

Criteria and Creation: Literary Texts and a Literature Textbook

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Abstract

Three LiLT SIG members, Wendy Jones Nakanishi, Simon Bibby, and Mari Ota recently published a textbook called *Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature*. Discussion of the textbook in this article is situated in consideration of criteria that teachers need for choosing suitable literary texts for language students. Five criteria are suggested for teachers to consider when deciding upon the suitability of a text: lexis, syntax, length, interest and familiarity. Major aspects of the creation of a literature textbook for language learners are explained, including the authors' reasons for textbook format, text choice and first language (L1) and second language (L2) balance, before moving on to consider and advise with regard to further issues such as consideration of audience, the creation of the online teachers' guide, shared workflow, and dealing with potential publishers.

Keywords: poetry, short stories, publishing, literature, textbook

LiLT SIG のメンバーであるジョーンズ＝中西、ビビー、太田の3人の近著、*Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature* は、文学作品を活用した語学学習者のための教科書である。本稿では編著者の一人であるビビーが本書の制作過程を振り返り、適切なテキストの選択基準（語彙・構文・長さ・関心・作品の知名度）および、制作の具体的な手順（教科書のフォーマットの決定・実際の文章の選択・L1/L2のバランスについての考察）について説明し、さらには本書の実際の授業での利用に（対象となる学生・オンライン教員用手引きの作成・教室での使用の例）ならびに、制作の過程における出版社との様々なやりとりについても、自身の経験を紹介する。

キーワード：詩・短編小説・出版・文学・教科書

Blanton (1992) notes teacher dissatisfaction regarding fragmented language chunks in textbooks connected by briefly introduced and very differing themes, and by disembodied grammatical points. In such circumstances, it is understandable that students may become disengaged by disjointed textual content and a paucity or absence of context. Perhaps you, the language teacher, may seek to engage students at a deeper level, and wish for more sustained and engaging readings, but wonder what real reading content may be available for students. For teachers contemplating using literary texts in their language classes, how are they to choose suitable reading materials? In searching for such, and upon purchasing and examining multiple textbooks that do exist as collections, some choices of texts have appeared unusually challenging, and seemingly inappropriate for language learners. This leaves the twin challenge of choosing texts based on a robust yet easily usable set of criteria, and finding a collected set of texts which can be used in the Japanese university language classroom. Noting the difficulties in choosing, and the absence of a suitable collection, LiLT SIG member Wendy Jones Nakanishi (PhD English Literature) led a project to create something for language teachers and students in Japan, and *Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature* (Jones Nakanishi, Bibby & Ota, 2014) is the resulting product.

This paper is split into two sections. Firstly, to situate the later discussion, a set of criteria for choosing literary texts for language students are suggested. Secondly, the creation of a textbook by three LiLT SIG members is described. The thematic format of the textbook is explained and text choices discussed. The author suggests how to balance L1, notes the contents of an online teacher guide and details publisher requirements of prospective authors.

Part 1: Criteria for Selecting Literary Texts in Language Classes

The use of literature in language classes has seen considerable ebbs and flows (Khatib & Hossein, 2012; McKay, 1982). McKay notes that literature has sometimes been seen as a teacherly whim, as an indulgence, and insufficiently instrumental, as “it will do nothing toward promoting the students’ academic and/or occupational goals” (p. 530). Inappropriately difficult choices in texts no doubt count in part toward such accusations, and your author recollects seeing a Saki (Hector H. Munroe) short story, *Open Window*, as the first text in a collection of English texts for language learners. Whilst Saki is indeed an assuredly biting satirist and a master of the

short story form, his tales may prove too challenging for students due to the syntactical complexity and the high volume of low frequency lexical items.

Countering the charges, McKay (1982) cites Widdowson (1979) in the defense of literature usage, who argues that reading literature requires a decoding of language and comprehension of meaning, both at heightened levels. Widdowson additionally discusses the significance for the language learner of the *interaction* of meaning between reader and text, echoing Rosenblatt's (1938) arguments for school age students reading literature in their first language - the importance of readers' own ideas and views when reading literary texts, and the necessity for teachers to respect and to accord value to student interpretations.

Lexis and Syntax

Two main points of criticism have been leveled at the use of authentic literary texts - the issues of unfamiliar lexis and of challenging syntax (see, for example Robson, 1989, Savvidou, 2004). Explicating these in turn, lexical level is the difficulty of individual words, and sets of words. This can be an issue for language learners when provided with authentic texts. Low frequency vocabulary may be unfamiliar, may appear in unusual volume, and is likely to be of reduced regular communicative use for a language learner. Secondly, syntactical complexity may be daunting for students more accustomed to shorter, single-clause S-V-O type constructions, particularly in school textbooks. A common issue is the appearance of sentences with multiple clauses, in which students can quickly get lost, particularly if these are additionally awash with descriptive vocabulary. When choosing literary texts, we have to pay particular attention regarding these major interlinked challenges as while we may wish to expose our students to rich and creative language, and such is a definite benefit of using authentic texts, we surely do not wish to overburden and discourage.

The rise and contemporary prevalence of Extensive Reading (ER) programs can be seen in this light. ER tenets are the provision of texts leveled by vocabulary, read in bulk, and according to student choice. In addition to being leveled by vocabulary, sentence structure is kept relatively simple, and the sentences kept short. The present author is an advocate of this approach for texts that are specifically written, both fiction and non-fiction, and uses such an approach in language classes. There may however be some issues where texts are amended downwards to fit designated word limits. Reduction of texts renders some loss of richness, of

language, and, inevitably, of meaning (Honeyfield, 1977). In the present author's view, such dilution can be readily seen in the Penguin graded reader (level 4) version of George Orwell's *1984*, where too much original meaning appears to be lost in the reduction process, and the text rendered oddly...empty. McKay (1982) notes further potential issues that may occur with reduced classics (rather than those written to order within vocabulary limits): "the simplification of syntax may reduce cohesion and readability" (p. 531). Instead, using ungraded literature can provide naturalistic examples of grammar (Liaw, 2001), provide wide, rich examples of vocabulary (Pugh, 1989) and provide a real context for language that is so often missing in our EFL setting (thereby suggested as an additional *content-context model* by Bibby, 2012).

Length

Noting psycholinguistic models of reading, derived from Goodman's (1967) early work, Rumelhart (1977) and Stanovich (1980) argue that students operating in their non-native language will have significantly decreased facility to dual-process top-down (using background knowledge) and bottom-up (word recognition). This is particularly pertinent for L2 literature, compared with artificially prepared texts, noting the above issues of syntax and lexis. For this reason, literary texts cannot be used in a manner akin to that of a standard L1 undergraduate literature course, where multiple novels may be assigned through the semester at a rate of about one per week. Students face not just the twin challenges of vocabulary and syntax, but also the length of a text, or texts. Longer texts can still be used, but in a necessarily *scaffolded* and slower manner, likely using a range of reader response style activities (as discussed in Carlisle, 2000; Hirvela, 1996; Oster, 1989), and in decreased number through a course. The authors never reached precise agreement regarding exact maximum length of a text, but keeping within two double-page spreads is how the book is presented.

Interest and Relevance

Any text that the teacher selects should have at least potential interest to the students. This is of course difficult to judge, as a new selection of individuals appears before teachers each semester, with different life histories, ideas and preferences. Seeking to address this when putting together a literature/language textbook, the textbook authors endeavored to choose texts that we thought would have a certain universal appeal, and a common humanity.

Familiarity and the Need for Schemata Building

Additionally, as teachers we need to be wary of erroneous notions of what we think may be commonly known without sufficient critical thought. Marshall (1979) notes such a danger in assuming shared understandings across cultures, instancing this with reference to Puerto Rican students understanding English weather and literary references to this. Marshall cites two examples: Gerard Manley Hopkins' *Spring and Fall* and T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* where students lacked appreciation of some aspects of the texts due to differing geography to that of the writers, thus meteorological conceptions and metaphors. Regarding history, when teaching a course centered on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* course to undergraduate students, I was fully aware that students were all born after the end of the Cold War, and would be unlikely to have more than a passing understanding of early twentieth century history (or perhaps of any history other than that of the locale). We need to carefully consider where our students *are*, not just geographically (and meteorologically) as Marshall notes, but culturally, historically, and cognitively, not to mention the most immediate issue that concerns us as language teachers, i.e. linguistically. Such areas where knowledge and understanding may be lacking are best addressed before starting a text by careful attention to building the relevant schemata (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983), which is to offer background and supporting information to aid understanding of something new. Schemata building for language students will be addressed in a later paper by the present author.

Part 2: Creating a Literature Text for Language Students

Wendy Jones Nakanishi, based on her experience of both English literature and language teaching experience in Japan (thirty years), had the idea to write a textbook for language learners focusing on literature. Simon Bibby and Mari Ota came on board to help, and between the three authors there is over fifty years of teaching experience. *Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature* and was published in February 2014 ready for the 2014 Spring semester. The choice of *Real Reads* for the title is twofold. This emphasises both the authenticity of the texts, and their unbowdlerized, ungraded nature.

The textbook is not just written as a conversation prompt, or as a general reading textbook (although it can be used for both those purposes) but as an introduction to literature, and incorporates what would be expected with such a professed remit. Key literary terminology is introduced, e.g. *moral, allegory, stanza, rhyme, points of view, personification* and explained as it arises naturally within the texts. The terminology provided is enough for students to start talking and writing about literature using the appropriate language for this academic field. The language is recycled, to give students practice and to increase familiarity as they progress through their studies with the textbook.

The textbook is designed to be flexible for teachers and students, mainly aimed at university teachers, but flexible enough to be used elsewhere. Any text can be read in different ways, at different literary and cognitive levels. Discussion of not just the texts, but ideas surrounding the texts, will naturally be at different levels also. In pedagogical terminology, this is *differentiation by outcome* whereby learners respond at different levels to a given task. That said, *Real Reads* authors suggest that a natural fit for the texts would be intermediate through to advanced levels.

CEFR levels

A tool for assessing language level is the Common European Framework (CEFR), which now reaches beyond Europe and is widely used by textbook publishers globally as a level guide, and has made considerable inroads within Japan too. The CEFR instrument uses a series of Can Do statements to inform curriculum design, and to assess performance against published standards. We placed our text as spanning the B1 and C1 boundaries, which is around the intermediate level. For lower level language learners, language support is provided, as discussed in the next section.

Teacher's Guide, and using Real Reads

The authors have put together a teacher's guide, which has been made available online, for free. The text is designed for quick and easy reference. Putting this together, we were thinking very much as end-user teachers ourselves and what we would wish for, and thus includes what teachers will need pertaining to understanding of the text, course planning, assessment, extra activities, and institutional administration. Within an initial *Overview* section

authors explain a number of issues, discussing the pedagogical underpinnings, rationale for L1 usage, offer tips for helping students read and seek meaning within the texts, discuss dictionary usage, and suggest means for formative and summative assessment of students. Concerning the classroom implementation of the text, a sample syllabus is provided, plus structured guidance as to how teachers can use the texts in class, noting that literary texts offer much more than the standard read-and-comprehend format, and can be used as the basis for discussions in students' L2.

Before Reading and After Reading Sections

Now considering the textbook itself, prior to reading each text there is a designated *Before reading* section, to activate both conceptual and linguistic schemata. Each literary text is prefaced with a variety of questions for private thought, leading to discussion with peers, concerning certain key themes of the respective texts. Where we judged it likely that students may struggle with the language of the text, we offer simple exercises for students to understand meaning. Usually, these are straightforward lexis/meaning matching exercises. Additionally, a full glossary of terms is provided. Teachers are advised to direct students to this, prior to the designated lesson as homework, or at the rear of a previous class to provide students with clear continuity between lessons. Flexibility is there for teachers to judge, and depending on both individual class duration and course scheduling.

For post-reading activities, multiple activities are provided within a designated *After reading* section. Firstly, students are invited to respond to the text with their own personal views, and the authors regard this to be the crux of using literature, not just in L2 but in L1 too. Where teachers prematurely impose meaning on texts that are 'up for grabs', student engagement, enjoyment and learning may be considerably diminished, and it is back to the constrictive "Teacher says so, and that's final" traditionalist approach. We encourage teachers to step back, for a while, and give students an initial opportunity to try to find their own way, to attempt to determine their own meanings, on both surface and deeper levels. Similarly, we encourage teachers to be try to coax further, pushing for deeper (justifiable) interpretations from students, as they engage with their peers to exchange their ideas. The cognitive load required to process the language itself, then to seek 'meaning' on the initial surface level is substantial, even before

attempting some deeper understandings, so teachers do need to give students plenty of time, encouragement and support for student efforts.

Textbook sections

The text is structured in temporal/life fashion, with units moving from childhood through adolescence, through life choices, to getting older, until... death. The textbook thus commences at a reassuring, unthreatening linguistic and cognitive level, with some children's literature. The first unit comprises a selection of *Aesop's Fables*, six in total, plus the Grimm brothers' *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The fables offer students short, pointed readings, with a clear message. Similarly, *Snow White* is a relatively short text, and has some clearly signposted morals. Information is provided for students about common themes of children's literature.

Within the second unit, *Growing up, finding out*, two readings are provided, a blackly amusing poem by Hilaire Beloc, and an allegorical tale by Oscar Wilde. One issue is how to approach the Judeo-Christian heritage which underpins a sizable chunk of the Western canon, and directly features in our chosen text *The Selfish Giant* by Wilde. Such critical linguists as Pennycook (1991) and Phillipson (1996) have argued that the ESL industry promulgates Western cultural and political hegemony. Thus, one must balance the provision of information regarding key tenets of Christianity as they feature in relation to the text with any possible perceptions of selling a belief system - of proselytizing.

Thirdly, students are presented with some meatier readings within the *Life Decisions* unit. Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, Rudyard Kipling's *If* and James Joyce's *Eveline* are the three texts herein. The common thread is clear.. The first two poems are well-known texts within English speaking countries, but are likely new to students studying in their L2 in Japan. Frost's text is very accessible in length, lexis and syntax. Kipling's contains some lower frequency vocabulary, which is addressed in the pre-reading section. The poem is short (it fits easily within a single column on a single page), and the lines short too, each comprising a single idea relating to the anaphoric *If*.... Joyce's short story *Eveline*, may provide the first slight challenge for students but fear not, as this text is taken from *Dubliners*, and is nowhere near as fraught as are attempts to read *Ulysses*. Throughout this unit we engage students directly by asking readers to consider decisions that people take, that they themselves take in their lives, and the effects of their life choices on their past and future selves, and on others.

The fourth section, *Love*, also contains three texts, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *How do I Love Thee? Let me count the ways*, DH Lawrence's *Intimates* and John Steinbeck's *Breakfast*. Likely the first and third of these will be familiar to readers, while Lawrence's short poem features a spousely dispute. Readers are invited to reflect on differing interactions and relationships through these texts, and to consider different types of love.

The final section offers consideration of the inevitable end for us all: *Getting ...older...* and features Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*, and WH Auden's *Funeral Blues*. The second of these will probably be familiar to many readers through its use in the popular British film, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Using additional media in class can certainly add extra frisson, but it may be better to allow students to access the poem in its written form first, and to read in their own internal voice, rather than having this imposed externally by teacher or by film. Additionally, we suggest to ask students whether they think a man or a woman may have written this, and about whom. Mansfield's *Miss Brill* may not be as familiar to readers. Without depriving readers of their own experience by providing excessive detail, it is a short, evocatively rendered description of an elderly lady, her perceptions, her reactions, and her thoughts, on a particular Sunday, and the reactions of others toward her.

Language support

Some readers may be considering the publishing route, and will be faced with the question of whether to use L1 Japanese, and if so, the quantity and placing of the support. As such, authorial considerations and publishing house guidance (as we experienced it) are shared here. Many books on the TESOL market, presumably aimed at Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) have L1 Japanese included throughout the text. However, excessive reliance on students' own L1 in on-page support may hinder progression of L2 learning. The authors sought a balance between on the one hand, judiciously assisting, and on the other hand, flooding with L1 leading to student over-reliance on language support.

Originally, the authors envisaged that the Japanese language support would accompany each literary text. Finally, the decision was made to push the Japanese language support to the back of the book, for three reasons. Firstly, the authors believed that, where possible, the flow of English should not be broken, allowing for an immersion in the L2. Secondly, the impression the authors had was that this would be favoured by the majority of Native Speaker Teachers

(NSTs), who, in our experience, have usually expressed preferences for a minimum of Japanese language within English textbooks. Thirdly, the publisher indicated this to be their preference, so that the text can be published for use by language learners in other countries, by the simple process of swapping out a single appendix section.

Final Words

An integral part of the job of a teacher is choosing and providing learning materials for classes. In an ideal world provision would be largely through a single textbook, and creating only a modicum of extra materials to support the text. In my experience of teaching content classes, considering appropriate levels (cognitive, maturity and language) and thematic interest of materials means the searching, choosing, mixing, creating and collating of lesson texts takes time, effort and patience. Likely you, the reader and teacher, approach classes similarly, and have a tranche of self-created materials, and may be thinking about sharing the materials more widely via publication. Telling of our experiences herein may hopefully be of some assistance if you are considering publication of your course materials.

After initial consideration of criteria for choosing suitable texts, this article has taken readers through the creation of the text *Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature*, which is now printed and available. Constructive feedback is very much welcomed, and the authors can be contacted at <realreadsrocks@gmail.com>. Literary questions can be directed to the main author of the text, Wendy Jones Nakanishi, literature/language pedagogy questions to Simon Bibby (present author), and queries regarding translation to Mari Ota. Meanwhile, do share your teaching ideas here within this journal, and hopefully you will also be able to share your lesson materials in the form of a textbook too.

Author notes

Simon Bibby is a full-time lecturer at Kwansei Gakuin University, technology fiend, chess player, and literature enthusiast. He founded LiLT SIG in 2011.

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