

# LITERATURE 2B

# TEACHER'S NOTES

**AUTHOR:** Oscar Wilde  
**TITLE:** *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Act I)  
**THEMES:** Family (unit 4), Home (unit 5), Friendship (unit 6)  
**WRITING:** Summaries  
**DID YOU KNOW?:** Wit

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was born in Dublin, Ireland. His works include *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897).

He went to Oxford University in England and after university, became popular in fashionable social circles in London because he was talented and funny. He wrote poems, plays, short stories and one novel. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which took just one month to write, is Wilde's most famous play. One journalist said it was 'the second most known and quoted play in English after *Hamlet* (Shakespeare)'.

Wilde lived during the Victorian era (called this because Queen Victoria was the reigning queen). Victorian Britain was characterised by social inequality and a strict moral code. People were expected to behave in a correct and proper manner. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the main character behaves correctly in public, but has found a way to misbehave in private. His private life is shown to be more fun than the life he leads in public.

Wilde was controversial because he made fun of Victorian society by criticising many of its values, such as work, marriage and religion. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* he uses inversion (reversing the normal order) to poke fun at the rigid social structure, for example by allowing the wealthy Lady Bracknell to interview potential husbands for her daughter which would traditionally have been the father's role. Lady Bracknell is a humorous figure and Wilde uses this humour to show what he thinks about the class system (the differences between the wealthy and the poor).

## INTRODUCTION

Ask students if they have heard of Oscar Wilde or *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Write any ideas on the board in note form. Use the information in the *About the author* box to provide an introduction. Depending on the class, it may be appropriate to use L1 at this stage.

## START THINKING ...

- 1 Draw students' attention to the film still at the top right of the worksheet. Elicit responses to the questions: *Do you know the actors?* (Colin Firth and Rupert Everett) *Do they look rich or poor?* (rich) *Are they friends or enemies?* (friends)

Organise the class into pairs or small groups. Set a time limit of a few minutes for students to discuss the questions. Then ask students for their opinions. Encourage them to back up their answers with reasons (in L1 if necessary). For example, 'It is

important to have a best friend so you can tell them your problems.'

- 2 Draw students' attention to the text above the film still which 'sets the scene' and clarify understanding. Play the audio. When students have read and listened to the text once, allow time to check unfamiliar words in the glossary.

### Optional extension

Ask some comprehension questions to check general understanding of the text: *How many characters are mentioned in the text?* (7: Jack, Algernon, Cecily, Miss Prism, Ernest, Bunbury, Gwendolen) *Which two characters don't really exist?* (Ernest, Bunbury)

- 3 Read through the questions and remind students to refer closely to the text to find the answers. It may be helpful to draw a mind map on the board to show how the characters are related. You could write the seven characters' names on the board (Jack, Algernon, Cecily, Miss Prism, Ernest, Bunbury, Gwendolen) and ask students to come to the board and draw a line linking two or more characters. They can then label the line with the relationship. For example; Miss Prism, Jack and Cecily live together.

### Answers

1 Jack 2 Ernest 3 Bunbury 4 Algernon  
5 Gwendolen

- 4 Students read the text again. Discuss the questions and answers with the class.

### Answers

1 friends 2 doesn't know 3 Jack

## VOCABULARY

- 5 Read through the sentences one at a time to check comprehension of any unknown vocabulary. Working individually, students complete the sentences with the words in the glossary. Ask individual students for answers to the questions.

### Answers

1 guess 2 explanation 3 behave 4 excuse  
5 truth 6 silly

### Optional extension

Ask students to make another sentence for each item in the glossary. Explain that writing new vocabulary items in context is a good way to remember them.

### Optional extension

Ask students to read the text again and to underline five more words that are new to them. Ask them to write the words in sentences. They then read their sentences in pairs and correct each other's mistakes.

### ROLE PLAY

- 6 Organise the class into pairs. Read the instruction and check that students understand what they are going to do. Set a time limit and then ask pairs to read out their answers. Check that the class has the correct order. Then give students time to practise the conversation. When they are ready, ask a pair to perform their role play to the class.

#### Answers

Toby Gwendolen! How nice to see you. You must meet my friend Ernest. Ernest! This is my friend Gwendolen.  
She lives here in London too.  
Gwendolen But this isn't Ernest. This is Jack!  
Toby Jack? Who's Jack? No, this is definitely Ernest.  
Gwendolen No, this is Jack. He lives in the country.  
Toby The country? Ernest doesn't live in the country. He hates the country! We're always at parties together here, in London.  
Gwendolen But, Jack, tell him!

### LISTENING

- 7 This interview is one of the most famous scenes in the play. It is also one of the most amusing. Read through the notes on the notepad before listening. Elicit predictions of answers from the students. Play the recording twice. The first time, encourage students to listen without taking notes. The second time, they complete Lady Bracknell's notes.

#### Answers

1 29 2 8,000 3 149 4 poor 5 0

- 8 Students read through the questions. Encourage students to answer from memory. Play the recording again for students to complete their answers and to check.

#### Answers

1 T 2 F 3 T 4 F 5 F

### Optional extension

Play the recording again and ask them to think about Lady Bracknell's character. Encourage them to make notes about her personality using adjectives. Possible answers include: confident, not cheerful or easy-going, angry, serious. Then ask them to think about her physical appearance by asking questions such as 'How old do you think she is?' 'What does she look like?' 'Is she tall or short?' 'What colour is her hair? And her eyes?' Explain that there are no correct answers, but they should work together to produce a description using as many adjectives as they can.

### AUDIOSCRIPT

Lady Bracknell Please sit down, Mr Worthing. First of all, I must tell you that you are not on my list of suitable young men for my daughter Gwendolen to marry. However, I will put your name on the list if you can give good answers to my questions. How old are you?

Jack I'm twenty-nine.

Lady Bracknell In my opinion, that's a very good age to get married. How much money do you earn in a year?

Jack About eight thousand pounds.

Lady Bracknell Fine. That is acceptable.

Jack I also have a house in the country.

Lady Bracknell A house in the country? How many bedrooms has it got? Well, we won't worry about that now. I hope you've got a house in London too.

Jack I've got a house in Belgrave Square,

Lady Bracknell What number in Belgrave Square?

Jack 149.

Lady Bracknell Oh dear! That's on the poorer side of the street, but we can soon change that.

Jack What do you mean? We can't change the location of the house!

Lady Bracknell We can if necessary! Now where are your parents living?

Jack I have lost both my parents – actually it's more correct to say, they lost me when I was a baby. I don't know who my parents are. A very kind old man found me.

Lady Bracknell Found you! Where exactly did he find you?

Jack In a hand-bag.

Lady Bracknell A hand-bag!

Jack Yes, in a large, black hand-bag.

Lady Bracknell And where did he find this bag?

Jack At Victoria Station in London.

Lady Bracknell Found in a bag at a train station! Well, in that case, Mr Worthing, I advise you to find some relatives quickly. I suggest you find at least one parent – either mother or father – as soon as you can.

Jack Well, I don't know how I can do that! But I can show you the hand-bag – it's at home in my bedroom. I can bring it to you, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell You can't possibly think that Lord Bracknell and I will let our daughter marry a man with only a bag as family! Good morning, Mr Worthing!



### CRITICAL THINKING

Write the following on the board: '29 is a very good age to get married'. Ask students to put their hands up if they agree with the statement. Divide the board into two halves with 'For' in one column and 'Against' in another. Ask students to give reasons for and against the statement. You could prompt students to think about: freedom, money, how people change when they grow older. When you have finished the discussion, ask students to put their hands up again if they agree with the statement now. Ask students who have changed their minds for their reasons. You may wish to use L1 to gather ideas or check understanding.

### Suggested answers

For: By the age of 29, some people might have met someone they want to marry; they may have a good career and be happy where they are living; they may want to have children and want to be married first; in some countries, there are financial benefits to being married.

Against: when they are 29, some people still want to travel and don't want to have to live in the same place; not everyone has met the person they want to marry; not everyone feels responsible enough in their twenties; some people don't think that marriage is important.

## WRITING: SUMMARIES

- 9 Read the instruction. Then read through the *Writing skills* box. Look at the first bullet point with the class and ask them to underline the key information in the text. Students then answer the questions and use their answers to write a summary in class or for homework. Students then swap their summaries with a partner. They read each other's work and highlight any mistakes. They then return the summaries to the original student who looks at the highlighted mistakes and corrects them. Ask some students to read their summaries out loud to the class.

### Suggested answers

1 Algernon and Jack are talking to each other. 2 Jack has two names so that he can act in different ways. Jack is sensible but Ernest is more sociable and fun. 3 Jack lives in the country and Ernest lives in London. 4 Bunbury is Algernon's sick friend who lives in the country. He isn't real. 5 A Bunburyist is someone who invents another person that they can pretend to visit when they don't want to do something they find boring. 6 The conversation ends with Jack saying that Ernest will go away when he marries Gwendolen. Algernon says that his friend Bunbury will never go away.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Read through the information and check that students understand the meaning of *wit* and why the choice of name is funny.

#### Optional extension

- You could ask students to research other famous Oscar Wilde quotations, or any famous witty quotations. They may know some translated into their L1. Ask them to say if they like them or not and give their reasons why. If students are struggling, you could give the following examples:
- 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking up at the stars.' (Wilde) – The gutter is the edge of the road where water runs away. It is used in this case to describe being at the lowest level of society. Wilde is saying that we are all struggling, but while some people accept their fate, other people are aiming higher.
- 'All that glitters is not gold.' (Shakespeare) – not everything that looks expensive is valuable.
- 'Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies.' (Oliver Goldsmith) – if you don't ask me anything, then I won't need to lie.