



Overview

This dark, humorous narrative is set during the First World War and, through exaggeration, shows the effects of extreme patriotism that can appear in wartime. Thomas, the narrator, hates Mrs Biggs, his teacher. He also hates singing. When Mrs Biggs finds him playing Catch the German, she punishes him by making him sing in front of the mayor. Thomas's desperate attempt to avoid singing has unexpected results when Mrs Biggs and the mayor decide to smash the piano – because it was made in Germany.

The story is told in Thomas's distinctive voice, using colloquialisms

and references to the time. His story covers the wider context of the war and the extreme anti-German sentiment of the times. A theme in which "adults are confusing" and things "make no sense at all" permeates the story. Some students will need support to understand the colloquial voice, and others may need support to identify the layers of meaning.

To learn more about the First World War, go to: www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/first-world-war

Texts related by theme

"The Butterfly Effect" SJ L3 April 2012 | "The History of Rugby: The First XV Facts" SJ 4.2.11

"Losing Nemo" SJ 4.1.11

Text characteristics from the year 6 reading standard

some ideas and information that are conveyed indirectly and require students to infer by drawing on several related pieces of information in the text

some information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, some competing information), which students need to identify and reject as they integrate pieces of information in order to answer questions

Then Betty said she could play the piano. So Mrs Biggs went on a piano hunt. In the end, she found one in the house of old Mrs Forbes who lived up on the hill and had died eating her dinner. Talk about bad luck. The piano arrived on the back of McLeod's milk truck. We practised singing twice a day, under the flagpole, for the next week. Betty's fingers danced over the keys like they were on fire. Mrs Biggs made me stand at the end of the line, right under her nose, so she could enjoy my pain.

The day of the concert, Mrs Biggs made sure I was in the same spot. The mayor and his wife came over to shake Mrs Biggs's hand. Because I was right next to them, I got to watch a drip of sweat run down the mayor's red nose and plop onto the dirt. It served him right for wearing a suit on such a hot day. Too full of himself, my mother says.

What happened next was an accident. Nobody who thought about it for more than a second could come to any other conclusion. Anyway, I sneezed – and you can't sneeze on purpose. It just isn't possible. And when you sneeze, sometimes tiny bits of bogie fly through the air. There's nothing a person can do about that, right?

So Mrs Biggs looked down at her arm, where the you-know-what had landed. Then she looked at me. Her eyes were blazing.

"We will start with a solo, Mr Mayor," she said, fixing those blazing eyes on me. "Thomas here would like to sing 'God Save the King' to us – on his own."

I don't sing in front of an audience. I don't even sing for my grandmother. Betty sat at the piano and smiled prettily. My face burnt with shame.

"I can't sing," I said.

"Of course you can. I've heard you," said Mrs Biggs. "Come on, open your mouth."

I was desperate. And when I get desperate, the strangest things pop into my head. "No, I can't sing," I said. "Not with a German piano."

figurative and/or ambiguous language that the context helps the students to understand

abstract ideas, in greater numbers than in texts at earlier levels, accompanied by concrete examples in the text that help support the students' understanding

Possible curriculum contexts

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 3 – Purposes and audiences: Show a developing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 3 – Purposes and audiences: Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.

Possible reading purposes

- To enjoy the black humour of a wartime story and explore its layers of meaning
- To understand how attitudes changed in wartime
- To understand the impact of the First World War on individuals and communities
- To read about a boy who outwitted his teacher.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

Possible writing purposes

- To write a story about how one character outwits another
- To recount a strange and/or amusing incident – real or imaginary.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.



The New Zealand Curriculum

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Unfamiliar words and concepts, including “Empire”, “milk truck”, “plaque”
- Extensive use of colloquial language, such as “giving it to the Hun”, “blow up”, “came after me”, “Talk about bad luck”, “full of himself”, “I got lucky”
- Words and expressions related to the war and the period, such as “the Hun”, “camp”, “troopship”, “patriotic”
- The use of metaphor and simile: “wider than a troopship”, “changes like the weather”, “like they were on fire”, “Her eyes were blazing”, “burnt with shame”, “like the piano was crying out”.

Possible supporting strategies

Identify terms that may be challenging and pre-teach any that would interfere with the students’ understanding during reading, for example, “the Empire” and “the Hun”.

English language learners may need support to understand the colloquial expressions and figurative language.

Use strategies before reading to support students with key words for understanding and enjoying the text (for example, students need to know the meaning of “desperate” to appreciate how Thomas was feeling on page 21 and why he said what he did). See ESOL Online, Vocabulary, for suggestions.

The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Some knowledge of New Zealand’s participation in the First World War
- Familiarity with stories in which characters are portrayed as larger than life
- Understanding that patriotism can be taken to extremes
- Awareness of the use of ambiguity and layers of meaning
- Awareness that life, and school life in particular, one hundred years ago was very different from nowadays.

Possible supporting strategies

Build knowledge of the First World War by exposing students to texts concerning New Zealand’s involvement. This is especially important for ELLs. You may need to explain that people sometimes take extreme positions in wartime, for example, demonising the enemy.

Support students to make connections with their own experiences of extreme behaviour. Students familiar with Roald Dahl stories (for example, *Matilda*, *The Twits*, *James and the Giant Peach*) will be able to make connections between those characters and the relationship Thomas has with his teacher. Allow students to read the story with minimal support for their first reading, and then spend time making connections and building understandings on their second reading.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- First person narrative
- Told in the past tense, with breaks in time when the action moves forward a week or two
- Set in New Zealand, at the time of the First World War
- Clear narrative voice of a primary schoolboy
- Use of ambiguity that highlights sense of confusion
- Use of black humour and satire
- Sentences that capture the flow of oral language.

Possible supporting strategies

Students will identify with the voice of the narrator but may need support to follow the sequence of the events. You could make a timeline to complete during a second reading to support students to follow the events.

Some students may need support to follow the narrator’s colloquial style and flow. Review the relevant features of oral language before reading, exploring examples together. Pause where necessary to unpack sentences, reading them aloud to demonstrate the voice.

Review the traditional structure of narrative texts before reading.

For information about the language function of recounting (which includes narrative texts) at different levels, see *Supporting English Language Learning in Primary Schools: A Guide for Teachers of Years 5 and 6*, pages 18–25.



Sounds and Words

Instructional focus – Reading

English (Level 3 – Purposes and audiences: Show a developing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.)

Text excerpts from “Das Piano”

I remember it hurt to hold the flag I was waving as my dad and Rex’s dad and Syd’s dad and Jimmy Kitchener went past. We all knew Jimmy had lied about his age to get in. It made us proud.

Students (what they might do)

The students **make connections** between the text and their knowledge of the First World War. They draw on their own family experiences to understand the paradox of feeling excited about fathers going to war. They use their knowledge of the age of enlisting to **infer** that Jimmy was younger than the minimum age. They **integrate** ideas and information to understand the feeling of being proud of a boy who lied in order to join in the war.

Everybody playing the game was made to stand outside the staffroom for half an hour. We waited in silence, imagining our punishments. When Mrs Biggs came back, she let all the boys who’d been Englishmen go back to class. But the Germans (there were six of us) had to stand beneath the flagpole and sing “God Save the King” ten times. She knows I hate singing and was trying to embarrass me.

The students draw on their own knowledge of games and punishments at school to understand how Thomas and his friends felt. They **ask questions** about why some received harsher punishment than others. They **make connections** within the text about Thomas and Mrs Biggs to **infer** that the punishment was harsher because of his involvement. They **ask questions** about why “the Germans” had to sing and **evaluate** Mrs Biggs’s actions to **infer** that her hatred of Germans extended to children who were pretending to be Germans in a game.

I was desperate. And when I get desperate, the strangest things pop into my head. “No, I can’t sing,” I said. “Not with a German piano.”

The students **locate** the action within the sequence of events. Their knowledge of story structure helps them to identify this as a turning point. They **make connections** between the text and their own experiences of panic to **infer** that Thomas’s desperation drove him to say something that seemed crazy.

I didn’t know that the piano was German. It was just a guess. My grandad had been a piano tuner, and he’d told me that Germany made some of the best pianos in the world. But this time, I got lucky. There was a little plaque on the inside: “Made in Dresden.” It was the mayor himself who checked.

The students use their knowledge of geography and the events of the war to identify Dresden as a city in Germany.

Based on what they have learnt about Mrs Biggs and her attitude to Germans, the students **make predictions** about what will happen.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

On a second reading, check that students are clear about the setting and are making connections with the text.

ASK QUESTIONS

- When and where is the story set?
- Where are the men going? Why?
- Why would the men and children look happy?
- Why did Jimmy Kitchener lie about his age? Who is “us” and why were they proud?
- What can you infer about the people’s feelings about the war? What evidence or knowledge helped you to infer that?

For students who find the text challenging, unpacking the orientation (the first part of a narrative text) together would be helpful and wouldn’t harm their enjoyment of the story. You could do this by working through page 17 and making notes on what it tells the reader about the people, time, and place and how it sets up the central issue to be resolved (a classic orientation). Students could then make predictions about what is going to happen – and read on to find out.

PROMPT the students to make connections and ask questions as they read.

- What connections can you make between the text and your own school experiences?
- Why do you think Mrs Biggs treated the two groups differently?
- What questions do you have about Mrs Biggs’s actions?
- What do her actions tell you about her beliefs?

It may be helpful to write up the students’ questions and revisit them at the end. Support them to make connections between Mrs Biggs’s actions and the hatred some people had for Germans, and also support them to understand how she is an example of a person taking patriotism to extremes.

ASK QUESTIONS to help the students think critically as they read.

- Given what you’ve learnt about the setting and Mrs Biggs, why do you think Thomas said the piano was German? How did he think it might save him?
- What was his guess based on?
- The story is called “Das Piano”. How does the title relate to the story?
- Thomas says he got lucky: what does he mean? Do you think it really was luck? Why/why not?
- What do you predict will happen next? What evidence did you use to make that prediction?

PROMPT the students to think critically about the theme.

- What did Thomas find so confusing about adults?
- Do you agree? Why/why not?
- How did you interpret the last two sentences? What bigger message do you think the author wants you to understand?
- Why do you think the author wrote this story?
- What do you think of his message?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- Your connections with how other authors set the scene in their stories have helped you understand the setting for this story.
- The questions you’re asking show me that you’re thinking critically and going below the surface as you try to understand the theme of the story.
- After rereading the story, you shared your understanding of ... Rereading is a useful strategy when you need to clarify the events or characters’ actions in a story.

METACOGNITION

- Show me a place where you understood more on the second reading. How did reading it for the second time help you to understand more? Is this a strategy you use a lot? It certainly helped here.
- What helped you understand the attitudes of people at that time?



Reading standard: by the end of year 6



The Literacy Learning Progressions



Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

English (Level 3 – Purposes and audiences: Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.)

Text excerpts from “Das Piano”

Das Piano

I’ve been at war with my teacher, Mrs Biggs, a long time. About as long as the Empire has been giving it to the Hun. I know this is true because the day our fathers marched through town on their way to camp, my knuckles were red from Mrs Biggs’s ruler.

Let’s just say Mrs Biggs’s name is about right. She’s wider than a troopship, which is why I bounced off her. It knocked the wind right out of me when I hit the ground. Mrs Biggs wasn’t hurt at all. If you ask me, she was waiting there, standing in my way deliberately. Setting a trap like enemies do.

Then she looked at me. Her eyes were blazing.

“We will start with a solo, Mr Mayor,” she said, fixing those blazing eyes on me. “Thomas here would like to sing ‘God Save the King’ to us – on his own.”

Examples of text characteristics

TITLE

A good title makes readers curious. It may give a clue but not the whole story. This makes readers want to read on.

AUDIENCE

By identifying the audience before writing, an author can choose the details or clues that the audience will know or be able to infer.

VOICE

Writers choose how they want to “sound” to their readers. They make word choices to show their voice.

CHARACTERISATION

Authors use rich descriptions and show actions to help readers know what a character is like.

HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is a form of figurative language, which can include simile and metaphor, to exaggerate something.

TURNING POINTS

A narrative usually has a point where events take a turn. Writers may use strong descriptive language to increase the drama in this turning point.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT the students to consider their purpose and audience.

- When you’ve decided on your topic and your purpose, think about your audience: who are you writing for?
- What do you expect your audience to know about your topic?
- What details do you need to make clear, and what can you imply?
- When you choose a title, think about how you want your audience to react to it. Will your title hint at the topic or theme, or will it be obvious?

EXPLAIN the impact of voice.

- When writers use a first-person narration, they use words that the character would use. This is called the “voice”.

ASK QUESTIONS about the use of descriptive language.

- How are you helping your audience to visualise the characters and events you’re writing about?
- How are you helping them to understand a point of view, for example, a narrator’s point of view?
- If you’re using figurative language, how do you choose the comparisons you’re making? Do you want to make accurate comparisons, or do you want to exaggerate for impact?

Explain the way all languages use some form of figurative language, giving examples from other languages. Encourage students who have a first language other than English to share how their languages use figurative language.

Encourage students to share their writing with a partner to check on the impact of their writing.

MODEL the impact of a turning point.

- When I came to this part of the story, I knew something awful was going to happen. The way “blazing eyes” is repeated and the way Mrs Biggs speaks as if Thomas has no choice made me feel his fear.
- When you’re planning your writing, think about the way you show your readers that the story has reached a turning point.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- The title intrigued me. I wasn’t sure exactly what it meant and that made me want to read the story to find out.
- I identified with the main character because you’ve written in a voice that sounds like a person who could be me. The way she talks and thinks is similar to the way my friends and I talk.
- When I reached the part where ... happened, I knew things were going to end in disaster. Your use of powerful verbs and adjectives made it a very effective turning point.

METACOGNITION

- How did your choice of audience affect the voice you used?
- What alternatives did you consider when you were deciding on your audience? Why did you make this choice? How does the choice of audience affect the way you write and the amount of detail you include?
- Show me a place where you made changes to give the writing more impact. What did you do?



Writing standard: by the end of year 6



The Literacy Learning Progressions