

Conference Reports LiLT in Kyoto, a festival of ideas

Different Types of Difficult

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Teaching an English literature class of about twenty-three students with a steep gradient of abilities and interest, I was puzzled as to how present real literature that while accessible, would be interesting and could cater for all the class members' needs and levels.

Having come across Raymond Carver's works some years ago, I thought that they would be suitable for at least some of my students as they are written in a very sparse style. In my hunt I was lucky to come across two of his stories that might be uniquely suited to teaching English literature in an EFL context.

Carver's two short stories, "A small good thing" and "The Bath" are very similar. They both are about people struggling to deal with sudden tragedy in their lives, and have the same basic plot, events, and characters. "The Bath" is much shorter at twelve hundred words than "A small good thing" at about eight thousand, and is written in a terse unadorned style that creates a sense of unreality and non-comprehension almost as if certain of the senses have been stunned or numbed. "A small good thing" is written with far more detail and discursion; the events are lived rather than observed, characters more minutely drawn and emotions more elaborately expressed. These two stories can meet the challenge of teaching students who are interested in English literature but have not yet acquired the skills to read it unaided.

Using these stories also provided me with an insight into what constitutes "difficulty" to the student and obstacles to their enjoyment of foreign literature. I had thought that the more unadorned the language the easier it would be for the students to enjoy, however a questionnaire distributed among the students brought this assumption into question. The bulk of the students found that the lack of detail in "The Bath" prevented them from following the progression of the story and from

becoming engaged with the characters. They said they enjoyed the much longer and seemingly more more complex, “A small good thing” more. Despite this, I find it hard to believe that they would have been able to penetrate “A small good thing” without having read the simpler version of the story first.

As literature in the current EFL context is in danger of being marginalized and as teachers are increasingly required to show the practical applicability rather than the intellectual or artistic aspirations of their teaching, and taking the above into account, using two versions of a text can help us bridge this gap. Through comparison we can illustrate the effect of vocabulary choices and the different structural options available to express a single meaning. We can teach the mechanics of language. At the same time we can enjoy the aesthetic effect of the original while maintaining a communicative English environment in the classroom with the aid of the “simpler” text. In the current vogue for graded readers offered as substitutes, we have been provided with a wide range of simplified, and by no means inferior, texts that used in conjunction with the originals or extracts thereof might provide a gangplank to board for a voyage toward a fuller experience of literature for the student.