PROSE

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1 The Last Lesson

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About the author

Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) was a French novelist and short-story writer. *The Last Lesson* is set in the days of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) in which France was defeated by Prussia led by Bismarck. Prussia then consisted of what now are the nations of Germany, Poland and parts of Austria. In this story the French districts of Alsace and Lorraine have passed into Prussian hands. Read the story to find out what effect this had on life at school.

Notice these expressions in the text.
Infer their meaning from the context

- in great dread of
- counted on
- thumbed at the edges
- in unison
- a great bustle
- reproach ourselves with

I started for school very late that morning and was in great dread of a scolding, especially because M. Hamel had said that he would question us on participles, and I did not know the first word about them. For a moment I thought of running away and spending the day out of doors. It was so warm, so bright! The birds were chirping at the edge of the woods; and in the open field back of the sawmill the Prussian soldiers were drilling. It was all much more tempting than the rule for participles, but I had the strength to resist, and hurried off to school.

When I passed the town hall there was a crowd in front of the bulletin-board. For the last two years all our bad news had come from there — the lost battles, the draft, the orders of the commanding officer — and I thought to myself, without stopping, "What can be the matter now?"

Then, as I hurried by as fast as I could go, the blacksmith, Wachter, who was there, with his apprentice, reading the bulletin,

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called after me, "Don't go so fast, bub; you'll get to your school in plenty of time!"

I thought he was making fun of me, and reached M. Hamel's little garden all out of breath.

Usually, when school began, there was a great bustle, which could be heard out in the street, the opening and closing of desks, lessons repeated in unison, very loud, with our hands over our ears to understand better, and the teacher's great ruler rapping on the table. But now it was all so still! I had counted on the commotion to get to my desk without being seen; but, of course, that day everything had to be as quiet as Sunday morning. Through the window I saw my classmates, already in their places, and M. Hamel walking up and down with his terrible iron ruler under his arm. I had to open the door and go in before everybody. You can imagine how I blushed and how frightened I was.

But nothing happened. M. Hamel saw me and said very kindly, "Go to your place quickly, little Franz. We were beginning without you."

I jumped over the bench and sat down at my desk. Not till then, when I had got a little over my fright, did I see that our teacher had on his beautiful green coat, his frilled shirt, and the little black silk cap, all embroidered, that he never wore except on inspection and prize days. Besides, the whole school seemed so



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strange and solemn. But the thing that surprised me most was to see, on the back benches that were always empty, the village people sitting quietly like ourselves; old Hauser, with his three-cornered hat, the former mayor, the former postmaster, and several others besides. Everybody looked sad; and Hauser had brought an old primer, thumbed at the edges, and he held it open on his knees with his great spectacles lying across the pages.

While I was wondering about it all, M. Hamel mounted his chair, and, in the same grave and gentle tone which he had used to me, said, "My children, this is the last lesson I shall give you. The order has come from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The new master comes tomorrow. This is your last French lesson. I want you to be very attentive."

What a thunderclap these words were to me!

Oh, the wretches; that was what they had put up at the town-hall!

My last French lesson! Why, I hardly knew how to write! I should never learn any more! I must stop there, then! Oh, how sorry I was for not learning my lessons, for seeking birds' eggs, or going sliding on the Saar! My books, that had seemed such a nuisance a while ago, so heavy to carry, my grammar, and my history of the saints, were old friends now that I couldn't give up. And M. Hamel, too; the idea that he was going away, that I should never see him again, made me forget all about his ruler and how cranky he was.

Poor man! It was in honour of this last lesson that he had put on his fine Sunday clothes, and now I understood why the old men of the village were sitting there in the back of the room. It was because they were sorry, too, that they had not gone to school more. It was their way of thanking our master for his forty years of faithful service and of showing their respect for the country that was theirs no more.

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While I was thinking of all this, I heard my name called. It was my turn to recite. What would I not have given to be able to say that dreadful rule for the participle all through, very loud and clear, and without one mistake? But I got mixed up on the first words and stood there, holding on to my desk, my heart beating, and not daring to look up.

I heard M. Hamel say to me, "I won't scold you, little Franz; you must feel bad enough. See how it is! Every day we have said to ourselves, 'Bah! I've plenty of time. I'll learn it tomorrow.' And now you see where we've come out. Ah, that's the great trouble with Alsace; she puts off learning till tomorrow. Now those fellows out there will have the right to say to you, 'How is it; you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?' But you are not the worst, poor little Franz. We've all a great deal to reproach ourselves with."

"Your parents were not anxious enough to have you learn. They preferred to put you to work on a farm or at the mills, so as to have a little more money. And I? I've been to blame also. Have I not often sent you to water my flowers instead of learning your lessons? And when I wanted to go fishing, did I not just give you a holiday?"

Then, from one thing to another, M. Hamel went on to talk of the French language, saying that it was the most beautiful language in the world — the clearest, the most logical; that we must guard it among us and never forget it, because when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison. Then he opened a grammar and read us our lesson. I was amazed to see how well I understood it. All he said seemed so easy, so easy! I think, too, that I had never listened so carefully, and that he had never explained everything with so



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France
1870-71

Sketch map not to scale





much patience. It seemed almost as if the poor man wanted to give us all he knew before going away, and to put it all into our heads at one stroke.

After the grammar, we had a lesson in writing. That day M. Hamel had new copies for us, written in a beautiful round hand — France, Alsace, France, Alsace. They looked like little flags floating everywhere in the school-room, hung from the rod at the top of our desks. You ought to have seen how every one set to work, and how quiet it was! The only sound was the scratching of the pens over the paper. Once some beetles flew in; but nobody paid any attention to them, not even the littlest ones, who worked right on tracing their fish-hooks, as if that was French, too. On the roof the pigeons cooed very low, and I thought to myself, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?"

Think as you read

1. What was Franz expected to be prepared with for school that day?
2. What did Franz notice that was unusual about the school that day?
3. What had been put up on the bulletin-board?

Whenever I looked up from my writing I saw M. Hamel sitting motionless in his chair and gazing first at one thing, then at another, as if he wanted to fix in his mind just how everything looked in that little school-room. Fancy! For forty years he had been there in the same place, with his garden outside the window and his class in front of him, just like that. Only the desks and benches had been worn smooth; the walnut-trees in the garden were taller, and the hopvine that he had planted himself twined about the windows to the roof. How it must have broken his heart to leave it all, poor man; to hear his sister moving about in the room above, packing their trunks! For they must leave the country next day.

But he had the courage to hear every lesson to the very last. After the writing, we had a lesson in history, and then the babies chanted their *ba, be bi, bo, bu.* Down there at the back of the room old Hauser had put on his spectacles and, holding his primer in

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both hands, spelled the letters with them. You could see that he, too, was crying; his voice trembled with emotion, and it was so funny to hear him that we all wanted to laugh and cry. Ah, how well I remember it, that last lesson!

All at once the church-clock struck twelve. Then the Angelus. At the same moment the trumpets of the Prussians, returning from drill, sounded under our windows. M. Hamel stood up, very pale, in his chair. I never saw him look so tall.

"My friends," said he, "I—I—" But something choked him. He could not go on.

Then he turned to the blackboard, took a piece of chalk, and, bearing on with all his might, he wrote as large as he could —

"Vive La France!"

Then he stopped and leaned his head against the wall, and, without a word, he made a gesture to us with his hand —

"School is dismissed — you may go."

Think as you read

1. What changes did the order from Berlin cause in school that day?
2. How did Franz's feelings about M. Hamel and school change?

Understanding the text

1. The people in this story suddenly realise how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?
2. Franz thinks, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" What could this mean?

   (There could be more than one answer.)

Talking about the text

1. "When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison."

   Can you think of examples in history where a conquered people had their language taken away from them or had a language imposed on them?
2. What happens to a linguistic minority in a state? How do you think they can keep their language alive? For example:

   Punjabis in Bangalore

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Tamilians in Mumbai

Kannadigas in Delhi

Gujaratis in Kolkata

3. Is it possible to carry pride in one's language too far?

   Do you know what 'linguistic chauvinism' means?

Working with words

1. English is a language that contains words from many other languages. This inclusiveness is one of the reasons it is now a world language, For example:

petite	–	French
kindergarten	–	German
capital	–	Latin
democracy	–	Greek
bazaar	–	Hindi

   Find out the origins of the following words.

tycoon	barbecue	zero
tulip	veranda	ski
logo	robot	trek
bandicoot		

2. Notice the underlined words in these sentences and tick the option that best explains their meaning.

   (a) "What a <u>thunderclap</u> these words were to me!"

   The words were

   (i) loud and clear.

   (ii) startling and unexpected.

   (iii) pleasant and welcome.

   (b) "When a people are enslaved, as long as they <u>hold fast to</u> their language it is as if they had the key to their prison"

   It is as if they have the key to the prison as long as they

   (i) do not lose their language.

   (ii) are attached to their language.

   (iii) quickly learn the conqueror's language.

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(c) Don't go so fast, you will get to your school <u>in plenty of time.</u>

You will get to your school

(i) very late.

(ii) too early.

(iii) early enough.

(d) I never saw him <u>look so tall.</u>

M. Hamel

(a) had grown physically taller

(b) seemed very confident

(c) stood on the chair

Noticing form

Read this sentence

M. Hamel **had said** that he would question us on participles.

In the sentence above, the verb form "had said" in the first part is used to indicate an "earlier past". The whole story is narrated in the past. M. Hamel's "saying" happened earlier than the events in this story. This form of the verb is called the **past perfect.**

Pick out five sentences from the story with this form of the verb and say why this form has been used.

Writing

1. Write a notice for your school bulletin board. Your notice could be an announcement of a forthcoming event, or a requirement to be fulfilled, or a rule to be followed.
2. Write a paragraph of about 100 words arguing for or against having to study three languages at school.
3. Have you ever changed your opinion about someone or something that you had earlier liked or disliked? Narrate what led you to change your mind.

Things to do

1. Find out about the following (You may go to the internet, interview people, consult reference books or visit a library.)

   (a) Linguistic human rights

   (b) Constitutional guarantees for linguistic minorities in India.

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2. Given below is a survey form. Talk to at least five of your classmates and fill in the information you get in the form.

S.No.	Languages you know	Home language	Neighbourhood language	City/Town language	School language
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					

About the Unit

Theme

The pain that is inflicted on the people of a territory by its conquerors by taking away the right to study or speak their own language.

Sub-theme

Student and teacher attitudes to learning and teaching.

Reading Comprehension

The comprehension check at the end of each section in the unit helps pupils make sure that they have understood the facts before they move on to the next section. One session of forty minutes is likely to be enough for one section of the unit.

Pupils can read each section silently and discuss the answers in pairs.

The questions at the end of the unit are inferential. These help pupils make sense of the writer's intention in focussing on a local episode and to comment on an issue of universal significance. There could be a follow-up discussion on parts for which students need explanation.

Talking about the text

Topics to be discussed in small groups or pairs. This shall help pupils think of issues that relate to the realities of the society they live in. Gives scope for developing speaking skills in the English language on varied issues. Fluency development.

Working with words

To make pupils aware of

- the enrichment of the English language through borrowings from the other languages.
- idiomatic expressions and figurative use of language.

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Noticing form

To make pupils notice tense form and understand the context of its use.

Writing

- Practice in a functional genre, e.g., bulletin.
- Argumentative writing on a topic related to their life at school.
- Narrating subjective experience discussing personal likes and dislikes.

Things to do

Extension activity that will help pupils understand language rights of citizens and the problems of linguistic minorities. Social and political awareness.

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