

Language Through Literature:

Using literature in the EFL classroom

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Introduction

In several recent papers (Green 1996; 2000a; 2000b) I have advocated using literature in the EFL classroom. In this paper I report a series of lessons which I taught to my second year junior college students in their seminar, from April to July 2000.

During my M.A. in Applied Linguistics I took a short course in using literature in the language classroom. The class was taught by Peter Grundy, who later went on to publish many of the ideas that he had piloted with us in a book called *Language Through Literature* (Bassnett & Grundy 1993). I had found Grundy's ideas and methodology very attractive during the course, and decided that I would use his book as the basis for my own seminar, in which I decided to study a selection of short stories and poetry in English, and to encourage the students to write their own stories and poems.

Grundy and Bassnett provide much of the methodology which I used in the seminar, and often suggested suitable texts to work with. Most of the students had studied with me the previous year in writing and/or oral English classes, and so I had a good idea of their English abilities and interests before the course began. This knowledge helped me to select other poems, short stories and extracts from plays, which I felt would be relevant and interesting for the students. As we will see, I was not always correct in my judgement.

In what follows I will outline each lesson in the order I taught them, explaining classroom procedure and underlying rationale. I will

also indicate how successful I thought each lesson was, and indicate ways of improving it. This last point is of particular importance to me, as it was the first time that I had taught this course.

Lesson One

I began the first lesson of the course with two activities from Bassnett and Grundy. The first was Meeting Poem (activity 1.1), designed to introduce the students to one another and to build confidence, because it involves writing a short poem.

After dividing the class into four groups of six students each, I wrote my own name on the board, left three lines blank and then wrote my name again. I then demonstrated to the students what I wanted them to do by filling the blank lines with pairs of words which began with the same letters as my two names. So I ended up with

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Wide Gorgeous

Wet Grin

Wonderful Golfer

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I asked the students to follow the same procedure with their own names, and when they had all finished, I asked them to read their five lines to the rest of their group, thereby introducing themselves.

Meeting Poem went fairly well, with some students producing memorable poems (one student was “mouth monkey - modern mother”). Overall, the students seemed to grasp the idea of the exercise, but some improvement could be made by emphasizing that the middle three lines should be a personal description. Some students were clearly uncomfortable reading their poems to a group of five others, and other students spoke so quietly that they were inaudible. Smaller groups would help to solve these problems.

The second activity which I presented in the first class was Sounds (activity 7.1) which is a variation on an old party game. The students in pairs were asked to make 50 words from the word CONSTANTINOPLE. About 30-35 words were to be in English, and the remainder in Japanese. I then asked the students to circle all the words in their list which sounded “poetic” to them, and then to take turns in reading their words to their original group from the first activity. I allowed the students to add any words to their own list that they heard and which they did not already have written down. They were then instructed to write a short “poem” using the words they had circled.

I judged this activity to be less successful than the first. Most students managed to get about 30 words out of CONSTANTINOPLE with approximately 20 in English and the rest in Japanese, but some additional direction is needed to avoid a preponderance of monosyllables. The notion of “poetic” seemed to puzzle some students, and the poems they produced reflected this. In the future it would be advisable to use this activity after doing some work on poetic features of the language.

Lesson Two

In this lesson I aimed to introduce the students to rhyme and rhythm in English, in everyday language and in literature. I began with an exercise from Bassnett and Grundy (activity 1.2) called Concentration. As Bassnett and Grundy note (page 2) everyday English has its own poetic qualities, so that the famous British department store has a more satisfying name in Marks and Spencer than it would if it were called Spencer and Marks. The store is nicknamed Marks and Sparks which is yet more poetic. I gave this and other examples from everyday language to the students, in order to raise their awareness of these features of rhyme and rhythm, and then

I started the exercise. Students worked in naturally occurring groups, and first of all I asked them to call out their parents' names in turn around their group. So the first student began "Hanako and Taro", the second followed with her parents' names as a pair (x and y), and so on round the group. I continued by asking the students to name different foods around the group, and then cartoon characters, film stars and finally the names of department stores.

This exercise worked very well. One group of students set up a clapping rhythm and interspersed their words between claps. They clearly had a strong sense of the rhythm in the language. Other groups were a little more tentative, and I encouraged them to repeat each category a few times using the same words each time. In this way pauses for thought which fractured the rhythms were eliminated, and the language became more fluent, as the students were able to build and appreciate the rhythms.

Before beginning the second activity of the lesson (Rhymes: Bassnett and Grundy's activity 7.3) I explained how rhymes work in English and gave several examples. I then gave a word to the group and asked for rhymes, in order to check that the basic principle had been grasped. Once the idea had been established, I began the exercise by asking each student to take a piece of paper and write a word on it, and then pass the paper clockwise round the group. On receiving a word from the next student, each person was to write a rhyming word underneath and pass the paper on. When the papers had gone once round the group I asked the students to read the lists of accumulated words aloud to check the accuracy of the rhymes.

The oral check revealed that students did not realize that diphthongs function as one rhyme-unit, so that for example "bear" and "year" became rhymes. Schwa on the end of a word was also used for rhyme so that "water" rhymed with "under". A brief explanation from

me at this point meant that a second attempt at the exercise was much more successful.

To end the lesson, I used a poem called “Madam and her Madam” by Langston Hughes, which is included in the textbook *Window On Literature* (Lazar 1999). As this lesson had concentrated on rhythm and rhyme I felt it was important to use the recording of the poem on the tape accompanying the textbook. The poem has strong rhythms and an abcb rhyme scheme over six four-line stanzas, and I asked the students to listen to the poem and then identify the rhymes. The tape-recording got and held the students’ attention, and they had no difficulty in identifying the rhymes, nor in answering subsequent comprehension questions. I felt that this poem was an excellent conclusion to the lesson.

Lesson Three

My aim in this lesson was to demonstrate the poetic nature of repetition. I began by miming a badly behaved child and eliciting a parent’s response from the students, in the negative imperative form. So for example, in answer to my mimes, the students told me “don’t pick your nose”, “don’t throw your food”, “don’t stare”, “don’t talk with your mouth full” and so on. I then elicited some positive imperatives that parents might use to their children, for example “say thank you”, “close the door”, “tidy your room” and the like. After this, I asked the students to write down all the positive and negative imperatives that parents use to their children. I then reminded them about rhyme and rhythm from the previous week’s class, before asking them to write out their imperatives, either putting negatives and positives in two groups, putting them in alternate lines, or in any order that they felt suitable.

The first part of this exercise was a big success, probably because the normally serious teacher spent much of the time with his finger up

his nose, sniffing hard and throwing imaginary food. The “poem” created from repeated imperatives was well done, with many students thinking hard about the rhythms of what they were writing.

Finally I used the poem “Chivvy” by Michael Rosen, which is included in the *Window On Literature* text. This poem is made up largely of parents’ imperatives to their children and ends with the couplet “Can’t you make your *own*/mind up about anything?” I wrote up the poem on the board and played the recording of it. I asked the students to make a note of any lines from the poem which were like their own.

Lesson Four

In this lesson we continued to look at repetition in literature. At the beginning of the class I divided the students into pairs, and made sure that each pair had one piece of paper and one pencil. I then asked them to communicate with each other only by drawing pictures - they were to use no words. After about 15 minutes, when each pair had covered a side of A4 paper with pictures and symbols, I stopped the activity and asked the students to write down individually what they thought had been communicated in pictures. The students then compared their written versions. Some pairs of students had written very similar accounts of their picture communication, but others were amused by how different their versions of events were.

As the discussions came to a natural conclusion, I talked a little bit about how communication can sometimes be difficult, how mistakes can be made, and how the mistakes can be interesting in themselves. The oral English favourite “Chinese Whispers” is a good illustration of what I was driving at here. I then went on to talk about how computers sometimes make mistakes, and I read Edwin Morgan’s poem “The Computer’s First Christmas Card” in which a computer tries to write a

Christmas card, beginning “jollymerry / hollyberry / jollyberry” and running through a long list of variations, such as “Mollymerry / Jerryjolly / bellyboppy” before arriving triumphantly at “asmerryasa / Chrismerry / asMERRYCHR / YSANTHEMUM”. Looking at the poem, I showed the students how each line was produced by a small variation on the previous. I then distributed a piece of paper to each student, at the bottom of each piece was a different sentence or phrase, such as “happy birthday”, “see you later”, “this is a pen” and other classics. I asked the students to work up from the bottom of the page, writing a line above the original phrase or sentence which had a small change in the same way as Morgan had done in his poem. So one student began from “it’s a nice day”:

Hits a rice pay

It’s a mice pay

It’s a nice day

and continued for almost a full page. This activity was met with initial bemusement, but after some explanation, and assurances that I merely wanted the students to experiment with the language, they set to with enthusiasm and produced some fine sounding poems. It was interesting to note that the nonsense words that some students produced, were mostly governed by the rules of English, so that there were not, for example, excessively long consonant clusters.

Lesson Five

In this lesson I wanted to work with Stevie Smith’s poem, “O grateful colours, bright looks” which, as the title suggests, contains many different colours. So as a warm-up exercise, I began the class with a brainstorm of colours and another of things that might be found at the beach. I then explained the idea of “thin poems” to the students (cf. Carter and Long, 1991). A thin poem consists of just two words per

line. Reminding the students about rhyme, rhythm and repetition, I asked them to arrange the colours and beach nouns that they had brainstormed into a thin poem, with each line consisting of a colour and a noun.

After the students had completed this warm-up, I distributed copies of a clozed version of “O grateful colours, bright looks”. All the single word adjectives were omitted from this version, and I asked the students to supply possible words for the spaces, again after considering rhyme, rhythm and repetition. While the students were doing this, I went around the class collecting the students’ words and writing them on the board. When everyone had finished, we discussed the alternatives on the board and as a class chose the best according to the criteria which I had given the students.

The last exercise of this lesson was another cloze exercise. With the students in pairs I gave one student in each pair a copy of William Blake’s “Nurse’s Song”, and the other student a copy of Julian Bell’s “Nonsense”. I asked the students to read through their poem and to white out any words which they didn’t understand, and then to exchange poems with their partner. Wherever words had been whited out the students filled in those blanks with words of their own choice. The idea behind this exercise is to draw attention to the requirements that any word in a literary text must meet if it is to fit into its context. Allowing students to remove all unknown vocabulary helps to relax the students, yet they must think hard in supplying suitable replacements. To finish the lesson I asked the students to compare their clozed version with the original which I supplied.

Lesson Six

Picture dictation is an old favourite in conversation classes, and I began this class by reading the poem “Fairy Tale” by Miroslav Holub to

the students and asking them to draw the poem as best they could. It begins

He built himself a house,
 his foundations,
 his stones
 his walls,
 his roof overhead

and goes on

He made himself a garden,
 his fence...

He cut out his bit of sky above.

The students ended up with a simple picture of a house surrounded by a garden. I then distributed a gapped version of the poem, one copy to each pair of students. I told them to fill in as many of the gaps as possible by using their pictures as an *aide memoire*. I read the poem twice more, giving the students time to fill in more words. Finally, I distributed the original poem for comparison and discussion.

For the second part of the lesson, I asked the students to imagine that they were going on a trip abroad, and asked them what they would take. Each student was then given a piece of A4 paper which she tore up into 16 small pieces. I told the students to write down what they would take, one thing on each small piece of paper, and I also requested that they use the grammatical form determiner-adjective-adjective-noun, for example "my old, red passport". Once all 16 pieces of paper had been filled, the students shuffled their things around until they had a satisfactory order, at which point they wrote them up on a piece of B5 paper, at the top of which was printed:

Leaving Home

When I go abroad, I will take with me:

Students thereby produced short poems in which repetition again

played an important role. The repeated grammatical form also sets up a rhythm which the students had seen in Holub's poem and then created for themselves.

Lesson Seven

In this class I wanted to show how sound and meaning are sometimes connected, and to do so I chose two poems which make extensive use of onomatopoeia - "Little Fish" and "Sea-weed" by D.H. Lawrence:

Little Fish

The tiny fish enjoy themselves
in the sea.
Quick little splinters of life,
their little lives are fun to them
in the sea

Sea-weed

Sea-weed sways and sways and swirls
as if swaying were its form of stillness;
and if it flushes against fierce rock
it slips over it as shadows do, without hurting itself.

First of all I told the students to find out what these words from the poems mean: enjoy, fierce, fish, flushes, fun, life, little, quick, sea, shadows, slips, stillness, sways, swirls, tiny. Then I asked them to divide these words into five groups using any criteria they liked. Next I told the students to divide the same set of words into three different groups, this time using the *sounds* of the words to make the groups. And finally I had the students divide the same words into two groups, one group for each poem.

Once this had been completed, I distributed a second worksheet to the students, on which both poems were printed. I told the students to group the words of “Little Fish” by vowel sounds: /i/ or /e/ or /i:/ or /ai/ or schwa. And to group the words of “Sea-weed” by consonant sounds: /s/ or /ʃ/ or /f/. I suggested that the dart and glide movements of schools of small fish were (perhaps) mirrored by the vowel sounds in “Little Fish”, for example “quick little splinters of life”, and that the sounds of sea-water and the sea-weed beneath it were (perhaps) mimicked by the sibilants and fricatives of “Sea-weed”, with “rock” being the exceptional sound. Why not “stone” which would have been in keeping with the rest of the sounds in the poem? Most students accepted my arguments for onomatopoeia in “Sea-weed”, but they were more doubtful about “Little Fish”. I made no further attempt to persuade the students, but was happy that they had understood the connection between sound and meaning.

Lesson Eight

In most of the lessons so far, a number of students had worked hard to translate the poems into Japanese. I had no objections to this, but in this lesson I decided to use some translation exercises from Bassnett and Grundy, in order to show the students some different aspects of translation. The first was What Gets Lost (activity 5.6) in which I asked the students to write down the two most beautiful and the two least beautiful Japanese words they could think of, and then translate them into English. I then divided the blackboard into two, titling one half “Beautiful” and the other half “Ugly”, and asked the students to write their translations into the appropriate half. I then discussed with the students whether the beautiful/ugly classification was still valid, now that the words were in English. The students decided that a number of words should be moved from one side to the

other, generally because of the sound.

The second translation exercise (Bassnett and Grundy activity 2.5) was of “Numbers” by Stevie Smith. I asked groups of four students to work together to translate the poem into Sign language. An effective translation of the poem into physical gestures requires clear understanding of the original, but students need not be concerned about nuances of a Japanese translation. So while recognizing the value of translations I wanted to avoid the drier aspects of the process.

I told the students that at the end of about 20 minutes all four members of the group would be required to perform their Sign version simultaneously. This exercise was met with some bemusement, but after I had “translated” a line or so for each group, the students became quite enthusiastic, and all the groups gave a good performance of their translation at the end of the allotted time.

The final translation exercise was Idiotic Idioms (activity 5.2), in which I distributed a list of English idioms to the students, and asked them to translate the idioms literally. This is usually a good source of humour for language learners, and sure enough the students found the exercise very amusing. They were also able in most cases to provide a corresponding Japanese idiom.

I rounded off the lesson by talking about equivalence in translation, and the problems posed by literary texts in particular, and I used examples created by the students in the lesson to illustrate my remarks.

Lesson Nine

I used tongue twisters as the warm-up exercise for this lesson, the students having most fun - and trouble - with “red leather, yellow leather” and “she sells sea-shells on the sea-shore”.

The main thrust of the lesson was to be the value of pre-reading

exercises in understanding texts. In the first activity (Bassnett and Grundy 3.6) the students worked in pairs, each student with a different poem. In this exercise I used two children's poems, "Fairy Story" by Stevie Smith and "Auckland Hesisitation" [sic] by John Hegley. Each student read only the poem she had been given, and worked on a short version of what the poem was about, using as many of the original words from the poem as possible. Once the summaries were complete, I asked each student to read her precis to her partner, before exchanging poems and reading the poem she had just been told about. This exercise gave the students a detailed expectation as to what would be in the text, so facilitating understanding; and it also demonstrated the benefits of pre-reading exercises, as the students read two texts, one with pre-reading and one without.

The second activity was called Predicting (Bassnett and Grundy, activity 2.1) and again aimed to activate the schema necessary for reading with understanding, before the text was presented to the students. I wrote a few words on the blackboard from the poem "Best Friends" by Adrian Henri, and explained that these were keywords from the next poem the students were going to read. I asked them to write a version of the poem in exactly 25 words, using all of the keywords on the blackboard. When they had finished, the students read their 25-word versions to one another, before I read the original poem to them, and then distributed a printed copy for comparison with their own versions.

Lesson Ten

This lesson was unified by the subject matter of the texts and exercises, and the theme of the class was "lies and lying". We began with a poem called "Lies" by Carol Ann Duffy, which I distributed to the students. I asked them to cross out any part of the poem which they

could not relate to or which was not a part of their own experience. Some students seemed to be remarkably honest, and deleted large parts of the text, but others left much of it untouched. I then read the poem chorally with the class, telling the students only to read those lines they had not crossed out. This is an awareness-raising activity in which students are made to realize the different ways in which they react to different parts of a text. Personal identification with elements of a text certainly aid comprehension and memorization, and I hoped to demonstrate this here.

I followed up this activity with a co-operative writing exercise in which the students write down the biggest lie they can think of on a piece of paper, and then exchange papers with a partner who extends the lie they are given. Papers are then exchanged again, the lies extended further still, and so on until the students' interest begins to wane. Many of the students in my seminar had begun to experiment imaginatively with English by this stage of the course, and I hoped that this exercise would encourage them to continue to do so.

Conclusion

I was gratified by the response of my seminar students to the lessons described here. I realize that much of the methodology and content of the lessons was new to them, but they were for the most part enthusiastic and interested in each lesson. I had begun the course by stressing to the students that although there would be some similarities in methodology to my writing class, a lot would be required of them. They had to be willing to experiment, to play with the language, and although there was occasional resistance, most of the activities were well done. There were failings on my part, perhaps a bad explanation at the beginning of an activity, or a text that was inappropriate, but the students' excellent attitude and enthusiasm

made it easy to identify these problems as of my own making.

Thanks to feedback from the students I was able to fine-tune my seminar classes in the second semester, and will continue to do so in the coming academic year.

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