

The Adventures of Magenta M: "Read, Read, Read."¹

By Stephen J. Davies

Magenta stopped in front of the sign that said: "Trans-Galactic Language Empowerment Agency," took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

"Good morning, Magenta," Dexter said, smiling and looking up from his computer screen. "Have a seat."

"Thanks," she replied.

"I've just had some news from Talut 9, the misty planet. The head teacher out there, Chet Divine, has emailed me about an extensive reading program that he's set up. He says he's pretty excited about the results, but there are a few puzzling anomalies with regard to L2 reading proficiencies. 'Weirdnesses,' as he calls them. I think it might be a good idea if you went to Talut 9 to investigate."

"What kind of anomalies?"

"He says there are significant gender variations in terms of reading proficiency."

"Really? In which direction?"

"Overall, the women are more proficient than the men."

"There could be a number of explanations for that –"

"Wait. Before you tell me about the female genetic pre-disposition to comprehend longer passages of text, I should point out that Chet says the *boys* on Talut 9 are significantly better readers than the men. So, in other words, there are both inter-gender and intra-gender proficiency asymmetries."

"Do you have more specific details?"

"Yes. The boys can read book titles and chapter headings, but they struggle with the actual texts."

"What about the men?"

"They can't read anything."

"Nothing at all?"

"That's right. The men are still pre-literate in the L2."

Magenta thought for a moment. "Do you think this could have anything to do with in-class reading activities? Perhaps the men haven't been given the appropriate materials?"

Dexter shook his head. "Nobody reads during class time."

"No one?"

"That's right."

"So what happens?"

"Not much, it seems. Chet hands out free food and textbooks and then the students go back to the village."

"Has he seen them doing *any* reading?"

"No. He says the village is very damp and going down there might..." Dexter studied the computer screen... 'mess with his chest.' He's asthmatic, apparently."

"So, you're telling me that Chet doesn't teach reading and that he hasn't seen his students doing any reading, either?"

"That's right."

"But how is he assessing reading proficiency?"

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"He uses book reports. The students are required to submit a written report after they finish reading a book. A minimum of one sentence is required."

Dexter glanced at his watch. "So, would you like to go to Talut 9, or do I have to find someone else?"

"Just a moment. How much do we know about the students?"

Dexter shrugged. "Not a lot. They're a secretive people. In fact, it's been quite difficult to convince them of the value of L2 literacy. Basically, we've had to drag them out of the Stone Age. We do know they have a lot of taboos. For example, the men and women live in separate long houses. There is gendered division of labor. And another thing: the Talutians believe strongly in the principle of utility. They have a saying, *Use what you can, but take only what you need*. They hunt birds, but they only kill them for food."

"But you just told me that Chet gives them free food."

"That's right. They like tinned fruit. But they have an aversion to mechanically reclaimed meat products. That's why they hunt for the migratory ducks that fly past their settlement. When the ducks appear, the students don't come to class."

"So you mean the men and women hunt together? But what about the gendered division of labor?"

"The men do the hunting, while the women –"

"Open tins?"

"Very funny," Dexter laughed, running his fingers through his hair. But then he spoke more firmly: "Magenta, we need to sort out this reading proficiency issue. We're sending a lot of books to the planet. The Talutians really should be making better progress. I don't believe I've ever seen such inconsistent results before. That's why I want you to go out there. Start by interviewing Chet. See if he knows anything more than he's told me. Now, are you willing to accept this mission or not?"

"Yes, I'll go. I could do with another off-planet adventure," Magenta said smiling.

Dexter beamed. "That's great. The Clothing Department will supply you with the right equipment. They don't call it the 'misty planet' for nothing. It can get pretty cold out there."

But Magenta wasn't worrying about the climate. "Talut 9 is in Deep Space. That's light-years from here. I'll need to take a sleeper."

"I've already thought of that," Dexter replied. He handed Magenta a small, beige envelope. "Here are your e-tickets. Business Class. You can sleep all you want."

On Chet's desk in the Empowerment Center there were two things: a paperback novel and a mug of coffee.

Chet grabbed the mug, took a swig, and asked, "Want some?"

Magenta shook her head. "No thanks."

"You've come a long way," Chet offered. "I hope I can be of help."

"I hope so too."

"Cool. You're here to learn about our extensive reading program, right?"

"Yes, I am."

Chet leaned forward. "I'm gonna cut to the chase. Let's start with the three Rs: reading, reading, and READING. The neat thing is, the cool thing is, we learn to read by reading. I mean, reading is reading, right? It's a non-negotiable issue. The

bottom line is reading, the root of which is to read. That's the message. Read, read, and read. Just read."

He took another swig of coffee and swallowed hard.

"So, all the students can read English?" Magenta asked.

"Not exactly," Chet said, in a puzzled voice. "I emailed Dexter the details. Some weird shit is going on. I figured he'd told you."

"He told me that you don't actually *teach* reading."

Chet shrugged. "Like I said, you just gotta let 'em read."

Magenta thought for a moment. "There's something I don't understand. Why do the students come to the Learning Center? What's their motivation?"

"This planet is frickin' freezin'," Chet said, "but we got this real neat uranium heater keeps the Center nice and toasty. And there's the free food. Tinned peaches and stuff. The Taluts love that shit. And there's the games."

"Games?"

"Yeah, you know, computer games. Armageddon, Dark Destroyer, Revenge of the Zombies, whatever."

"They like to play computer games?"

"Yeah. The guys love 'em."

"What about the women?"

"Nah. They're, like, more into word games. Crosswords. Scrabble. Stuff like that."

Magenta considered this. She knew that hunter-gatherer communities enjoyed more leisure time than was generally assumed and, since the Talutians were the inhabitants of a terribly cold planet, that fact that they could spend their free time in the warm Empowerment Center would obviously be very appealing. And, of course, there was the added attraction of the free food. As for any language proficiency gains, if Chet's account of what was happening was accurate, then the women *would* be making progress by playing lexical games. And the men? Well, they wouldn't learn much English playing those awful computer games. But that still didn't explain why that the boys were making L2 reading progress... "Do *all* the boys play computer games?" she asked Chet.

"Sure. They love 'em."

"How long do they play for?"

"Until it's time to leave."

"Then what happens?"

"They just get their bags, fill 'em up with free books, and hit the trail back to the village."

"You don't think that's strange?"

"What?"

"The fact that they don't do any reading in the Center, but they're willing to carry heavy books all the way back to the village?"

"I guess," Chet said, stifling a yawn.

Magenta pushed her chair back, stood up, and said: "I think I'd like to interview some of the students myself. Will they be here tomorrow?"

Chet shook his head. He made a pantomime gesture of using a bow and arrow. "It's hunting time."

"How far is it to the village?" Magenta asked, looking at a map on the wall.

"About five miles, I guess."

"Is that a lake I can see on the map?"

"Yeah. It's right by the village. I've heard it's real damp down there."

"You've not been there?"

“No way. Not with my asthma an’ all.”

Early the next morning, when the sun was bright and red in the eastern sky, Magenta walked along a narrow pathway that twisted between several strange, grassy knolls that reminded her of ancient burial mounds.

She felt cold. Very cold. It was a sharp, bright, frosty coldness that had transformed the tussocks of grass into silver shards that crunched and popped under her feet like broken glass.

As she marched onwards, she thrust her gloved hands deeper into her pockets, and tried not to let her fears take over. Really, it made no sense to worry. Even if some of the villagers were pre-literate and unfriendly, she had to remember that they had been willing to accept books, that they had started to read English. They were moving in the right direction... But why was their progress so uneven? Most likely, given the gendered division of labor that Dexter had talked about, the women were able to spend more time reading while the men were away hunting for ducks. That made sense. But why were the boys more proficient than the men? That seemed to be counter-intuitive... Magenta smiled. There was something funny about the situation. What had the poet William Wordsworth written? “The Child is father of the Man”?

Unless...Were the women teaching the boys to read? Had they set up their own village school? Was Vygotskian other-regulation taking place?

Magenta kept walking until she crested a low hill. Feeling thirsty, she took off her backpack and rummaged inside for her coffee flask.

From somewhere nearby a child cried out – a strange, feral sound – and Magenta crouched down and stared ahead through the tall grass.

There, in the distance, was a long house. It was a wooden building with a sinuous column of smoke rising from a hole in the thatched roof.

But there was no sign of a child...or of anyone else...or...

“Looking for someone, is it?”

Magenta turned around. Standing in front of her was a woman with eyes that were dark and bright, but not unfriendly.

The woman laughed, showing her small uneven teeth. “Are you scared?” she asked. “You think I kill you?”

“I – ” Magenta managed to stammer.

“Come,” the woman said, clasping her hands together. “We go to house. Is warm.”

After a few minutes of brisk walking, they arrived at the entrance to the long house.

Magenta bent low and followed the woman through the doorway.

Inside, the air was thickly warm with a rich aroma of oily meat that was simmering in a large, soot-stained pot hanging over the fire. There was another smell, too: the coarse stink of tallow smoke, rising in dark coils from many thick-stemmed candles that cast strange shadows on the walls.

Several women were curled around the fire. All of them had been reading when Magenta entered, but now they scrambled to their feet, whispering and staring.

One of them stepped forward. Her dark, thick, braided hair was tied in an elaborate topknot, decorated with bird feathers. A vivid tattoo stretched across her forehead, and a shiny necklace of animal bones gleamed at her throat.

"My name is Aruli," the woman said. "Welcome to our village. We've been waiting for you. You've come a long way. Please have something to eat. We must strengthen you for your work."

While Magenta ate the broth, greedily gulping down mouthfuls of duck meat and pungent herbs, Aruli explained that a young boy had fallen ill and so the messenger had been sent to find a doctor. She was pleased and grateful that Magenta had come so quickly, as the boy had a strong fever and needed attention.

There was an expectant hush when Magenta pushed aside her bowl, stood up and searched in her backpack for her medical kit. From Aruli's description of the symptoms, it sounded as though the boy had influenza. She knew that aspirin would help to lower his temperature, and treating him would give her an ideal opportunity to look around the men's long house...

A little while later, Aruli, carrying a goatskin water bottle, led Magenta across a narrow strip of muddy grass that led to a second building. Reaching the entrance, she stopped and handed the bottle to Magenta.

"Is this the men's long house?"

Aruli nodded. "Go in. I must wait here."

Inside the house, a boy – about 14 years old – was wrapped in a blanket of animal fur. He was asleep and softly breathing, but when Magenta drew near, his eyes flashed open and he struggled to sit up.

Magenta cupped two pills of aspirin in her hand and offered them to him. Saying nothing, he scooped them into his mouth, swilling them down with water from the bottle that Magenta held for him.

Soon the boy stretched out again, already half-asleep.

Magenta gazed around the room. It was bare except for the boy's clothes, neatly folded beside the bed. She could see no reading materials of any kind...

Stepping outside, she whispered, "Where are all the men?"

"Hunting. At the lake," Aruli answered, yawning and walking towards the women's long house.

Magenta glanced at the buildings. It seemed that all the villagers lived in just these two dwellings. What was the total population? Fifty? Sixty?

She was about to follow Aruli when a gust of wind blew a piece of paper towards her.

She bent down and picked it up.

It was a page from a book. She turned it over. The back was stained with something sticky...

"What are you doing?" Aruli asked her.

"Nothing," Magenta replied, stuffing the paper inside a pocket and hurrying across the muddy grass.

Inside the long house, most of the women were now enjoying an afternoon nap. Aruli, too, stretched out on the floor, gesturing to Magenta to do the same. "Have a rest," she urged. "You've done well, and you have a long journey back to the Center."

Magenta waited until she was quite sure all of the women were asleep. Then, as quietly as she could, she got to her feet and tiptoed outside.

She remembered the map on the wall of Chet's office. The lake wasn't far away. Had the piece of paper come from there?

She took it from her pocket and looked at it for a second time. Although it had yellowed with age, she could see that it was from a beginner-level text.

I'll try to find the lake, she thought. It can't be far away.

As Magenta drew nearer to the water, wraiths of mist rose up and swirled around her feet, soaking her boots with damp dew. Determined, though, to find the lake, she kept walking forwards, treading as quietly as she could through the clumps of wet grass, following a thin, meandering pathway, until, a little way ahead, she noticed something lying on the ground.

It was a second piece of paper, wetly crumpled in the grass.

Was it from a textbook?

As she stepped closer, bending down to get a better look, a twig snapped under her foot and she heard the sound of a bird breaking cover.

Startled, she looked up and saw a duck fly directly overhead, its wings a blur of frenzied energy.

Then, seconds later, an arrow scorched upwards and the bird crashed to the ground.

Magenta crouched and stared in the direction that the arrow had come from until she located the well-camouflaged hide. She heard a deep, satisfied grunt, and then a young boy charged out and raced through the wet grass towards the dead bird.

Returning, he left the hide door slightly ajar – and Magenta was able to glimpse inside.

She gasped. The walls of the hide were thickly plastered with pages from reading texts. From where she was standing, Magenta could even identify one of the titles: "Zargon Zoo". She remembered that it was a beginner text, for students with a passive reading vocabulary of 500 words or less.

Magenta watched the boy as he showed the dead bird to the archer – a bearded, swarthy man of around 50 – who simply grunted again.

The boy passed the man a fresh arrow. He carefully set the bow, pulled the string taut, and squinted skywards through a slit in the roof.

The boy, waiting for the next kill, began staring at the words on the walls...

As Magenta walked back towards the village, stepping softly through the wet grass, she thought about what she'd seen. *Gosh! The air around here is awfully damp, so I'm not surprised the men tear up the textbooks and use the paper for insulation. It's perfectly understandable, especially given the utilitarian ethos of the culture... And the boys are s.l.o.w.l.y learning to read by studying the language-rich wallpaper... As for the women – lucky things – they can enjoy their autonomous L2 reading in a nice, dry long house...*

Read, read, read, Magenta hummed softly to herself. All you need is to read. This is one of the most interesting cases of autonomous learning that I've ever encountered. I wonder what Dexter will say when I tell him about it?

She walked quietly past the two long houses and then hurried onwards towards the trail that led back to the Empowerment Center.

A cold wind was beginning to blow, and the sun was already sinking towards the bare mountains in the west.