Content and context: A university L2 course using George Orwell's Animal Farm

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Abstract

The author describes the reasons for introducing a literature-based course, using a single literary text, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Particular attention is paid to pre-reading activities to build the necessary relevant schemata - the conceptual and language tools required to understand the text at surface level and as an allegorical text. A range of spoken and written 'during-reading' Reader Response activities are described in detail. Specifically, a reading log is used as the backbone of the course. The article offers a balance of practical and theoretical considerations when using a single L2 text within the EFL classroom.

Keywords: content-context model, content-based learning, CLIL, literature, Animal Farm

The course described within this article arose from teaching Policy Studies majors at a large private university in western Japan. In seminar discussion classes, as conversations developed and more complex topics arose in classes, it became clear that all too frequently students lacked rudimentary political knowledge. This was surprising and appeared problematic – policy studies students were apparently studying in a conceptual vacuum. For how can one be engaged in policy studies without any understanding of politics? This appeared to be an egregious deficit, and I considered how I may be able to try to remedy this in the creation of suitable elective courses.

My first try was to teach a current news topics class. The course appeared successful but appeared an impractical choice as such a course requires constant updating to remain relevant, and a complete overhaul every semester to remain up-to-date. I alighted on the idea of teaching

some politics through literature: using George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, not simply as a book to read but as a vehicle for delivering some 'Introductory Politics 101,' while also offering what I hoped would be stimulating and meaningful reading content for class discussion and learning. As I have noted prior, this is an example of the content-context model for using literature in L2 language classes (Bibby, 2012). At a relatively short 128 pages in the Signet edition, the ten chapters comprising only ten to fifteen pages each, this text seemed like it would be a comfortable fit for the span of a fourteen-week university semester.

Levels of reading and understanding

Reading at surface level

　　Students first need to read on a surface, literal level, something that applies to L2 and to L1 readers too. For *Animal Farm*, indeed there are animals on a farm, and what happens there? I did warn students at the outset that they should not necessarily expect a Disney type happy ending to this tale. Everyone does not live happily ever after. Readers are likely familiar with *Animal Farm*, and know that what occurs is considerably bleaker. It was written as a sustained allegory, events within the text paralleling key events within Russia in the early twentieth century. However, I considered that just leading students through a straightforward one-to-one parallel reading of the novel as a *direct* political allegory would be a significant disservice to Orwell and to the text, and to my prospective student readers. The text offers a great deal as a much broader 'life allegory,' transcending the direct time-place parallel. I wished students to engage with the text and to relate happenings and themes therein to themselves, to their own experiences, to Japan, and to wider society.

Introducing allegorical readings

　　Allegorical parallels will not be apparent to students reading for the first time, and we cannot expect this - undergraduate students in Japan aged 19-21 are naturally not assumed to be familiar with Russian history one hundred years prior. To try to assist students in achieving an allegorical reading, and before a connection is made to an outside (historical) reality, students must first be helped to gain some understanding of events and personages. The difficult decision for a teacher when using this text is when and how to seek to impart this extra information – that the text is an allegory and, to provide the allegorical parallels. Additionally, even having been assisted in the learning of allegorical aspects, it should be noted that the cognitive load is already

weighty when reading in L2, processing the text bottom-up from words to sentences, from sentences to paragraphs, to following the whole story. This is a considerable psycholinguistic challenge (Iida, 2013).

Providing relevant schemata

I considered that early content schemata-building activities were essential. The value of providing effective schemata for L2 reading is well-documented, notably by Coady (1979) who asserts the import of background knowledge, serving to motivate and counteract syntactical deficiencies that the reader may suffer from (p. 12). In addition, there is the very practical consideration that many students arrive at the first or even the second class without the designated text, which requires suitable early-course activities which are not dependent on possession of the text. The first two lessons were thus set aside largely for preparing students to more effectively read the text, and to enhance their ability to discuss it.

Language work: vocabulary

As previously examined by this author (Bibby, 2014), L2 lexis (for present purposes, basically vocabulary) and syntax (structure) are both liable to pose difficulties for students. Whereas students are able to look up individual words, multi-clause sentences may remain impenetrable as there is no ready means of assistance. Lengthy sentences containing multiple clauses can thus prove difficult for students reading in their L2 (McKay, 1982). Anticipating this as a potential challenge when choosing class texts enables a more informed choice of texts, and is the solution in itself.

The original version of *Animal Farm* was used, not a graded text version. As such, inevitably there is a certain amount of low-frequency vocabulary present. The teacher has several options regarding vocabulary provision and, again, anticipation and providing ahead of time is key. Teachers can provide lexical support in advance via some straightforward dictionary work prior to reading the chapter ('Look up these words for next week'). Alternatively, students may be directed to write example sentences, other forms of the word, and/or meaning in their own language, but whereas this is ideal for an Academic Word List vocabulary, this seemed inappropriate for low-frequency vocabulary – it is not time well spent as the words are unlikely to recur in conversation outside of this reading. Another EFL standard is for students to match more 'difficult' words with easier (near) synonyms, definitions or illustrations.

I chose to provide a glossary, typed up and amended from something I had found in a US high school teacher guide, to fit the needs of Japanese EFL learners, adding example sentences to place words in understandable context. I provided the whole glossary in advance, broken up into the ten chapter sections. Upon teaching this class again, it would be productive to research the extent to which students used the glossary or what other techniques they had for dealing with unknown vocabulary. As teacher-researchers, we can make our materials more effective and streamline our materials by determining students' preferences and choices. Should there be a further iteration of the course, I would provide words directly in advance of each chapter, providing ten words in the lesson prior, offering higher frequency synonyms and/or with brief explanations of meaning. This would be a suitable task at the end of a lesson, feeding into homework.

Conceptual understanding

Essentially, teachers have two choices: to discuss as particular ideas arise in the text, or engage in some prior schemata-building. I sought to prime students with ideas that would directly arise within the text later, and ideas that surround the text, such as religion, power, individualism, equality, corruption, protest, scapegoating, propaganda and lying, and dictatorship. Having chosen to build schemata prior to reading, I produced worksheets inviting students to agree or disagree with these statements:

- All humans are born equal
- All people have freedom of speech
- A dictator has complete control of his country,
- People who cannot read are easier to control than those who can read;
- People are always free to make their own choices
- Power corrupts those who have it
- You should never question those with power or authority
- You should protest if the people in power are corrupt or evil
- If peaceful protest does not work, violent action is acceptable
- Japan is a free country; I am free to make my own choices.

Students were required to circle 'Agree' or 'Disagree,' then write their ideas underneath each

statement next to 'Response.' I designed this activity with several thoughts in mind. Students were introduced to some key vocabulary: *dictator/dictatorship, corrupt, protest, violent,* then required to write a comment for each section. Students were then directed to discuss any of the issues they wished in pairs then in groups of three. Originally planned only as a relatively short activity, this took on a life of its own, and students engaged with considerable gusto, and at great length, in making detailed notes of their own views, then in discussing and debating with peers. Plainly stated, students have opinions, and they wish to share those opinions about issues that are relevant to them.

Cultural/Geographic/Historical

Bibby (2014) discusses a number of problems that readers have due to the paucity of local knowledge. Adding a personal example to the earlier discussion, in my early teens I struggled with a number of cultural references when reading US novels, ostensibly in my L1, as an Englishman. When reading Stephen King novels I remember struggled to envisage such cultural items as Chevies, diners and high school proms. These gaps occur even with a shared L1 and within two cultures that share many commonalities.

To give students a brief introduction to the historical parallels, I prepared a worksheet for students entitled 'A Brief History of Communism in Russia.' I provided key terms: *capitalist system, socialist, communist system, Czarist government, deported, idealistic, totalitarianism* and had student pairs match their definitions. Key terminology and ideas were bolded in the text to assist 'noticing.' Additionally, illustrations of the real-life allegorical figures were provided: Tsar Nicholas II, Joseph Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, UK/USA. Each was titled with his real name, and the names of corresponding in-text allegorical figures were included underneath the picture. Students were directed to the importance of four key points: Karl Marx, Russian (Bolshevik) Revolution, Lenin versus Trotsky, and Stalin.

The first class ended with homework questions assigned for completion to assist initial comprehension, an explanation of the reading log, and a completed example, and reading logs handed out for all students to complete. Within the second class we continued with more schemata work: a single information sheet providing reference reading for students about the term 'allegory' plus discussion of the text as Fable, and as Satire. We then continued with further conceptual schemata work. For example, *All people are created equal* and *Society would be*

improved if everyone earned equally. The format differed only slightly from earlier in that students also had to record a partner's views in addition to their own, to aid the exchange of views and to hopefully have their own ideas pushed a little further and deeper by the need to explain and discuss them.

During reading: 'Reader Response'

Once students had acquired copies of the text, by the second class we were underway with reading, and ready for during-reading Reader Response style activities. Reader Response originated within literary criticism (Hirvela, 1996). Theorists deny authorial dictatorship of textual meaning, and reader interpretation is considerably valued within this conceptual framework. Hirvela notes the divergence among literary critics in the relative assignment of interpretive responsibility, varying from a fairly equal split (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1938) and responsibility largely or entirely with the reader (Bleich, 1978; Fish, 1970).

Louise Rosenblatt's (1938) distinction between *aesthetic* and *efferent* reading has proven enduring. She differentiates between efferent (from Latin, 'getting carried away'), where the reader seeks meaning to 'carry away' from the text, and aesthetic, which is reading for pleasure. To offer examples for clarity, efferent reading might be that of a student reading a physics textbook to gain information about that subject, or in the case of a clunky reading comprehension activity, a text would be searched for answers to a set of questions. Aesthetic reading would be you reading a novel for pleasure (perhaps leant up against a tree in the park on a sunny day). Thus, readers interact with texts differently, depending not just on the type of text, but also on what they bring to the reading, and what they may seek to take away from a text.

The inauthenticity of reading comprehension

The relevance of this for the teacher is that for any particular text, personal relevance and understanding derived cannot be guaranteed for all students, and will not be at the same 'level.' Additionally, it will be advisable to aim for differing points along the efferent/aesthetic continuum while choosing texts, and in designing the choice of activities. A common failing of teachers and materials designers is over-reliance on basic reading comprehension questions for more aesthetic texts. Such 'basic information' questions can serve as an initial help, ensuring students understand the essential happenings, but only as a starting point. Approaching texts in such an inappropriate fashion has been criticised by Widdowson as 'a lack of authenticity' (1980,

p. 80). Aesthetic reading requires a personal engagement, a human interaction/transaction between author and reader through the text, and as a speaking activity, via discussion among fellow readers.

Implementing 'Reader Response'

There are some differing ways in which Reader Response may be implemented: written responses to the text in a reading log (Benton and Fox, 1985; Carlisle, 2000, Kasper, 1996); a response journal (Sheridan, 1991); questions as writing prompts (Pritchard, 1993): self-questioning, whereby students create their own Q and A (Davis, 1989); drama: performance, role plays, dramatic re-enactment, writing letters (Baxter, 1999; Elliott, 1990); providing a narrative or answering questions from a character's viewpoint (Oster, 1989). Such are the ideas, and teachers can variously enact these creatively using assorted multimedia tools, for example by writing a short blog posting in character, or regularly microblog (with Twitter), recording video logs ('vlogs') of their opinions instead of writing, creating Facebook-type accounts for characters within free School Management Systems (SMS) like Schoology, Edmodo and Google Classroom. Students can dress up, or more simply wear a mask when being interviewed; these activities can be taken in many directions. Creative teachers can consider how best to engage and motivate in this regard.

The course backbone: Using reading logs

Of these, I opted for weekly written response in a handwritten log. Cornell-style note-taking sheets were provided for students to complete, comprising two columns. On the left were these headings: Characters, Setting, Plot, Your Reaction, Two Questions, Vocabulary, and Your Prediction. On the right were spaces for student responses. With *Animal Farm* as the assigned text, students were assigned to read one chapter each week, and complete the reading log accordingly. As a practical consideration, I had students handwrite at the time, but it may be better to have students type them up, ideally within a shared environment such as within Google Drive for three reasons. Google Drive enables easier tracking of submissions, means less paperwork piled up for the teacher, and ensures that students cannot scribble in comments at the start of class because they failed to complete their logs in advance.

With one chapter per week, I gave students a short test at the start of the following class. The reason is less for assessment (although I did incorporate this into the grading) than to push

students hard to read what was assigned, due to the "threat" of testing. Questions pertained to general understanding – key characters and happenings of the chapter, and were made to be easily answerable for those who had read as directed. After the test, students were put into groups of three, and directed to exchange reading logs, then briefly discuss the chapter, and the whole text. Exchanging provided genuine readers of the logs and offered speakers some scaffolding for their discussion. During discussions I would move between the class groups, joining in discussions, checking logs, and helping out with any misunderstandings regarding the events within the text. One example of how students helped each other in co-constructing was in a misunderstanding of Napoleon's scapegoating lies about Snowball (in allegory, Lenin about Trotsky). Whereas some readers took the lies at face value, others questioned the veracity of these assertions, quite correctly. A practical point to note is that a group size of three to four students probably works best. Pairs may not work, as inevitably some students forget or do not complete. More than four students leaves too much time reading, not enough time discussing. I advise groups of three as the optimum.

Classes 1-2

Schemata activation activities, as described above.

Classes 3-4 Activities: The seven commandments

The reading logs provided the backbone of the class. The short test and the reading log exchange occurred at the start of each class. Having already noted that the first two classes were mainly given to schemata-building, within classes three and four we examined the pigs' Seven Commandments, and students were directed to create their own seven commandments for their own perfect society. In week four, students presented these, poster-style. The class was divided, with half presenting and half viewing, then the two groups were switched.

Class 4-5 Activities: Rhetoric and propaganda

In *Animal Farm*, the character of Squealer is described as such:

"A small fat pig with very round cheeks, twinkling eyes, nimble movements and a shrill voice. He was a brilliant talker, and when he was arguing some difficult point he had a way of skipping from side to side and whisking his tail, which was somehow very persuasive."

Squealer represents propaganda in general, and in the direct allegory represents *Pravda*, meaning 'truth,' with a certain delicious irony, the Russian newspaper and official propaganda organ of the Russian state. Using Squealer's speech in chapter three as a springboard, the next two classes were spent examining propaganda and rhetorical tools, as employed not just by politicians but by advertisers. As I remember, Osama bin Laden was killed during the last iteration of the course, and US President Obama's speech offered an excellent example of the rhetorical skills we had been examining. I broke the speech up into twenty-four segments (the speech is very readily taken apart in this way), and had students match the segments with a summary of each section that I had made. Following this we examined the ideas within the speech, and the rhetorical tools used, before checking together in plenary. Students were set homework to prepare and deliver their own speech using the tools we had examined, to be delivered in weeks eight and nine, about a subject of their choice (checking with the teacher for appropriacy and relevance).

Class 6: Closer allegorical review

Within this class, we examined the allegorical elements more closely, tying together both characters and events. This was done via matching in pairs, using laminated cards. For example, Mr Jones (the farmer) equates to Tsar Nicholas II, and students would pair these. Students were allowed the remainder of the time to prepare for their speeches and for an interim test the following week.

Class 7: Interim test

The interim test contained sections on events and characters and their Russian parallels. This was followed by time for preparation and practice of the propaganda speeches.

Class 8-9 Rhetoric presentations

In addition to the regular reading logs and weekly tests, students delivered their speeches across these two weeks. Students were directed to self-assess via a rubric that had been provided in advance. Students were additionally grouped into sets of four peers, and group members were required to give peer feedback about their peer set.

Class 10 Literary technique - foreshadowing

At chapter nine, students were nearing the end of *Animal Farm*. I decided that this was a

good time to review the text so far, prior to the conclusion, and to do so via examination of the literary technique of foreshadowing. Students were directed to work in pairs for these challenging activities. The first activity was to match the event (provided) with the foreshadowing. Further to one matched model, I provided four events to match to the foreshadowing item of text. In the second section of the class task, I provided four questions for students to respond to in open text format: about old Major's speech in chapter one, the attack of the dogs on Boxer, possible foreshadowing at the start of chapter nine, and a final general question about the use and effectiveness of foreshadowing as a literary tool.

Class 11

Having finished the book, students were given a little extra time in their reading log discussions to review the text as a whole. In plenary I explained some key themes from the text via a slide-supported presentation, followed by a Jeopardy-style game with key themes, events and characters as categories, and questions to be answered in teams, designed to be a more entertaining means of reviewing. Students were given sets of discussion questions, grouped according to these themes: Power, Fear, Trust, Equality, Greed, Propaganda. After group discussions, students were directed to choose one question from each section for a written response to be submitted. In addition, students were directed to complete a character profile of a character of their choice. The sheet requires description of the character (five adjectives), a sketched image of the character, a description of what the character does, the character's objective (if this is apparent), and how others see this character.

Class 12: Comparing texts

Students expressed a desire to watch the movie version of the text. There are two movie versions, one from 1954, in animated format – and as the story goes, supposedly funded by the CIA, to clearly demonstrate the evils of US Cold War enemy, Russia. The second version was made in 1999, and includes a significantly more positive ending than that of the book. To aid viewing, some viewing softwares, such as VLC, allow the user to alter the speed of the movie. Depending on student level, slowing the movie is likely to assist listening comprehension. Providing subtitles offers a further aid, the teacher choosing between L1 and L2. My choice was to use Japanese subtitles, and the movie played at regular speed, but this is up to each instructor and the students.

Class 13 Final assessment

The test I gave students had three sections. As noted earlier, classes started with simple general comprehension quiz about each chapter. The first section of the test was similarly fashioned – easy for those who had read the text, but of course very difficult for students who had skimped or not done so at all. The second section was the allegorical section – comparing events and characters in the text with their real-life Russian compatriots. The third section was a take-home short-essay section, to be completed and submitted within one week. Students were required to answer three from a choice of eight questions.

Class 14: Final review, grades

At the university in question, the last class of the semester was generally used as a wrap-up class, and I accorded with this. Following a brief overview of the text, a summary of themes and questions, papers were returned and grades provided.

Overview and final thoughts

Single texts versus multiple texts

Animal Farm proved suitable in terms of book length and subject matter for these university classes. However, I have not taught the course since 2012, instead having chosen to use multiple texts thenceforth. Not based on student feedback, but due to some post-course self-reflection, I feared that imposing a single text for the entirety of a semester may be excessive, and may trap students for a whole semester within a text that they may not be enjoying, as indeed happened to me at primary school, a vivid memory lingering of teacher-fronted whole-class reading tedium. Subsequently, I have incorporated literary texts in two ways, in each case using multiple texts – using the newly-published textbook for Japanese learners, *Real Reads - An Introduction to Literature* as described in the previous issue of this journal (Bibby, 2014), and within a Dystopian literature and cinema class, which will be discussed subsequently.

Author note

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