Silas the Stretcher-bearer

by Rachel Stedman

Overview

This article conveys the experiences of Silas, who was a stretcher-bearer during the First World War. Silas was a conscientious objector who decided to join non-combatant service upon being drafted. Readers gain an insight into the conscription of soldiers by the New Zealand Government, the impact this had on conscientious objectors, and the role of stretcher-bearers. A glossary and photographs support the text, and links to websites for further information are included at the end. Some students may need support with the concepts and the subject-specific vocabulary of war.

Be aware of and sensitive to students who have personal experience of war and of students whose families come from countries on different sides of conflicts.

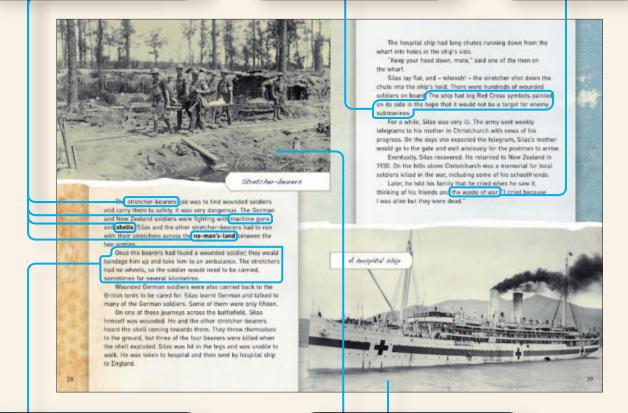| Texts related by theme	"Boy Soldiers" SJ 4.3.08	"The Anzac Button" SJ L2 Feb 2012	
	"One Man's War: The Story of Archie Baxter" SJ L4 Mar 2012		

Text characteristics from the year 6 reading standard

a significant amount of vocabulary that is unfamiliar to the students (including academic and content-specific words and phrases), which is generally explained in the text by words or illustrations

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

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

The hospital ship had long chutes running down from the wharf into holes in the ship's side.

"Keep your head down, mate," said one of the men on the wharf.

Silas lay flat, and – whoosh! – the stretcher shot down the chute into the ship's hold. There were hundreds of wounded soldiers on board. The ship had big Red Cross symbols painted on its side in the hope that it would not be a target for enemy submarines.

For a while, Silas was very ill. The army sent weekly telegrams to his mother in Christchurch with news of his progress. On the days she expected the telegram, Silas's mother would go to the gate and wait anxiously for the postman to arrive.

Eventually, Silas recovered. He returned to New Zealand in 1920. On the hills above Christchurch was a memorial for local soldiers killed in the war, including some of his schoolfriends.

Later, he told his family that he cried when he saw it, thinking of his friends and the waste of war. "I cried because I was alive but they were dead."

Stretcher-bearers

The stretcher-bearers' job was to find wounded soldiers and carry them to safety. It was very dangerous. The German and New Zealand soldiers were fighting with machine guns and shells. Silas and the other stretcher-bearers had to run with their stretchers across the no-man's-land between the two armies.

Once the bearers had found a wounded soldier, they would bandage him up and take him to an ambulance. The stretchers had no wheels, so the soldier would need to be carried, sometimes for several kilometres.

Wounded German soldiers were also carried back to the British tents to be cared for. Silas learnt German and talked to many of the German soldiers. Some of them were only fifteen.

On one of these journeys across the battlefield, Silas himself was wounded. He and the other stretcher-bearers heard the shell coming towards them. They threw themselves to the ground, but three of the four bearers were killed when the shell exploded. Silas was hit in the legs and was unable to walk. He was taken to hospital and then sent by hospital ship to England.

A hospital ship

sentences that vary in length and in structure (for example, sentences that begin in different ways and different kinds of complex sentences with a number of subordinate clauses)

illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs that clarify or extend the text and may require some interpretation

Reading standard: by the end of year 6

Possible curriculum contexts

SOCIAL SCIENCES

LEVEL 3 – Social studies: Understand how groups make and implement rules and laws.

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 learn about the role of stretcher-bearers during the First World War
- To understand how and why conscription was implemented and how it affected people
- To identify the author's purpose for writing
- To explore the concept of conscientious objection.

Possible writing purposes

- To explain the job of a stretcher-bearer
- To describe the conditions in the trenches during the First World War
- To evaluate the use of conscription
- To describe the life of a grandparent.

See Instructional focus – Reading for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

See Instructional focus – Writing for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

The New Zealand Curriculum

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar and subject-specific words and phrases, including "stretcher-bearer", "volunteering", "service", "replaced", "volunteers", "conscription", "drawn", "lottery", "drafted", "believed", "Thou shalt not kill", "refused", "conscientious objector", "unpopular", "cowards", "religion", "non-combatant", "modern-day", "paramedics", "first-aid", "training camp", "bleeding", "trenches", "company", "seasick", "journey", "hammocks", "hold", "snoring", "enemy submarine", "shipped off", "field kitchens", "wounded", "machine guns", "shells", "no-man's-land", "armies", "bandage", "ambulance", "battlefield", "hospital ship", "chutes", "wharf", "target", "telegrams", "memorial", "waste of war", "population", "million", "role", "websites"
- Capitalised words and phrases – "First World War", "Great War", "New Zealand Government", "Bible", "Medical Corps", "Featherston", "England", "France", "Bapaume", "German", "Red Cross", "Christchurch".

Possible supporting strategies

Identify new vocabulary that the students should prioritise for learning. *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.

Introduce the text by linking into the students' prior knowledge of the First World War. You may need to provide background information for students with little prior knowledge. Ask the students to discuss what words and phrases associated with war they would expect to encounter in the text. Add identified words to a word web or vocabulary lists.

Select some words from the vocabulary lists as a basis for instruction on root words and affixes, for example, "volunteer", "voluntary", and "volunteers".

Direct students' attention (if required) to the use of capitalisation. Clarify the use of capital letters in order to support their understanding.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Knowledge of the First World War and where it took place
- Knowledge of the distances to, and the times taken to get to, the Northern Hemisphere
- Knowledge of the public perceptions around conscription and conscientious objection at the time.

Possible supporting strategies

Make connections to any prior knowledge that the students have about Anzac Day and the First World War. Provide information if necessary. Discuss the views about war that were held by New Zealand society at the time – how there was a belief that people had a responsibility to take part. Discuss the concept of conscientious objection.

Tell students that the war occurred in other parts of the world, not New Zealand. Provide a map to identify the places mentioned in the text. Discuss the distances between New Zealand and Europe.

Support the students to recognise the modes of transport available at the time and the length of time it took to get to Europe.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- Photographs, captions, glossary
- Afterword that is clearly differentiated by a heading
- Language signalling time and sequence, for example, "in 1914", "By 1916", "First", "After training", "when the food arrived"
- Sentences using "so" and "because" to signal reason and result relationships, for example, "By 1916, … New Zealand soldiers … could not be replaced by volunteers alone", "… so the New Zealand Government introduced conscription", "Because he was so sick, he could hardly eat …"
- Mostly past simple verb forms, such as "began", "introduced", "had", "had to", "believed"
- Many passive verb forms, for example, "were drawn", "was drawn", "was drafted", "were sent", "was also taught".

Possible supporting strategies

Before reading, review the features of factual articles, prompting the students to think about the features that help to organise a text and guide the reader.

For students who are likely to find this text challenging, you could spend some time previewing the content (and the language). For example, you could give pairs of students one of the photos. Have them label everything they can and discuss what they think the photo is showing and what the article could be about. Then have each pair present their photo to the others. (If appropriate, provide the opportunity for students who share a first language other than English to research and discuss their photo in this language. You may want to give them time to do that before this session. Then they could spend the time in this session preparing to share their ideas in English.) After each pair presents their photo, discuss the photo (and what the students have presented) as a group. During this discussion, also note and introduce key vocabulary and record it, beginning a vocabulary list that the students add to as they read. If appropriate, also record the predictions to check later as you all read the text.

Sounds and Words

Text excerpts from "Silas the Stretcher-bearer"	Students (what they might do)	Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)
New Zealanders began volunteering for service immediately. … so the New Zealand Government introduced conscription. You had no choice: you had to go to war.	*Students **locate** related information about volunteering and conscription within the paragraph and **integrate** this information to understand why the government introduced conscription. They **infer** from "You had no choice: you had to go to war" that conscription was the law. They **make connections** to their prior knowledge of war and laws to **evaluate** this information.*	**ASK QUESTIONS** to support the students to integrate and evaluate information from the text. • At first people volunteered. Why do you think people wanted to go to war? • What occurred that made the government introduce conscription? Why did conscription solve the problem of the need for more men? • How might the government have enforced conscription? • What are your thoughts about conscription? How might it have affected people? Turn to a partner and discuss your ideas.
New Zealanders began volunteering for service immediately … You had no choice: you had to go to war. But Silas believed in the Bible, and the Bible said, "Thou shalt not kill." Conscientious objectors were very unpopular, and a lot of people thought that they were cowards.	*Students **locate**, **evaluate**, and **integrate** information from the third paragraph on page 25 ("Conscientious objectors were very unpopular …") and the first paragraph on page 25 to **infer** why people would consider conscientious objectors cowards.*	**MODEL** making inferences to support the students' understanding. • I've just read that conscientious objectors were not popular and were thought of as cowards. I'm wondering why people might have thought this? I'm going to look for information about why Silas was a conscientious objector and then look for information about people's attitudes towards the war. I'm predicting that perhaps people didn't understand, but I need to check. Let's see if we can find out by rereading these sections.
On the hills above Christchurch was a memorial for local soldiers killed in the war, including some of his schoolfriends. Later, he told his family that he cried when he saw it, thinking of his friends and the waste of war. "I cried because I was alive but they were dead."	*Students **integrate** their prior knowledge of the word "waste" and identify that the phrase "waste of war" relates to the phrase "killed in the war" in the previous paragraph. They **infer** that the waste of war Silas referred to was the waste of people's lives. The students go on to **infer** that the reason Silas cried was that he felt guilty that he was alive.*	**PROMPT** the students to deepen their understanding. • I wonder what Silas thought about as he looked at the memorial? • Silas said he was thinking of "the waste of war". Turn to a partner and tell them what you think the meaning of waste is in this sentence. • What did Silas think was a waste? What was the waste of war? How do you know that? • Why did Silas cry? How do you think he was feeling? **GIVE FEEDBACK** • You integrated information across the text to make references about Silas's motives. • Your comments showed that you had thought about the information before evaluating the decisions made by the government. • You used what you know about the word "waste" and the information in the text to understand what Silas meant. Remember to use this strategy of intergrating what you know with information in the text next time you find an unusual expression.

METACOGNITION
- How did the photos help you to understand the conditions during the war?
- What strategies did you use to check your understanding of the position Silas was in when he was drafted into the army?
- How did you use the glossary to help you to understand the text?
- How does knowing about how to integrate information help you when writing factual recounts?

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 "Silas the Stretcher-bearer"	Examples of text characteristics	Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)
The stretcher-bearers' job was to find wounded soldiers and carry them to safety. It was very dangerous.	**PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE** *Authors have a purpose and an audience in mind when they write. When selecting language and content, they consider this purpose and audience.*	**MODEL** how an author selects content and language to suit their purpose for writing and their audience.

MODEL how an author selects content and language to suit their purpose for writing and their audience.

- When I read the sentence "It was very dangerous", I thought about why the author included this in the text. I think her purpose was to show the reader that Silas was brave and not a coward. As a writer, she decided to include this sentence, and particularly the word "dangerous", because her audience may not know that being a stretcher-bearer was very dangerous work.

- As an author, you need to deliberately include content and language that meet your purpose. Review your writing with a partner. Tell them your purpose for writing and encourage them to suggest ways to improve the accuracy of your content or the clarity of your language.

EXPLAIN that authors use clauses, phrases, and single words to support readers to link information and make connections across paragraphs.

PROMPT the students to notice these initial phrases and clause.

- What do you notice about the way these three paragraphs begin?

- How does this clause and how do these two phrases help us as readers? How do they connect ideas across the text? What has the author stressed by selecting them? (training)

- Work with a partner to identify where you might be able to use connectives to link your paragraphs. What language will work best?

For students who find working with this language challenging, it's beneficial to note the role of a range of connectives generally but to focus on only one type (for example, time markers) at any one time.

In order to begin using (selected) connectives in their writing, many students may need:

- explicit explanations of the meanings and structures of sentences with connectives in the text

- models of how to use the connectives in other sentences

- opportunities to co-construct sentences using the connectives

- opportunities to complete cloze sentences by selecting the correct connectives (and/or to use writing frames or sentence starters) to scaffold their creation of sentences with these connectives

- prompting and guidance on using them in their writing

- feedback on their use of connectives.

ASK QUESTIONS to support the students' understanding of how complex sentences are constructed. Provide the sentence as a model and highlight the subordinate clause.

- Does the highlighted clause make sense by itself? What does it tell us as readers?

- What punctuation do you notice when the subordinate clause is first?

- How else could we structure this sentence? What emphasis does this new structure create? What effect does this new emphasis have on the reader?

- Reread your writing and think about how you have structured your sentences. What decisions did you make? Could you use complex sentences to connect your ideas?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- I can see that you have been careful to select language that is suitable for your audience. Do you think you need to add a glossary?

- You have used effective connectives at the beginning of these paragraphs; they make the writing flow well.

- I can see you have used complex sentences to good effect. They really clarify your ideas and clearly express some important relationships.

Text excerpts:

First he went to a training camp at Featherston, …

After training, his company sailed to England.

After more training in England, …

CONNECTIVES (linkages) *Clauses, phrases, and single words are used to make links within and between sentences and paragraphs. These examples from the text are used to convey the passing of time and link information about training.*

Once the bearers had found a wounded soldier, they would bandage him up and take him to an ambulance.

COMPLEX SENTENCES *A complex sentence has one independent clause and at least one subordinate clause. By using complex sentences, authors connect two or more ideas within a sentence and can add variety and interest to their writing.*

METACOGNITION

- How did having a clear purpose for writing support you as you wrote?

- When you were structuring your writing, what were you thinking about? Would you change anything?

- Have complex sentences improved your writing? How?

- How does knowing how to write complex sentences help you when reading complex sentences?

Writing standard: by the end of year 6

The Literacy Learning Progressions