

Christmas: #SadTree by Troy Nahumko

Age: Teenagers / Adults
Level: Upper intermediate (B2)
Time: 90 minutes +
Objective: to describe objects and feelings; to study texts about Christmas trees
Key skills: integrated skills
Materials: one copy of the Christmas tree pictures per small group of students; one copy of each worksheet per student; Internet access in class so you can play the two songs from YouTube

Note: Students often expect and look forward to Christmas lessons. However, traditional Christmas lessons run the risk of putting too much focus on once-a-year vocabulary or on religion, which may not be appropriate for all teaching situations. This lesson attempts to meet learner expectation by placing a well-known symbol in a historical context while avoiding less frequent vocabulary.

Procedure

1. Explain to your students that you are going to play a clip of a song. Ask them to just sit back and listen. Follow the link to play the clip of 'Linus and Lucy'.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6zypc_LhnM&list=UUGRXhgTAT-ozbpVf0WhktqQ&index=8

2. After playing the song, put students in pairs and ask them to discuss:
 - what kind of music it is;
 - how it made them feel.

Do not offer any information at this point. Just help with vocabulary. Some students may be familiar with the connection between the song and Charlie Brown but do not offer any comment.

3. Tell students you are going to show them four pictures of different Christmas trees. Ask them to make brief notes on each picture, as they will have to describe each one later. Hand out the trees worksheets to the students.

4. In pairs, students compare notes on each tree. Then, conduct some whole-class feedback, collating all of the vocabulary that comes up on the board.
5. When you have finished, ask them to return to their notes and see if they can add the following words to any of their observations:
 - really
 - quite
 - a bit
 - so

In an effort to make their language production more descriptive, draw their attention to how the addition of one small word or phrase can make their language sound a lot more natural and interesting. During feedback, emphasize the fact that the main stress falls on the modifying adverb.

6. Dictogloss. Ask students if anyone knows the origins of the Christmas tree. Tell them that you are going to read a text to them three times at regular speed. The first time, they are only allowed to listen. After the first reading, in pairs, they write down as much information as they can remember. Read the text again. This time, they may write down and add information as you are reading. Then, once again, they share their information in pairs. Repeat the procedure for the third and last time. In pairs, they reformulate all of the information and create a paragraph.

Dictate the first paragraph from 'A short history of the Christmas tree':

For many people around the world, the sight of an evergreen tree decorated with lights and baubles conjures up the spirit of Christmas. That said, it hasn't always been this way. In fact, the modern-day image we share of the Christmas tree only became widespread in 1846, when the popular royals Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were pictured in a popular magazine standing around a Christmas tree with their children. Until then, the Christmas tree had been viewed with suspicion as a foreign or pagan symbol.

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The aim here is for them to have all of the main information and to be able to put it together in a paragraph. Do not show students the original at this time.

Conduct whole-class feedback to make sure everyone has all the information.

- Extensive reading. Hand out worksheet 1a. Ask students to check for differences between their text and the original. Conduct feedback.
- Tell students that they have to match the headings in Exercise 1 to the paragraphs of the text. Give them a short, set period of time (3 to 4 minutes) in order to encourage them to skim the rest of the text for gist. Conduct whole class feedback.

Key:

Exercise 1

1. E; 2. B; 3. F; 4. C; 5. A; 6. D; 7. G

- Hand out worksheet 1b. Ask students to complete the comprehension questions in Exercise 2.

Key:

Exercise 2

- Evergreen plants have always reminded man that spring will return.;*
- No, palm trees were used in Egypt.;*
- The first trees were seen in the Baltic countries.;*
- European royalty made it fashionable to have Christmas trees.;*
- A reprinted picture of Queen Victoria's family around a tree minus all of the royal symbols was widely distributed across the continent.*

- Once finished with the comprehension tasks, ask students the following questions:
 - What was the most surprising thing in the text?
 - Is there anything you disagree with?
 - Do you have a Christmas tree in your home?
- Vocabulary (optional). Christmas lessons often focus on uncommon vocabulary (*mistletoe, reindeer, sleigh*, etc). In Exercise 3, an attempt is made to focus on some useful phrases and vocabulary associated with *Christmas trees*. Ask students to look at Exercise 3 and discuss which

vocabulary does not collocate with Christmas tree in pairs. Then, conduct class feedback, asking for example sentences containing the vocabulary.

Note that the vocabulary in this activity is useful for the homework task.

Key:

Exercise 3

Adjectives: religious

Phrasal verbs: lay over

- Explain to students that they are going to listen to a clip of a second song. Ask them to just sit back and listen, as before.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fh133ZO1AE

After playing the song, ask students to discuss, in pairs:

- if it bears any relation to the first song;
- what kind of music it is;
- how it made them feel.

Do not give any information; just help with vocabulary. Encourage the use of *really, so, a bit* or a combination of the words.

- Explain that the song is an instrumental version of 'O Christmas Tree', also known as 'O Tannenbaum'. The song is German in origin but many different versions of English lyrics have been written for it. Hand out worksheet 2 and play the song again.

Ask the students 'Which paragraph of the text you read do the lyrics relate to?' (Answer: *The song talks about the evergreen colours during winter – paragraph 2.*)

- Now, focus on the connection between the two songs you have played. If no one has identified the connection, explain that both songs come from the soundtrack to the 1965 Christmas film *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. In the programme, Charlie Brown looks for the true meaning of Christmas in an ever more commercialized age. Charlie buys a terribly sad looking Christmas tree that has since popularized the saying, 'A Charlie Brown Christmas tree', which refers to sad looking trees (#SadTree).

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15. Ask students to read the stories behind the trees on the worksheet. You could put students in groups of four and have each student read out one text to their group. Each of the four texts is someone's story behind a Christmas tree that they find particularly memorable. Before asking them to read the texts, you may find it useful to pre-teach some of the more difficult vocabulary (conjure up, widespread, centrepiece etc).

Optional extra:

If you have a particularly creative class you can put them in small groups and ask them to come up with a title for each story. Then they can compare titles and vote for the best ones as a class.

16. Conduct whole class feedback. Focus on the similarities between the texts: the narrative tenses used, the descriptive language employed to evoke emotions and the informal, confessional tone of each text.

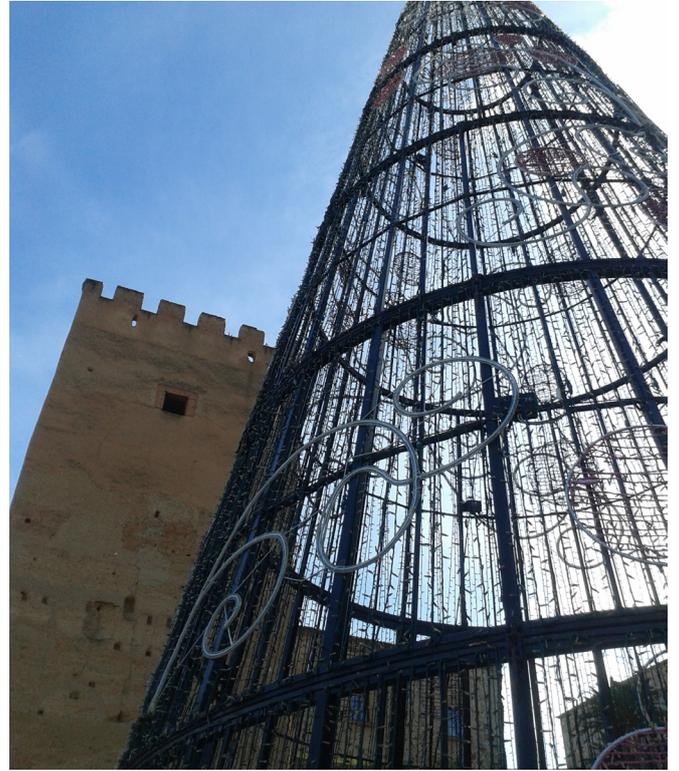
Homework

Ask students to write a 150–200-word composition using the four stories as models. They should describe a memorable Christmas tree or, if they do not have Christmas trees in their culture, students can write about a comparable religious symbol or even a memorable present that have received.

Extension activities

- Webquests. Look for more pictures and stories using the #SadTree hashtag.
- Ask students to take pictures of Christmas trees around where they live and explain the story behind each tree in the next class.
- Watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.
- Watch the documentary *A Christmas Miracle – The Making of A Charlie Brown Christmas*.
- Listen to the NPR programme that inspired this lesson.
- Lithuania and Latvia both claim to be the birthplace of the Christmas tree. Ask students to investigate these claims further.

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1. For many people around the world, the sight of an evergreen tree decorated with lights and baubles conjures up the spirit of Christmas. That said, it hasn't always been this way. In fact, the modern-day image we share of the Christmas tree only became widespread in 1846, when the popular royals Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were pictured in a popular magazine standing around a Christmas tree with their children. Until then, the Christmas tree had been viewed with suspicion as a foreign or pagan symbol.
2. Since the beginnings of man, the evergreen tree has held a special, symbolic meaning for people living in the northern hemisphere. During the short, cold days and long, dark nights of winter, evergreen plants have always reminded people that, once the winter solstice ends, warmer weather will return and the world around them will once again turn from frozen white to living green.
3. As far back as ancient Egypt, people have been decorating their homes to help them through the winter. In the time of the pharaohs, green palm leaves were used in order to symbolize the return of longer days. Some credit the ancient Greeks as being the first to decorate evergreen trees in honour of their gods. The Romans then adopted the tradition by decorating trees with pieces of metal and images of their fertility god, Bacchus, to celebrate the solstice of Saturnalia.
4. It wasn't until the sixteenth century that Christian missionaries began to synthesize Christian and pagan traditions and the symbol of the Christmas tree that we know today began to take shape. The first hybrid symbols were seen in what are now known as the Baltic countries. The medieval Brotherhood of the Blackheads, a drinking society of merchants and soldiers, is said to have ended their winter festival of drinking and eating by dragging a tree into a square and setting it ablaze. The tradition later moved to Germany where Christians began bringing trees into their homes and decorating them and the Christmas tree as we now know it was born.
5. Because of its pagan associations, the tradition of decorating trees remained a strictly German tradition until well into the nineteenth century when it became fashionable among European royalty. The aforementioned portrayal of the British royal family standing around a decorated tree in 1846 signalled widespread acceptance of the custom, which then crossed the Atlantic.
6. Although decorated trees had been seen in the homes of German settlers as early as the late 1700s, it wasn't until this royal stamp of approval that Christmas trees became popular in North America. A reprint of the famous Queen Victoria picture with all of the royal symbols removed was widely distributed a few years later, thus converting the symbol into an accepted American scene.
7. While small pockets of modern-day opposition can still be found, the Christmas tree has now been widely adopted around the world. From Bangkok to Bogotá, glittering balls and blinking lights strung around a green tree remind us that, despite ever-changing tastes, the passing of the seasons will always remain constant.

Exercise 1. Match each heading to the right paragraph of the text.

- a. The Christmas tree goes public
- b. The symbol's meaning to early man
- c. The modern-day Christmas tree appears
- d. A Photoshopped picture
- e. Have Christmas trees always had the same meaning?
- f. Pre-Christian celebrations
- g. The Christmas tree's popularity around the world

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Exercise 2.

Go back to the text and answer the following questions.

- a. What did the Christmas tree symbolize for pre-Christian cultures?

- b. Have evergreen trees always been the exclusive symbol?

- c. Where were the first Christmas trees found?

- d. What happened in the nineteenth century?

- e. How did the Christmas tree's popularity spread in North America?

Exercise 3.

Which of the following adjectives and verb phrases do *not* collocate with *Christmas tree*?

adjectives

- a. sparkling
- b. massive
- c. real
- d. dazzling
- e. religious
- f. artificial

verb phrases

- a. put up
- b. put something underneath
- c. lay over
- d. take down
- e. decorate
- f. light

O Christmas Tree (O Tannenbaum) lyrics (excerpt)

O Christmas tree,

Not only green when

O Christmas tree,

Summer's here

Your leaves are so unchanging.

But also when it's cold and dreary.

O Christmas tree,

O Christmas tree,

O Christmas tree,

O Christmas tree,

Your leaves are so unchanging.

Your leaves are so unchanging.

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1. I remember my first flat. I shared it with three friends and we barely had enough money to eat, let alone pay the rent. We were coming home late one night from the bars and my roommate sees this rotten old tree next to the bins. He suddenly has the bright idea that this was going to be our tree and that it would be the perfect centrepiece for a party the next day. We dragged the sad looking tree home and decorated it with CD covers and takeaway leaflets that we often ordered from. The next day we invited some friends over for a party, with one rule: they had to bring something for the tree. I tell you, that was the strangest looking tree ever!
2. My parents always made a big deal out of putting up the Christmas tree. My father thought it was a crime to cut down a real, live tree for something like this, so we had this artificial tree that looked like something you used to clean glasses. At least it looked like that until it was decorated. Sometime after Thanksgiving, we could haul out the Christmas box from the basement and start putting up the tree. My brother and I would always fight over who got to help my dad figure out which lights worked and which ones didn't. Once we replaced all of the burnt out lights, we would string the lights around the tree and start decorating it. My mother would always insist on putting up homemade decorations and would only allow a certain number of store-bought ornaments. We would have strings of popcorn and others with different pasta shapes. We would of course have to put up the things my brother and I had made at school and, then, finally, we would all make a star for the top together. Back then, I couldn't wait to get the tree up because it meant that the presents would soon go under it. Now that I look back, I think I can understand why my parents insisted on the ritual.
3. When my wife and I first got married, we were living and working abroad in the developing world – Mauritania, to be exact. Being a Muslim country, Christmas isn't exactly one of the most popular celebrations and, therefore, it was impossible to find a tree and, being in the Sahel, there aren't many trees around. As Christmas approached the first year we were there, we were wondering what we were going to do for a tree. For me, there is just something about having a tree and putting gifts underneath it that conjures up the Christmas spirit. One day, after an unsuccessful search through the markets for anything that would serve as a tree, my wife had a great idea. We went home and she asked me to wait outside. It must have been about an hour later when she finally came out and got me. She insisted that I walk in blindfolded and I reluctantly agreed. When I finally got in, she took off the blindfold and shouted, 'Surprise! Merry Christmas!' There, in front of me, was a lamp that she had decorated with ribbons and aluminium stars with the three or four presents that she had bought all nicely wrapped and placed at the base of the lamp/Christmas tree. It might not have been much for anyone else but it was the best 'tree' I had ever seen!
4. My most vivid memory of a Christmas tree isn't necessarily about a beautiful one from my childhood or anything like that. One year, when I was coming home from work, I saw smoke pouring out of my neighbour's house. She was standing at the front door shouting, 'Help, help! Someone, please help!' I ran up the steps and looked inside and saw that the Christmas tree had caught fire and was starting to burn the curtains near the window. I asked her if she had an extinguisher and she said that she didn't. So I ran next door to my house and got the extinguisher that we keep in the kitchen and ran back to my neighbour's house. By the time I got back, the fire had begun to spread and, without thinking twice, I started to spray the foam all over the place. Just as I put out the last bit of fire, the firemen arrived and rushed in. Unfortunately, my neighbour had lost all of their Christmas presents and some curtains, although they really were ugly anyway. But I learned something that day. The best present isn't necessarily under the tree but under the kitchen sink!