Literature in language teaching: What, why, and how

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Literature in Language Teaching SIG

This short article first offers a quick overview of both theory and practice and then presents some straightforward practical suggestions for how to use literature in language classrooms. Finally, summaries are provided of articles in the first two issues of our peer-reviewed journal.

本論では、まず表題のテーマの理論と実践をまとめる。次に、授業でどのように文学を使用するかについて、わかりやすく実践的な提案を示す。最後に、我々の論文審査付きの研究教育雑誌の創刊号と第2号の論文についてのまとめを掲載する。

What is literature in language teaching, and why should teachers use it?

There are a good many reasons for teachers to use literature in the language classroom. For a range of readings see Brumfit and Carter (1986) for an introduction, Sage (1975) for a how-to guide that manages to be both well-researched and directly practical, and Hall (2005) for an overview of research trends. The likely benefits can be usefully considered in relation to Carter and Long's (1991) three models of why teachers use literature: *the cultural model*, *the language model*, and *the personal growth model*.

The cultural model

Literature is "one of the most obvious and valuable means of attaining cultural insights" (Scott, 1964, p. 490). Scott strongly advocates the use of literature as a cultural *way in*. Literature can be viewed as a product of historical and social circumstance, as a representative and revealing artifact. Texts can thus be used to engage and motivate learners and provide more ready and deeper connections with target cultures (Lazar, 1993). In the EFL class, a selection of texts may thus be employed as an integral part of a cultural course, to aid intercultural understanding, or the cultural analysis may conversely be derived from the chosen text(s).

> ### SIG Spotlight: LiLT SIG
> The Literature in Language Teaching (LiLT) SIG was set up to encourage and promote the use of literature in the language classroom. Our diverse membership includes teachers at various levels teaching language through film, creative writing, poetry, the short story, classic literature, literature in translation and world literature. We also welcome interest from educators interested in cultural studies, politics through literature, language learning, and applications of literary texts in different contexts. LiLT SIG activities include sponsoring literature/language experts to spread the good word of literature use across Japan, co-sponsoring conferences, working with other groups to promote effective pedagogical practice, publishing a bi-annual journal. The next volume of *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching* (Volume 2, Issue 2) will be available from October 2013.

The language model

The focus of the language model is psycholinguistic. Teachers may choose to focus on how language is used within a given text. A literary text may be used to provide exemplars of particular grammatical points and/or lexical items. More ambitiously, teachers may ask students to engage in stylistic analysis of the text, though this may be best reserved for more advanced students. Among the suggested benefits of the language model are the expansion of vocabulary; increased reading fluency; enhanced interpretive and inferential skills (due to dealing with texts of increased complexity and sophistication); and exposure to a greater variety of language (lexis and syntax) due to the use of ungraded, authentic texts (Widdowson, 1979).

The personal growth model

The personal growth model offers a more student-centered approach to literature study. The purpose is to use literature as a vehicle to educate, to promote critical awareness, and to have students assess, evaluate, and discuss issues within the text and provoked by the text. Examples could include reader-response activi-

ties (Rosenblatt, 1938) that personalize the reading experience, or reactions to a text that help connect reading to students' lives (Showalter, 2003). This model is used in different contexts, but is particularly well suited to the developing language learner reflecting on development through childhood and adolescence, and thus is particularly suited to the high school and undergraduate university classroom.

How to choose literature: Establishing criteria

The key element in determining the success or otherwise of literature use in the language classroom is the choice of literary work. If the language is too difficult, or the subject matter too culturally distant, learning gains may be minimal (McKay, 1982). What are the possible solutions?

Certainly, graded readers are one option for teachers in a variety of contexts and there use is addressed elsewhere, but teachers may also choose to use literature *as is*, neither written for language students, nor diluted. How can teachers seek to evaluate whether a text may be suitable? We suggest some useful, readily applicable criteria below:

Relevance and accessibility

As with any language-learning course planning, a needs analysis is recommended for considering ways to integrate a literary theme. But don't be afraid to challenge students with more involved, weightier topics. Have your students reach far beyond the standard ESL/EFL textbook fare, the steady yet stultifying topics of free time, family, friends, etc. Entice, engage, and enthrall them in reading and discussing topics that mean something to them. Let's teach up rather than dumb down to students subjected to admass, perpetual SMS, and general short-termism.

Regarding length, if the book is too long students may simply be scared off and so teachers should make reasonable assessments of ability in order to select texts. Possessing a working knowledge of the local literature and applying the wants and needs of students to the planning of the course of study can make for a potent use of literary texts for successful language teaching.

Genre and narrative structure

A fundamental choice is whether to use multiple extracts, short stories, poems, or drama in a course, or to focus on one or more lengthier texts. Additionally, the use of literature in translation is another option available to teachers of English. In using shorter extracts, teachers may consider connecting within an overriding theme or series of themes when submitting a course proposal.

Balance between action and description

This of course does depend on how the teacher chooses to use the text, the students' majors, and the level of students, but L2 readers may struggle upon being confronted with an excess of colorful description and, alas, quite possibly just give up on the text. A suitable balance between description and action is thus something to bear in mind when choosing texts.

Syntactic and lexical accessibility

As with selecting any text for classroom use, the difficulty level should be anticipated by the instructor and materials developed accordingly. Lexical difficulty can be gauged using a variety of methods. One example suitable for readily available copyright-free literary texts is the frequency analysis available at <lextutor.ca>. With this information, teachers can prepare materials confident in the knowledge that they have assessed the difficulty level for students.

Multimodal and multimedia representations

Viewing the film version of a class text is likely to support understanding, particularly of lengthier narratives. Similarly, graphic novels, audio recordings, theatre productions, and shorts on YouTube can all assist students. Comparing versions can be a beneficial class activity, considering why a film director may have chosen to omit scenes, to amend the story, to change the focus, to exclude certain characters, or even change the ending. This should only be tried after reading, as the film version is often different, sometimes very different. While it may also defeat the object of reading and creating mind's eye meaning with the language if this is pre-created, pre-visualised, and pre-digested. Watching the film can be assigned as homework, after reading, to be discussed in class.

What do you like as a teacher?

Finally, if the teacher radiates boredom, it is unlikely that students will be enthused. So, teach what you like to read (within reasonable realms of syntactical and lexical access), and you are likely to be more energetic, and your enthusiasm for the text will communicate itself to students. "This

is great stuff. This matters. Reading this matters. Reading matters." Reading certainly does matter.

LiLT SIG views and directions

Thus far in the LiLT SIG's short time as part of the JALT community, a glimpse into the broad and varied interests of our members has been provided by the initial contributions to our publication, the *Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*. Now a biannual publication, *Vol. 2* will have two issues in 2013 particularly focusing on Literature in ELT (*Issue 1*) and Literature in Japan (*Issue 2*). The journal can be found at <lilt.jalt.org>. In *Volume One*, Simon Bibby introduced literature in an overview essay (from which this is an offshoot) and continuing this, Atsushi Iida provided a critical review of literary reading and writing. Patrick Judge asserted the value of television series as literary texts, a theme he followed up this year describing how he uses the series *Battlestar Galactica* within EAP classes. Creativity and post-colonial criticism have received attention from Cameron Smith and Neil Addison in their articles, both expanding and challenging our views of text types in use. Regarding poetry, Tara McIlroy discussed the issues of text choice and activities teachers use for poetry classes. Jane Joritz-Nakagawa discussed her experiences as both a poet and as a teacher who uses poetry in her classes. She gave an extensive list of useful poetry sources. Interviews, research summaries and a conference report variously featured from Wendy Nakanishi, Kayo Ozawa, Jane Joritz-Nakagawa, Donna Tatsuki, Lori Zenuk-Nishide and Frances Shiobara, all of whom have vast experience within language classrooms in Japan. We all hope that through publishing the work of our SIG members in the journal and promoting the activities of LiLT SIG and of kindred groups throughout Japan, a positive contribution to the world of literature in language teaching can be made.

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Simon Bibby founded the Literature in Language Teaching SIG in 2011. He was using literature in classes, looked around for a relevant JALT group to discuss with like-minded folk, but couldn't find one. So he decided to start up a new SIG, and here we are. In addition to being a qualified school teacher, he has an MA in Educational Technology and is currently a doctoral candidate.

Tara McIlroy has an MA in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University in Wellington, NZ and is a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham, UK. She has been teaching English literature and EFL for over 10 years. Her interests include literary reading, investigating uses of creative texts and uses of world literature in the language classroom.