

## **Literature in Language Teaching Conference: The Heart of the Matter**

**September 7th, 2014**

**Aichi University, Toyohashi Campus**

“...Every monologue sooner or later becomes a discussion.”

— Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948)

The *Literature in language teaching conference: The heart of the matter* was held on September 7th, 2014 at Aichi University, Toyohashi Campus. Co-sponsoring SIGs for the event were the Materials Writers SIG, the Extensive Reading SIG, Global Issues in Language Education (GILE) SIG and Gender Awareness in Language Education (GALE) SIG. 15 presenters discussed a range of topics which included Plato, poetry, classic literature, creativity, extensive reading, global issues through literature and film-as-literature. The conference theme, *The Heart of The Matter* was taken from the Graham Greene novel of the same name. Although Greene’s protagonist contemplates life in a somewhat melancholy way, this tone was not reflected in the lively atmosphere of the LiLT conference. A number of encouraging and thoughtful discussions resulted in lively responses from audience participants. Each session was 40 minutes long, giving presenters and participants time to delve deeply into the topics and cover an impressive amount of theory and practice while leaving opportunities to discuss points with the session participants afterwards. The standard of preparation and presentation was high. Some themes from the conference which stood out clearly from the day’s presentations were 1) creativity in adapting and using literary texts in a range of ways 2) intertextual connections with classic and modern texts and 3) literature integrated language learning, with appropriately scaffolded materials for second language learning. We encourage all members of the LiLT SIG community to consider joining the next literature-themed event.

### **Plenary talk**

In the conference plenary talk by Marcos Benevides, *A lexical approach to developing western cultural fluency*, the presenter began by defining his terms and then proceeded to present a strong case for learning language and culture through literature. The perspective of this talk, that of utilizing a *lexical approach*, is taken from the world of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Benevides recognises that not all literature courses are explicitly EFL, although the application of this principle is appropriate as a framework. Next, the audience was invited to take a literary journey through several thousand years of writing, and in this way encouraging students to see the cultural “big picture.” In doing so, taking in the Bible as literature as well as Greek and Roman myths, Benevides demonstrated how it is important to understand the foundational cultural layers of meaning in literature in order to create fluency and smooth, clear understanding of modern texts for discussion inside and outside the classroom. By merging these two approaches, Benevides described that just as language can be learned in chunks, so too culture can be learned in this manageable way. Benevides demonstrated the use of cultural fluency to negotiate meanings in a number of texts, one of which is Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which requires some understanding of Christianity as well as gender identity. When students can make connections across texts and cultures fluently through literary references, this is evidence for developing a stronger sense of the “big picture.” Overall, in looking at a cultural fluency from a language learning perspective, the educator can make an impact on learners which lasts long after the classroom has ended. The LiLT SIG thanks Marcos Benevides most wholeheartedly for his support of the SIG and the plenary talk at this event.

### **Summary of presentations**

In the first session of the day, Simon Bibby gave a talk entitled *Plato in The Matrix: Mixing old and new in a literature and cinema class*. In this presentation a number of texts with a shared dystopian theme were introduced with reference to the intertextual layering present in each. Bibby teaches this course as a film-as-literature content-based elective class. The aims of the class, course content and a discussion on learner benefits were all shared. Participants in the session could gain insight into the creativity in building a web of literary references in a fast-paced and engaging course for students. Gareth Jones’ presentation on *Knowing through doing: Literature, learning and practice-as-research in the creative arts* was a cross-disciplinary

approach to learning and utilising literature in a creative arts context. The aim of the presentation was to show how practice-based research within the literary arts field could be exploited in communicative classes. This was done effectively while illustrating ways that this approach could help inform critical and creative thinking as well as cross-cultural awareness in language classroom settings. In making this case, Jones strongly put forward a case for greater cross-pollination amongst creative arts practitioners and the language learning teaching environment.

In the second session, Thomas Bieri used an extensive reading classroom setting to discuss various versions of the same literary text in his talk *The Secret Garden: Blending versions*. In this highly user-friendly talk, Bieri outlined some ways to introduce original excerpts alongside adapted graded readers and a film version of the classic children's literary text "The Secret Garden" by F. Hodgson Burnett. A number of activities were described which aimed to raise language awareness and encourage discussion about the decisions made in modifying texts for language learners. For example, some examples of comparison would include use of critical thinking skills to evaluate the successful adaptations of original texts. The Oxford bookworm version was introduced alongside the listening text, and participants completed a gap-fill listening task to illustrate the type of activity which can help to spend time repeating material. Emphasis was given on the value of preparation. Participants left with practical ideas on blending versions of the same text. With a focus on young learners in particular, but with relevance across the curriculum, Kristin Ormiston brought her topic to life with music in her presentation *Poetry for young children: The power of repetition through movement*. Building on the assertion that children's neurological development is assisted by learning through movement, Ormiston illustrated ways in which movement and participation can become central elements in an early-years curriculum with good effect. Using examples from the classroom, music and storytelling, elements of language highly suited to a movement-based approach were demonstrated for audience participants in a dynamic session. Creativity was once again a strong feature of this talk that gave participants ideas about how to compose and perform original poems and verse participation stories for use in the language classroom.

Next Chris Davanzo talked about a blended approach to using adapted literature as a type of enhancement in reading classes in EFL settings. In his talk, *Utilizing graded readers to enhance reading classes*, a number of practical suggestions were made which could be used by educators in a number of different contexts, making this a highly practical session for

participants. Cameron Smith gave a talk entitled *Creativity research and its relevance to the language teacher* bringing an extensive range of research and theoretical evidence together in a motivating talk framed through the creativity lens. In foregrounding research and making its connection to teachers prominent, this thought-provoking talk helped participants reflect on their own creative practices also.

In the afternoon the concurrent sessions continued, beginning with a talk entitled *Reactivating the classics* by Heather Doiron. In this session, a strong emphasis on finding new ways to approach well-loved texts was given, using examples from classics which teachers may adapt for classroom use in a number of ways. Kevin Stein gave a presentation via Skype in a virtual presentation. In his talk, *Short poetry: Helping language learners find their voice between the words on the paper*, a combination of practical teaching ideas and examples from student workshops helped participants in the session consider some ways to get students writing, developing personal identity and language proficiency at the same time.

Next Morten Hunke brought into focus the topic of poetry recitals in a specially adapted series of lessons designed to develop presentation skills amongst Japanese university learners of German. In his presentation *Speaking of fluency - revamping poetry recitals*, a number of ideas involving voice coaching, drama pedagogy and phonation were applied in a specially designed course at Aichi University. Applying a model of speech recital piloted in Hanover, Germany, and using video recordings of progress over time, Hunke's recital performance classes focused on learning through recital. The results of action research from 2014 were presented in this original and motivating talk.

Sue Sullivan introduced student poetry and poetry blogs as a way to connect the dots between creativity, language learning, and creative expression. In her talk *Student poetry, student blogs: The melding of creativity, technology and analysis* a highly practical session was filled with example class materials. One reason for doing this was to focus on showing the work of students and allowing their writing to be read by peers. Another purpose was to help encourage participant production of poetry and the teaching of metaphor, onomatopoeia, alliteration and so on. With a strong focus on learner-centred pedagogy, Sullivan gave participants a wealth of ideas from which to choose when planning creative, imaginative language courses.

Following this, Anna Isozaki talked on listening extensively using literature in her talk *Bridges to literature: New research and approaches*. Using her own language learning story as a beginning point, Isozaki talked about the benefits of listening to stories, in her case while learning Japanese. Although the technology has changed now and language learning no longer requires the use of cassette tapes, instead with the help of Youtube, extensive listening with literature is simple and easy to arrange. Talking about some recent research on the topic of learning through listening, particularly cognitive research, Isozaki gave a strong case for the foregrounding of listening in any EFL program.

Roehl Sibling gave a presentation on the value of critical thinking using discussions, in his presentation *Discussion skills through literature in EFL education*. There was a strong focus on ideas for classroom activities in this practical session, using literature as a beginning point for classroom discussions. Concepts and principles connected to critical thinking were described in detail and then some suggestions were given on how to connect these principles with second language speaking activities. Overall, this was a highly useful session for curriculum designers and educators in a range of settings.

In the final session of the day Tara McIlroy described developing a course in global issues through literature, with the presentation *The heart of any balanced programme: Integrating literature into a four-skills course*. In this presentation the curriculum design model by Paul Nation and John Macalister (2010) was adapted for use in literature-based content classes at the university level. Examples of classroom materials were provided and a discussion on the balance between elements such as fluency and grammar were discussed. In the concurrent session, James Venema spoke about a wide variety of children's texts put to use in the language classroom in his presentation *Fables, fairy tales, and the English classroom*. Beginning with Aesop's fables and going on to describe a number of activities using Snow White, Cinderella and others, the presentation was framed around the view that storytelling, in its different forms, is constantly under constant metamorphosis and as such makes for engaging materials for students today. The presenter also provided some ideas for adapting materials into other classroom settings also.

### **Round table discussions**

During the first round table discussion, *Finding the muse with literature: Continuity, teaching and professional development*, three presenters shared their thoughts on finding good texts to use with students and keeping involved in professional development through learning with literature. Simon Bibby introduced the Literature in Language Teaching SIG and some reasons for setting up the SIG. Before 2011 there was not a place amongst the JALT SIGs for teachers interested simply in literature and through setting up the LiLT SIG this missing element has been found. Gregg McNabb talked about motivations for teaching literature, particularly with students who have low levels of motivation and may be in need of scaffolded learning to approach literature texts. Tara McIlroy on motivation for teaching literature from the perspective of using students' background knowledge of Japanese literature, and in some way harnessing this to approach literature in translation and thus make connections between Japanese and world literature. A number of questions and comments from the audience were also addressed which made for a lively discussion on the topics raised.

At the second round table discussion of the day, *Literature in ELT: Past, present and future*, Marcos Benevides, Cameron Smith and Tara McIlroy gave perspectives from their various backgrounds on some current changes in ELT and the session ended with an open invitation to the participants to share their ideas about how current trends may shape future developments in the field. Benevides is interested in the ways in which technology is changing the reading and availability of literature, and how this will continue to shape the educational contexts for ELT practitioners in the future. One example of how new ways to read are developing is the multi-path stories which Benevides is creating with his crowd-funded project Atama-ii Books. Smith talked from the viewpoint of creativity research and creative writing, which requires particular elements to be present for production of creative uses of language. This interest in creativity is something which will continue and, Smith hopes, gather more interest in the future. One piece of advice for teachers engaging with students through creative writing was to respect their best efforts and appreciate that what they create is new or original for them. McIlroy reflected on her own experiences as a high school literature teacher in L1 settings and compared this with current experience in the tertiary setting. Some aspects of literature teaching seem to stay constant across cultures and languages, although the need for a grounded

background in literature for an all-round liberal arts education may be more important in these uncertain economic times than ever.

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**Reference**

Greene, G. (1948) *The Heart of the Matter*. London, UK: Penguin.