

# Learning English

## **American Stories**

### ***Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge***

***by Ambrose Bierce***

Lesson Plan  
*by Jill Robbins, Ph.D.*

# Introduction

This lesson plan is to accompany the American Stories series episode, *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge by Ambrose Bierce*.

A transcript of the story is included at the end of this lesson to print so students can read as they listen. Teachers who cannot play the audio from the website can read the story aloud or have students read it.

This lesson plan is based on the CALLA Approach. See the end of the lesson for more information and resources on teaching with the CALLA approach. The following slide shows the five parts of this lesson plan.

# Lesson Elements

**Prepare**

**Present**

**Practice**

**Self-Evaluate**

**Expand**

# Prepare

Introduce the story. “Today we will read *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, a story about a man in a dangerous situation. When you are in danger, what do you think about?”

Listen to students’ comments about thoughts that come to mind when they are in danger. Give an example if necessary: ‘I think about my family or my loved ones when I am in danger.’ Teach the vocabulary for the story.

# Vocabulary

**swift** - *adj.* moving or able to move very fast

**scream** - *n.* a loud and high cry or sound

**cannon** - *n.* a large gun that shoots heavy metal or stone balls; once a common military weapon

**whirlpool** - *n.* an area of water in a river, stream, etc., that moves very fast in a circle

# Present

Introduce the task to students: “As we read the story today, we will **summarize** to help us understand the story. *Summarizing* is putting the story into our own words. Just the main points, not all the details. Let’s read the beginning. Make notes as you listen. What is happening at this point of the story?”

Play or read the introduction and beginning of the story aloud to ‘But the sounds he heard were just those of the river running swiftly under the bridge.’

Model the strategy: “I’m going to summarize: The introduction to this story gives us some background. We find out the story happens during the American Civil War. The main character in this story is a prisoner. He tried to stop troops from going over the bridge. Now the Union Army soldiers are going to hang him. He is thinking about his family. Remember how we talked about the things you might think about when you are in danger? Here’s an example. Let’s read some more – and get ready to summarize the next part yourself.”

Play or read aloud to ‘Then he dropped him through a hole in the bridge.’

# Practice

Tell students, Now it's your turn. Sit with a partner. Summarize what has happened in the story so far." Ask one or two students to share their summaries after they have told them to a partner. Instruct them to stay together and listen to another part of the story. "Remember, you only need to tell the key points of the story when you summarize."

Play or read aloud to 'But his hands reached the rope on his neck and tore it off.'

Tell students, "Summarize this part for your partner."

Give students time to share their summaries.



Ask individual students to share their summaries. Then, ask students to give their opinions: “What do you think is really happening to the prisoner?” Give students time to express their opinions. “Let’s read more and find out what is really happening.”

Play or read aloud to ‘He saw one soldier shooting at him.’

Once again, pause to ask students to summarize. Ask whether they think the prisoner is imagining the action. Give students time to discuss their opinions and summarize.

Following this discussion, play or read aloud to the end of the story.

# Self-Evaluate

Ask students to stay with their partner and talk about the ‘surprise’ ending. Point out that Bierce tells us early on in the story, “Then he dropped him through a hole in the bridge.”

Continue, “Now I’d like to ask – what do you think about using this strategy, *summarize*, when you read? Did it help you understand this story? Write a sentence or two on your paper to turn in about how *summarizing* helped you today.”

# Expand

Ask students, “Are there other times when you can *summarize*?”

Listen to students’ responses.

Continue, “This strategy is helpful in much of our school work. We read and then summarize by writing about what we read. In speaking, we summarize our thoughts or experiences. Try using this strategy tonight when you do your homework, or in your next class. Let me know how it goes!”

# About the CALLA Approach

The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) is an instructional model for second and foreign language learners based on cognitive theory and research.

CALLA integrates instruction in priority topics from the content curriculum, development of the language skills needed for learning in school, and explicit instruction in using learning strategies for academic tasks.

The goals of CALLA are for students to learn essential academic content and language and to become independent and self-regulated learners through their increasing command over a variety of strategies for learning in school. CALLA can be used in ESL, EFL, bilingual, foreign language, and general education classrooms.

CALLA was developed by Anna Uhl Chamot and J. Michael O'Malley, and is being implemented in approximately 30 school districts in the United States as well as in several other countries.

See a list of language learning strategies below.

*Our story today is called, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." It was written by Ambrose Bierce.*

*The occurrence, or event, in our story takes place during the Civil War of the eighteen sixties between the American states of the north and the states of the south. A group of soldiers is hanging a southern farm owner for trying to stop northern military movements across the Owl Creek Bridge.*

*In the last moments of his life, the southern prisoner dreams he has escaped. And everything that happens in the story is really the images in the prisoner's mind just before he dies.*

*Here is Shep O'Neal with our story.*

A man stood on a railroad bridge in Alabama looking down into the **swift** waters of the Owl Creek River below. The man's hands were tied behind his back. There was a rope around his neck. The rope was tied to part of the bridge above him. Three soldiers of the northern army stood near the prisoner, waiting for their captain's orders to hang him.

Everybody was ready. The prisoner stood quietly. His eyes were not covered. He looked down and saw the water under the bridge. Now, he closed his eyes.

He wanted his last thoughts to be of his wife and children. But, as he tried to think of them, he heard sounds -- again and again. The sounds were soft. But they got louder and louder and started to hurt his ears. The pain was strong. He wanted to shout. But the sounds he heard were just those of the river running swiftly under the bridge.

The prisoner quickly opened his eyes and looked at the water. "If I could only free my hands," he thought. "Then I could get the rope off my neck and jump into the river. I could swim under the water and escape the fire of their guns. I could reach the other side of the river and get home through the forest. My house is outside of their military area, and my wife and children are safe there. I would be, too..."

While these thoughts raced through the prisoner's mind, the captain gave the soldiers the order to hang him. A soldier quickly obeyed. He made the rope firm around the prisoner's neck. Then he dropped him through a hole in the bridge.

As the prisoner fell, everything seemed black and empty. But then he felt a sharp pain in his neck and could not breathe. There were terrible pains running from his neck down through his body, his arms and his legs. He could not think. He could only feel, a feeling of living in a world of pain.

Then, suddenly, he heard a noise...something falling into the water. There was a big sound in his ears. Everything around him was cold and dark. Now he could think. He believed the rope had broken and that he was in the river.

But the rope was still around his neck, and his hands were tied. He thought: "How funny. How funny to die of hanging at the bottom of a river!" Then he felt his body moving up to the top of the water.

The prisoner did not know what he was doing. But his hands reached the rope on his neck and tore it off.

Now he felt the most violent pain he had ever known. He wanted to put the rope back on his neck. He tried but could not. His hands beat the water and pushed him up to the top. His head came out of the water. The light of the sun hurt his eyes. His mouth opened, and he swallowed air. It was too much for his lungs. He blew out the air with a **scream**.

Now the prisoner could think more clearly. All his senses had returned. They were even sharper than before. He heard sounds he never heard before -- that no man's ears ever heard -- the flying wings of small insects, the movement of a fish. His eyes saw more than just the trees along the river. They saw every leaf on the trees. And they saw the thin lines in the leaves.

And he saw the bridge, with the wall at one end. He saw the soldiers and the captain on the bridge. They shouted, and they pointed at him. They looked like giant monsters. As he looked, he heard gunfire. Something hit the water near his head. Now there was a second shot. He saw one soldier shooting at him.

He knew he had to get to the forest and escape. He heard an officer call to the other soldiers to shoot.

The prisoner went down into the river, deep, as far as he could. The water made a great noise in his ears, but he heard the shots.

As he came up to the top again, he saw the bullets hit the water. Some of them touched his face and hands.

One even fell into the top of his shirt. He felt the heat of the bullet on his back.

When his head came out of the water for air, he saw that he was farther away from the soldiers. And he began swimming strongly.



Civil War troops and cannon

As he swam, the soldiers fired their rifles. Then they fired their **cannon** at him. But nothing hit him. Then, suddenly, he could not swim. He was caught in a **whirlpool** which kept turning him around and around. This was the end, he thought. Then, just as suddenly as it had caught him, the whirlpool lifted him and threw him out of the river. He was on land!

He kissed the ground. He looked around him. There was a pink light in the air. The wind

seemed to make music as it blew through the trees. He wanted to stay there. But the cannon

fired again, and he heard the bullets above his head. He got up and ran into the forest. At last, he found a road toward his house. It was a wide, straight road. Yet it looked like a road that never had any travelers on it. No farms. No houses on its sides, only tall black trees.

In the tall black trees, the prisoner heard strange voices. Some of them spoke in words that he could not understand.

His neck began to hurt. When he touched it, it felt very large. His eyes hurt so much that he could not close them. His feet moved, but he could not feel the road.

As he walked, he was in a kind of sleep. Now, half-awake, half asleep, he found himself at the door of his house. His lovely wife ran to him. Ah, at last.

He put his arms about his beautiful wife. And just then, he felt a terrible pain in the back of his neck. All around him there was a great white light and the sound of a cannon. And then...then...darkness and silence.

The prisoner was dead. His neck was broken. His body hung at the end of a rope. It kept swinging from side to side. Swinging gently under a hole in Owl Creek Bridge.

### **Words in This Story**





**swift** - *adj.* moving or able to move very fast

**scream** - *n.* a loud and high cry or sound

**cannon** - *n.* a large gun that shoots heavy metal or stone balls and that was once a common military weapon

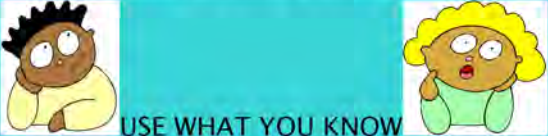




**whirlpool** - *n.* an area of water in a river, stream, etc., that moves very fast in a circle

# Metacognitive Strategies



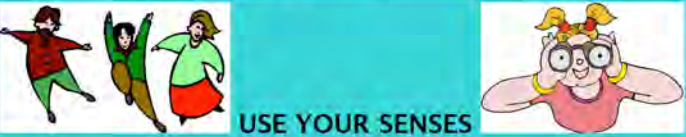


CALLA CONTENT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES		
STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	
<b>METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES</b>		
Plan / Organize	 <p>Planner</p>	<p>Before beginning a task:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Set goals.</li> <li>-Plan the task or content sequence.</li> <li>-Plan how to accomplish the task (choose strategies).</li> <li>-Preview a text.</li> </ul>
Monitor / Identify Problems	 <p>Check</p>	<p>While working on a task:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Check your progress on the task.</li> <li>-Check your comprehension as you use the language. Do you understand? If not, what is the problem?</li> <li>-Check your production as you use the language. Are you making sense? If not, what is the problem?</li> </ul>
Evaluate	 <p>I did it!</p>	<p>After completing a task:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Assess how well you have accomplished the learning task.</li> <li>-Assess how well you have used learning strategies.</li> <li>-Decide how effective the strategies were.</li> <li>-Identify changes you will make the next time you have a similar task to do.</li> </ul>
Manage Your Own Learning	 <p>Pace Yourself</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Determine how you learn best.</li> <li>-Arrange conditions that help you learn.</li> <li>-Seek opportunities for practice.</li> <li>-Focus your attention on the task.</li> </ul>



# Task-Based Strategies

CALLA CONTENT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES		
STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	
<b>TASK-BASED STRATEGIES</b>		
 <p style="text-align: center;"><b>USE WHAT YOU KNOW</b></p>		
Use Background Knowledge	 <p style="text-align: center;">I know.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Think about and use what you already know to help you do the task.</li> <li>- Make associations between new information and your prior knowledge.</li> <li>-Use new information to clarify or modify your prior knowledge.</li> </ul>
Make Inferences	 <p style="text-align: center;">Use Clues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use context and what you know to figure out meaning.</li> <li>-Read and listen between the lines.</li> <li>-Go beyond the text to understand its meaning.</li> </ul>
Make Predictions	 <p style="text-align: center;">Crystal Ball</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Anticipate information to come.</li> <li>-Make logical guesses about what will happen in a written or oral text.</li> <li>-Make an estimate (math).</li> <li>-Make a hypothesis (science).</li> </ul>
Personalize	 <p style="text-align: center;">Me</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Relate new concepts to your own life, to your experiences, knowledge, beliefs and feelings.</li> </ul>


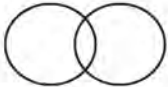


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<b>TASK-BASED STRATEGIES</b>		
Transfer / Use Cognates	 Coffee/Café	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Apply your linguistic knowledge of other languages (including your native language) to the target language.</li> <li>-Recognize cognates.</li> </ul>
Substitute / Paraphrase	 Make it work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use a synonym or descriptive phrase for unknown words or expressions.</li> </ul>
 <b>USE YOUR SENSES</b>		
Use Images	 See it in your mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use or create an actual or mental image to understand and/or represent information.</li> <li>-Use or draw a picture or diagram.</li> </ul>
Use Sounds	 Sound Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Say or read aloud a word, sentence, or paragraph to help your understanding.</li> <li>-Sound out/vocalize.</li> <li>- Use your "mental tape recorder" to remember sounds, words, phrases, and/or conversations.</li> </ul>






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<b>TASK-BASED STRATEGIES</b>		
Use Your Kinesthetic Sense		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Act out a role, for example, in Readers' Theater, or imagine yourself in different roles in the target language.</li> <li>-Use real objects to help you remember words, sentences, or content information.</li> </ul>
  <b>USE YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS</b>		
Find/Apply Patterns	 abacus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Apply a rule.</li> <li>-Make a rule.</li> <li>-Recognize and apply letter/sound, grammar, discourse, or register rules.</li> <li>-Identify patterns in literature (genre).</li> <li>-Identify patterns in math, science, and social studies.</li> </ul>
Classify/Sequence	 Life cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Categorize words or ideas according to attributes.</li> <li>-Classify living things; identify natural cycles.</li> <li>-Identify order and sequences in math, science, and social studies.</li> <li>-Sequence events in history.</li> </ul>

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TASK-BASED STRATEGIES		
Take Notes	 <p>PDA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Write down important words and ideas while listening or reading.</li> <li>-List ideas or words to include in speaking or writing..</li> </ul>
Use Graphic Organizers	 <p>A Venn diagram</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use or create visual representations (such as Venn diagrams, time lines, webs, and charts) of important relationships between concepts.</li> </ul>
Summarize	 <p>Main Idea</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Create a mental, oral, or written summary of information.</li> </ul>
Use Selective Attention	 <p>Focus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Focus on specific information, structures, key words, phrases, or ideas.</li> </ul>

# Task-Based Strategies

CALLA CONTENT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES		
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<b>TASK-BASED STRATEGIES</b>		
 		
<b>USE A VARIETY OF RESOURCES</b>		
Access Information Sources	 <p>Look it up!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use the dictionary, the internet, and other reference materials.</li> <li>-Seek out and use sources of information.</li> <li>-Follow a model</li> <li>-Ask questions</li> </ul>
Cooperate	 <p>Together</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Work with others to complete tasks, build confidence, and give and receive feedback.</li> </ul>
Talk Yourself Through It (Self-Talk)	 <p>I can do it!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use your inner resources. Reduce your anxiety by reminding yourself of your progress, the resources you have available, and your goals.</li> </ul>