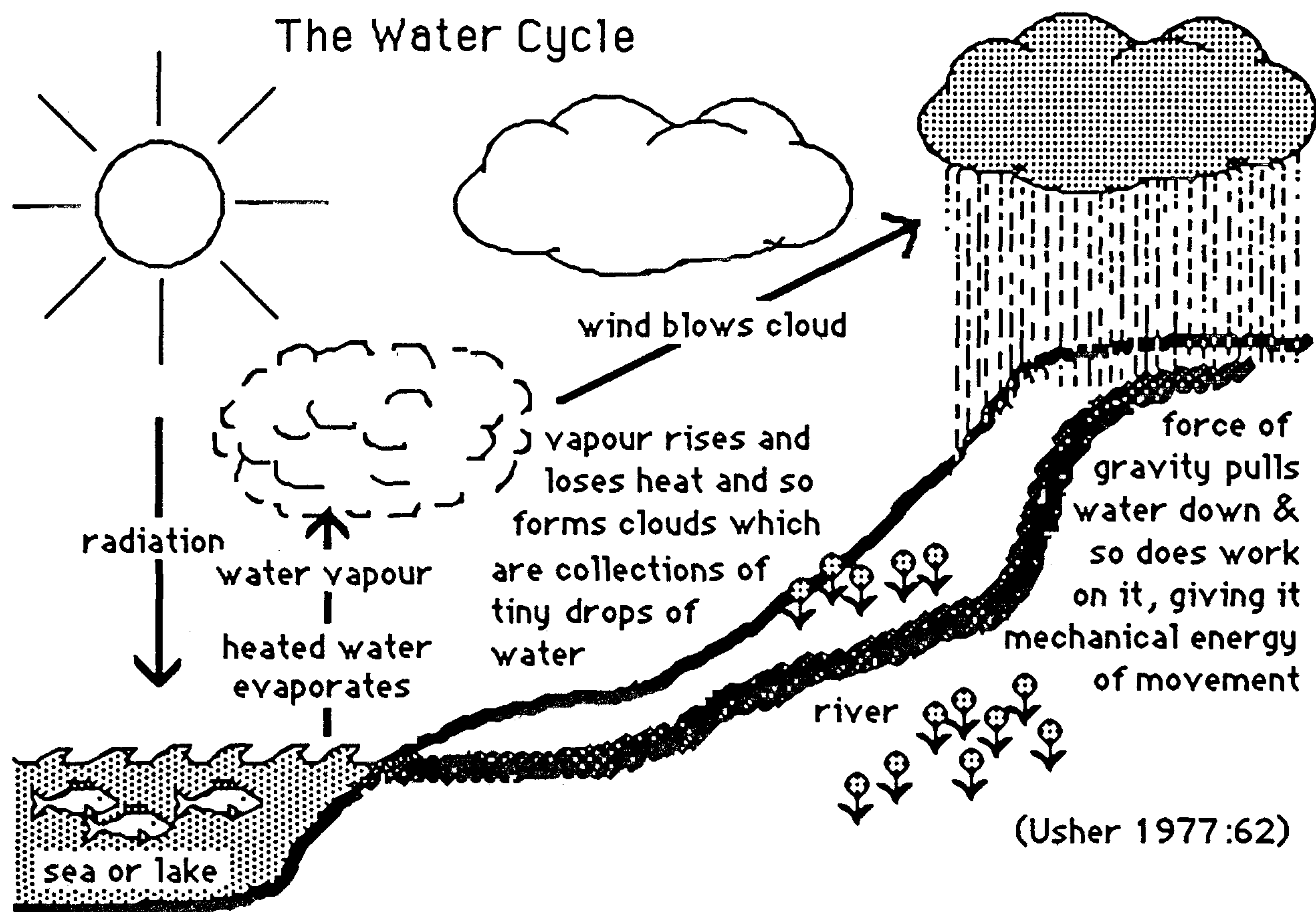


Figure 1.

_____ *it becomes water vapor.*
 _____ *the cloud has cooled, gravity plays
 a part.*

By using this illustration in the language class whatever work is done in terms of reading, writing, discussion or grammar falls within a context that is both relevant and appropriate to the needs of the students. Compare how much thought the students will have to give in choosing an appropriate 'time clause' expression from the example given using the illustration with what appears in their English text:

Following a grammatical explanation, the teacher is advised to do the following substitution table:

- T: He has told me to work until everyone has gone.
 S: He has told me to work until everyone has gone.
 T: I expected her to stay with me . . .
 S: I expected her to stay with me until everyone had gone.
 T: I want to keep the money . . . etc.
 (Ogundipe 1980: 196).

The whole focus in their English text is on verb agreement rather than the relationship of the two events in the sentence. Whether *before*, *after*, *until*, etc. would be more appropriate is not a decision the student has to make. There is little input and decision making on the part of the students and no context to give meaning. Consequently, very little learning takes place.

A Trial Experience

In order to test this, I had one of my student teachers try the exercise from the English text with a group of students and then had him give the exercise from the illustration where the students had to select

the appropriate 'time clause' expression. Though they performed at nearly 100% level with the English textbook exercise they had extreme difficulty selecting the appropriate 'time clause' item for the sentences about the illustration as well as considerable difficulty reordering a set of sentences to match the illustration.

In addition, the students felt quite uncomfortable with the use of the illustration from their science text. They seemed unable to comprehend that they were studying about 'time clauses' within the frame work of information on the 'water cycle'. When asked at the next lesson what they had done in the previous lesson they explained that they had studied about evaporation. This illustrates, I believe, how unrelated their English classes have become to their actual use of and need for English outside the English class. Also, it reveals how much the language class has become a 'subject' in and of itself rather than a place to develop language skills within a suitable context. The students have become much more comfortable studying the language at a linguistic level, learning about the language rather than learning how to use the language for their personal and educational benefit.

A Sample Unit

In order to further assist teachers in the secondary schools here in Malawi I was asked by the local English teaching association to put together materials that could be used for the teaching of note-taking. Because of the lack of content material being used to integrate the English lessons with the students' need to comprehend these materials, I chose selections from the students' subject texts. The following passage from *A Geography of Malawi* and the accompanying page from the pupils

workbook will illustrate how these subject texts can be used to expand the types of materials used in the classroom, improve reading comprehension, improve study skills in general, and build general competence in the language.

Trees are divided into hardwoods and softwoods. Nearly all the trees that grow in the woodland and savanna of Malawi are hardwoods. Mlombwa and Mbawa are two hardwoods that produce good timber. Hardwoods are the best kind of timber for making furniture. They are also made into mortars, used for pounding maize into flour. People depend on hardwoods to provide firewood as fuel for cooking.

Softwoods grow more quickly than hardwoods. A softwood that grows wild on Mulanje Mountain is Mulanje cedar. Softwoods from other countries have been introduced and are now grown in Malawi. Pine trees grow best in cool climates, and are therefore planted on plateaus (Young 1978: 40).

1. This passage divides into two categories. These are _____ and _____.

2. Indicate which of the categories each of the following points gives more details about:

- _____ grow quickly
- _____ grow in woodland
- _____ both imported and local
- _____ have many uses
- _____ grow in cool climates

3. Complete the following notes by filling in the information you have so far:

Trees

I (category 1)

A

B

II (category 2)

A

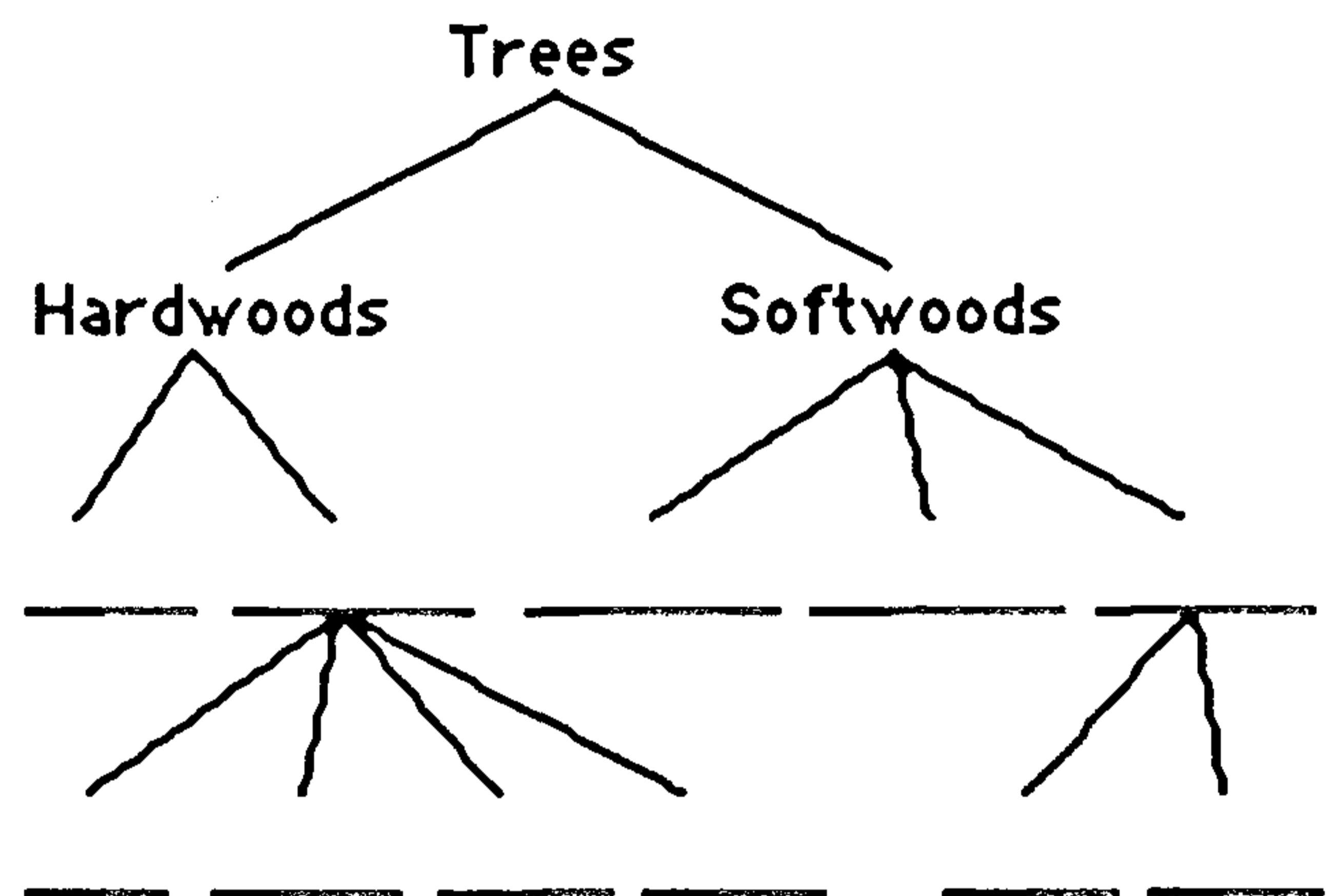
B

C

4. List four uses made of hardwoods. List two places softwoods grow.

5. How can this information be shown in your notes?

6. Present this same information by completing the following 'tree diagram':



7. Can you think of another way to show this information?

8. a) Can you think of any other ways trees could be classified? Discuss these alternate classifications with a friend.

b) Write down any facts you know, or can find out, about your way of classifying trees.

c) Choose a way to illustrate your classification (Dunbar 1986:1).

Summary

As the examples that have been given show, students frequently fail to see the

relationship of their English lessons to their need for English in comprehending reading material in subject courses, that they frequently do have severe problems with comprehension of that reading material and that adaptation of that material for use in their English classes is possible.

The instrumental functions of the language need to be given more emphasis, especially in areas where students need English for educational purposes. The other functions should not be relegated to positions of less importance but rather a more equitable form of teaching that provides a more complete look at the various functions for which English is used needs to be developed.

The end result of implementing a more concentrated instrumental function approach to teaching English will be a more useful program for the students, one that should reduce the mechanical nature of so much of the material in English texts, provide a move away from a skills centered approach, and present material that is immediately relevant and useful to the students.

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About the Author

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