

Mavilde Rebelo
EOI La Seu d'Urgell
mrebelo@xtec.cat

Reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in English class is too dangerous an adventure – or is it?

Why is a *hairband* called an *Alice band* in the UK? Students will probably find it curious and therefore memorise it much more easily when they learn that this object was named after *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as the main character was often depicted wearing a hairband. This is just one example of the numerous cultural and linguistic references students may discover when reading *Alice's Adventures*.

Alice's Adventures having been our school topic this year (2013-14), all our English students were asked to read it. The lower level students (elementary to intermediate) used graded readers, whilst the higher levels (upper-intermediate and advanced) have had a challenging task reading it in its original version.

The entire English department worked as a team, planning the reading to be split into chapters, creating the activities and exercises to be done in class (as well as out of class, using Moodle), some from scratch, and sharing teaching materials for different levels.

All levels have done reading comprehension and vocabulary activities through different types of exercise, including multiple choice, Wh-questions, ordering, matching, crosswords, word puzzles, sentence completion and open questions, among others. Nevertheless, we wanted the higher levels to go beyond this approach and to focus mainly on what is most characteristic of this novel: its word play and its linguistic and cultural references. In order to achieve this goal, students did several phonetics and vocabulary activities, many of them in groups.

Are you ready to 'go down the rabbit hole'¹ with Alice? Below are several examples of the activities and worksheets done in class allowing students to interpret Lewis Carroll's wonderfully chaotic world of words.

Chapter III – A Caucus Race And A Long Tale

Chapter III is full of puns achieved by different semantic meanings and homophones. We asked students to find out the different meanings of 'caucus race', especially the UK idiomatic meaning, used in the novel, which have probably confirmed their idea and Alice's words that she thought 'the whole thing very absurd'. Another challenge was to identify the word play with the following homophones:

- dry: not wet ≠ not interesting ('This is the driest thing I know')
- tale ≠ tail ('It IS a long TAIL, certainly,' said Alice. ≠ 'Mine is a long and sad TALE!' said the Mouse.)
- knot ≠ not ('I beg your pardon', said Alice very humbly: 'you had got to the fifth bend, I think?' / 'I had NOT!' cried the Mouse, sharply and very angry.)

Consequently, students were further challenged with additional English puns to be completed.

¹ Expression used today to say get into trouble, 'to enter a period of chaos or confusion'. Urban dictionary:
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=%22Go%20Down%20the%20Rabbit%20Hole%22>

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll (Advanced)
CHAPTER III – 'A CAUCUS-RACE AND A LONG TAIL'

I. What is a CAUCUS RACE? /'kɔ:kəs reɪs/

Fill in the gaps with the given words to find out the definitions.

held / win-win / accomplishing / support / futile / party/ expending

1. (originally *UK, idiomatic*) A laborious but arbitrary and activity; an activity that amounts to running around in a circle, great energy but not anything.
2. A system; a positive system in which everybody wins.
3. (*US, idiomatic*) A meeting to decide which candidate a political will in an election.

II. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is full of PUNS/ linguistic tricks. Can you identify the different meanings of the words/ phrases given?

- 'Ahem!' said the Mouse with an important air, 'are you ready?' This is the driest thing I know. Silence all around, if you please!'
 1. 'dry' may mean (e.g. clothes)
 2. 'dry' may mean (e.g. books)
- **Alice's VS Mouse's Interpretation.** Write down the missing words and identify their meaning in each context.

Cause of misunderstanding	Alice's interpretation	Mouse's interpretation
Homophone /teɪl/	'It IS a long certainly,' said Alice. /teɪl/ =	'Mine is a long and sad!' said the Mouse. /teɪl/ =
'I beg your pardon', said Alice very humbly: 'you had got to the fifth bend , I think?' 'I had NOT!' cried the Mouse, sharply and very angry.	bend (noun)=.....	'had got to the fifth bend' is similar in meaning to ' be /go round the bend ' (INF) E.g. <i>If I'd stayed there any longer I'd have gone <u>round the bend</u>.</i> <i>I was sure I'd locked that door. I <u>must be going round the bend</u>.</i> What does it mean?

Homophone /nɒt/	'A!' said Alice, always ready to make herself useful, and looking anxiously about her. /nɒt/ =	'I had!' cried the Mouse, sharply and very angry. /nɒt/ =
----------------------------------	--	---

III. Here you have some PUNS in English. Choose the phonetic transcription which best suits each pun and write the suitable word. Have fun!

<http://itesl.org/c/jokes-puns.html>

/tens/ /ɪt/ /ju: tu:/ /'pɒl,əʊ.vər/ /'hɑ: dʒæk/

a. I was arrested at the airport. Just because I was greeting my cousin Jack! All that I said was ".....", but very loud.

b. A woman was driving in her car on a narrow road. She was knitting at the same time, so she was driving very slowly. A man came up from behind and he wanted to pass her. He opened the window and yelled, ".....!" ".....!" The lady yelled back, "No, it's a sweater!"

c. Two friends meet and one of them says: "I've taught my dog how to speak English!" "That's impossible", says the other man. "Dogs don't speak!" "It's true! I'll show you." He turns to his dog, "How's the situation in England?" The dog answers: "....."

d. One day an English grammar teacher was looking ill. A student asked, "What's the matter?" ".....", answered the teacher, describing how he felt. The student paused, then continued, "What was the matter? What has been the matter? What might have been the matter...?"

Cha

e. Boyfriend: What is your favorite music group?

Girlfriend: I love

Boyfriend: I love, but what is your favorite music group?

Chapter IV – The Rabbit Sends In A Little Bill

One of the activities we prepared for students after reading this chapter was to identify certain words through their phonetic transcription in order to solve the graphic puzzle. Even higher level students generally find it difficult to recognise and read the phonetic symbols. With this activity they had to be absolutely correct if they wanted to get the sketch of the white rabbit.



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (Advanced)

ANSWER KEY

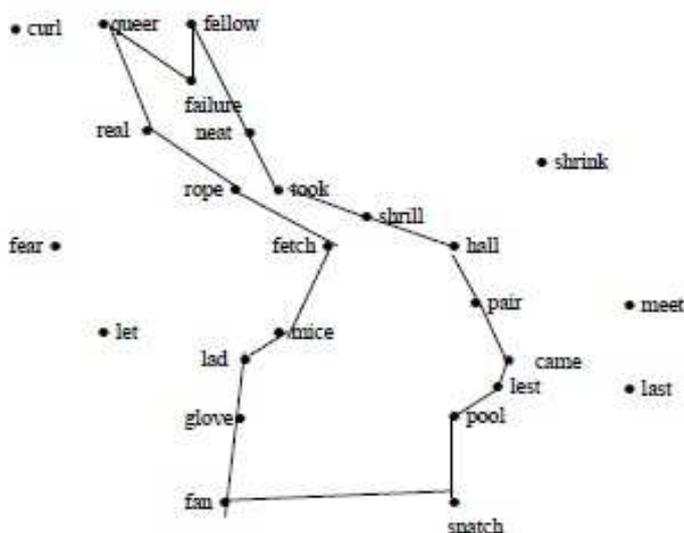
Chapter IV The Rabbit Sends In A Little Bill

Puzzle 1

If you join the dots below, you will get the sketch of a creature. Can you guess what it is? It is a rabbit. According to Alice, what is its outstanding trait? The rabbit, according to Alice, is too bossy.

Follow the order of the phonetic transcription:

- | | | | |
|-----------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. /fæɪn/ | 7. /rɪəl/ | 13. /ʃrɪl/ | 19. /sneɪtʃ/ |
| 2. /glʌv/ | 8. /kwɪzə(r)/ | 14. /hɔ:l/ | 20. /fæɪn/ |
| 3. /læd/ | 9. /'feɪtʃə(r)/ | 15. /peə(r)/ | |
| 4. /mɑ:z/ | 10. /'feɪə/ | 16. /keɪm/ | |
| 5. /fetʃ/ | 11. /ni:t/ | 17. /lest/ | |
| 6. /rəʊp/ | 12. /tʌk/ | 18. /pu:l/ | |



Chapter V – Advice From A Caterpillar

A good way to help students improve accuracy in pronunciation, word stress and intonation is to use rhyming poems. Knowing that two words have the same last sound, students are forced to pronounce them well. Students were put in groups and given the poem 'You Are Old, Father William' to complete the missing rhymes. Although the missing words are very common and well known to students, if done individually this task could be extremely difficult and discouraging. After completing the gap filling, students listened to the read poem and corrected their answers, as well as their pronunciation.



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

-5- Advice From a Caterpillar

1. Fill in the gaps with a suitable word:

'Repeat, "YOU ARE OLD, FATHER WILLIAM," said the Caterpillar.

Alice folded her hands, and began:--

'You are old, Father William,' the young man said,
'And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your _____ --
Do you think, at your age, it is _____?'

'In my youth,' Father William replied to his son,
'I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have _____,
Why, I do it again and _____.'

'You are old,' said the youth, 'as I mentioned before,
And have grown most uncommonly fat;
Yet you turned a back-somersault in at the _____ --
Pray, what is the reason of _____?'

'In my youth,' said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,
'I kept all my limbs very supple
By the use of this ointment--one shilling the _____ --
Allow me to sell you a _____?'

'You are old,' said the youth, 'and your jaws are too weak
For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the _____ --
Pray how did you manage to do _____?'

'In my youth,' said his father, 'I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my _____,
Has lasted the rest of my _____.'

'You are old,' said the youth, 'one would hardly suppose
That your eye was as steady as ever;
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your _____ --
What made you so awfully _____?'

'I have answered three questions, and that is enough,'
Said his father, 'don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such _____?
Be off, or I'll kick you down _____!'

2. Listen and check: <http://www.wiredforbooks.org/alice/chapter5.htm>

Chapter VI – Pig And Pepper

One of the biggest advantages of reading literature or good extensive texts is to be exposed to content-rich vocabulary in context, which allows students to increase their vocabulary knowledge and efficiency through strong word connections. *Alice's Adventures* is a rich source of semantic fields, such as sounds animals make, ways of looking or verbs of movement. Using mind-maps with the definitions and providing a short list of words students should be able to relate what they remember from the story to the nuances of meaning of each word given.



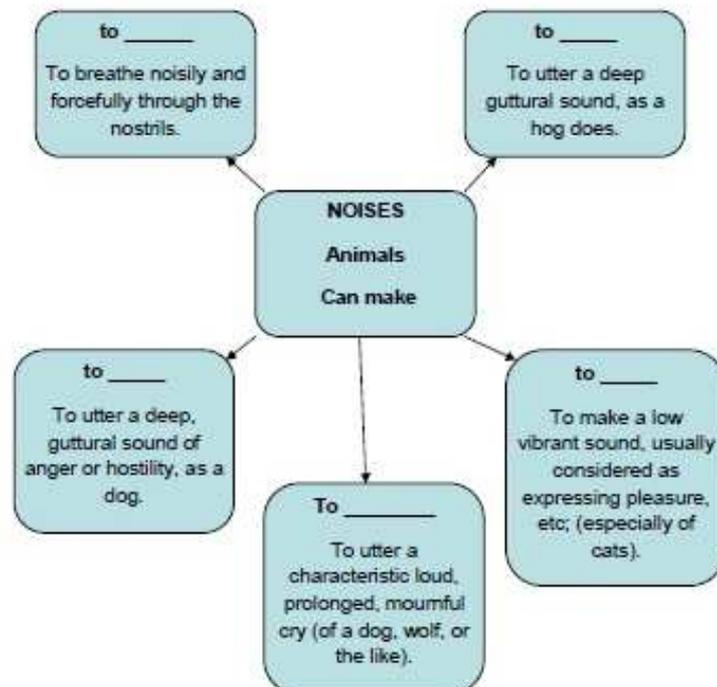
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (Advanced)

Chapter 6 – Pig and Pepper

Task 1. SEMANTIC FIELDS. Complete the mind maps below with words from the box:

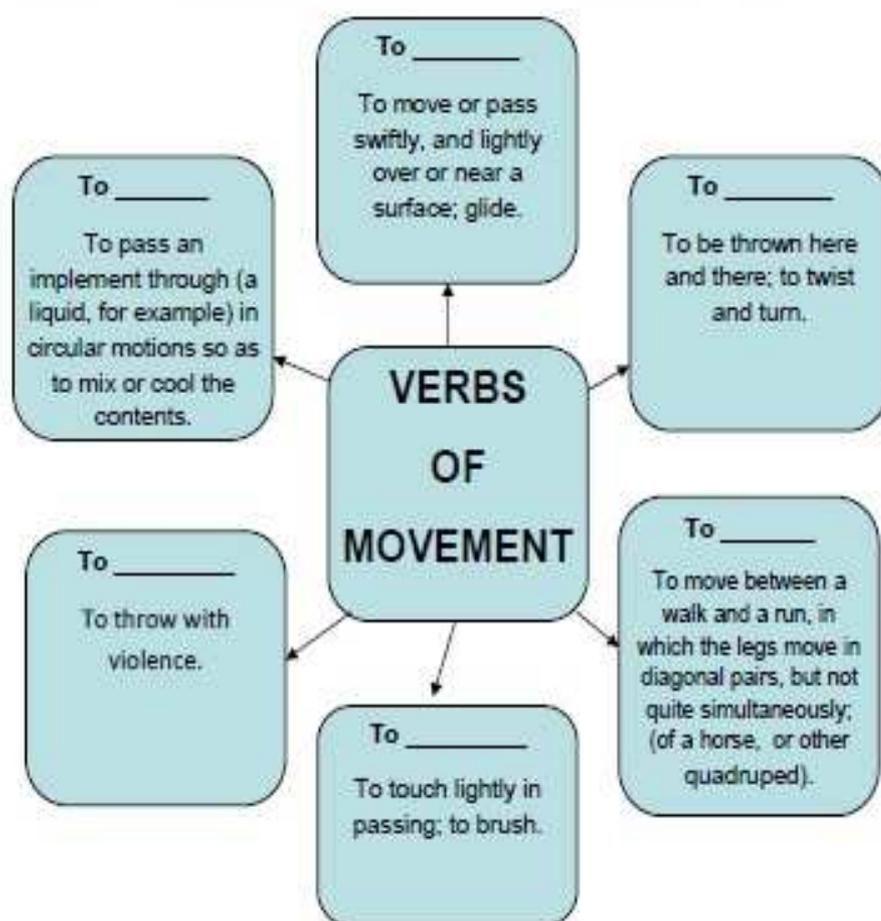
A-

grunt - growl - purr - snort - howl



B -

trot - skim - fling - graze - toss - stir



Chapter VII – A Mad Tea Party

Perhaps the most well-known and amusing chapter of the novel, 'A Mad Tea Party', is full of puns which make us laugh. Nevertheless, in order to appreciate such typical English humour, students first need to know the different meanings of the words used in such word games. In 1985 a special production for television was made² of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books³. Our students were asked to view this worthwhile 'Mad Hatter Tea Party' television adaptation and to answer some questions about it. It is advisable to revise or pre-teach some words so that students may better understand the puns. Examples of these are as follows:

- introduce: give sb's name ≠ begin ('May I introduce myself?/ 'My dear child, if you want an introduction, go and get yourself an orchestra')
- give: give sb's name ≠ provide/offer ('She wants to give us her name [...] That is ridiculous: we already have names, we don't need hers.')
- room: space ≠ place ('There's plenty of room; here are at least nine empty chairs./ 'We didn't say there aren't any chairs; we said there wasn't any room [...] we are here in the great outdoors, and there are certainly no rooms here')
- March: 'March Hare' (=as mad as a hatter) ≠ January hare/ February hare ('How did you become a March Hare?/ Actually I started [...] to be a January hare')
- run: operate ≠ go quickly (also as opposite to 'be seated') ('Are you sure your watch is running?/ 'Of course it isn't running; it's sitting here quite quietly in my hand')

Another approach to this TV clip could be to ask students to watch the video and answer the questions without providing them with additional information about the word play. Afterwards they would complete extracts from the Mad Tea Party scene with the words used to make the pun.

² An Irwin Allen production which can be seen here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AroNyp9ovUc>

³ *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*

Chapter VII - 'A Mad Tea-Party'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArqNyp9ovUc>

1. Watch the 1985 Mad Hatter Tea Party Clip and answer the questions.

1. What does Alice want to do as soon as she arrives at the tea party?
2. How many empty chairs are there?
3. Why does the March Hare say there is no room?
4. Why did Alice sit at the table without being invited?
5. Why does the Hatter ask the riddle?
6. What does the Dormouse look like to Alice?
7. What time is it?
8. What is special about the Hatter's watch?
9. What do the Hatter and the March Hare want the dormouse to do?
10. Why does Alice leave the party?



Picture taken from: <http://www.johnnydepp-zone.com/boards/viewtopic.php?f=7&t=47097>

Teaching material prepared by Mavilde Rebelo

II. Complete the following extracts from the Mad Tea Party scene you have just watched with the missing words. Remember there is a pun in each section.

ALICE: May I _____ myself?

MAD HATTER: My dear child, if you want an introduction, go and get yourself an orchestra.

ALICE: I just want to _____ you my name?

MAD HATTER: Why, have you finished with it? Did you hear that? Mr. Hare, she wants to _____ us her name.

MARCH HARE: It's ridiculous: we already have names, we don't need hers.

MAD HATTER/ MARCH HARE: No _____! No _____!

ALICE: There's plenty of _____; here are at least nine empty chairs.

MAD HATTER: Of course there are, we didn't say there aren't any chairs; we said there wasn't any _____.

MARCH HARE: [...] we are here in the great outdoors, and there are certainly no _____ here.

ALICE: How did you become a _____ Hare?

MARCH HARE: Well, actually I started to be a _____ hare [...]

ALICE: But are you sure your watch is _____?

MAD HATTER: Of course it isn't _____, it's sitting here quite quietly in my hand.

Chapter IX – The Mock Turtle's Story

To understand the title of this chapter and the chapter itself, students must first know what 'mock' means as a verb (to laugh at someone) and as an adjective (not real but pretending to be exactly like something). As for this type of soup, the teacher may simply suggest reading about mock turtle soup on Wikipedia⁴. Students will then be able to comprehend the joke and the Turtle's words –

⁴

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mock_turtle_soup

'Once,' said the Mock Turtle at last, with a deep sigh, 'I was a real Turtle.' – since mock turtle soup was supposedly made from unreal turtles/calf's meat. For this chapter students were required to read the phonetic transcription of the words given and fill in the gaps with the correct spelling. In one of the sentences, students should recognise the homophones 'tortoise' and 'taught us' and laugh at the pun in the sentence 'We called him Tortoise because he taught us'.



ESCOLA OFICIAL D'IDIOMES

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (Advanced)

Chapter IX The Mock Turtle's Story

Task 1. Fill the gaps with the words given in phonetic transcription: /'peɪnfʊli/, /'stɔ:ri/ /'brəʊkən/, /spəʊk/, /'kɑ:mli/, /θɔ:t/, /bi:z/, /sæt/, /dʌl/, /tɔ:t/, /ju:zɪd/, /ðəʊ/

So they sat down, and nobody for some minutes. Alice to herself, "I don't see how he can even finish, if he doesn't begin." But she waited

'Once,' said the Mock Turtle at last, with a deep "I was a real Turtle."

..... words were followed by a very long silence, only by an occasional exclamation of "Hjckrrh!" from the Gryphon, and the constant heavy sobbing of the Mock Turtle. Alice was very nearly getting up and saying, "Thank you, sir, for your interesting" but she could not help thinking there must be more to come, so she sat still and said nothing.

"When we were little," the Mock Turtle went on at last, more, still sobbing a little now and then, "we went to school in the sea. The master was an old Turtle – we to call him Tortoise –"

"We called him Tortoise because he us," said the Mock Turtle angrily. "really you are very"

In addition to the activities done in class, *Alice in Wonderland* was present all through the year at our school along with the well-known French novel *Le Petit Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which was the French department's topic. Most students, who probably read these worldwide reference stories in their childhood, had the chance to start afresh and read the novels in original version from a grown-up perspective.

Alice and *Le Petit Prince* met inside and outside the school in different cultural events. They invited students to go to the cinema to watch Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* in original version, to meet at the (English) 'Mad Tea Party' and the (French) 'Crêpe Party' and to participate in Sant Jordi's literary contest submitting a visual poem.

To conclude, although the reading and the lesson planning made us both – students and teachers alike– feel at some point as bemused as Alice on the Queen's Croquet-Ground, it was a worthwhile learning/teaching experience. Most of us could probably say that 'I can't go back to yesterday because I was a different person then [before reading *Alice's Adventures*]'⁵.

Teaching materials

The worksheets attached to this article were created by Mercè Solanelles, Mercè Clemente, Esther Vilana i Mavilde Rebelo.

⁵

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll