

An Interview With Simon Bibby, LiLT Founder, on the State of LiLT and Literature in EFL

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The Journal of Literature and Language Teaching (Gregg McNabb) virtually sat down with Simon Bibby for what turned out to be an enjoyable and wide-ranging conversation about this SIG and perspectives about the roles of literature in EFL.

Q: Hello Simon, tell us a little bit about yourself

I teach in Kobe, at a private women's university there, where I am currently tenure track. I am from the UK originally, and came here 16 years ago, after having completed postgraduate teacher training in Bath. I did the typical *eikaiwa* thing for a few years, then moved onto part-time employment at university, then to a contract position, and now am tenure track. In my free time I play chess, but don't get the time to play as much as I'd like!

Q: How did LiLT come about?

If I remember correctly, I think the Literature in Language Teaching (LiLT) SIG has just celebrated its fifth birthday! The idea came about rather by accident. I was teaching at a well-known private university in Kansai, in the "Policy Studies" department, where there were "Discussion Seminar" classes. I noted that when politics came up in discussion, students appeared to lack elementary political knowledge. I first sought to remedy that deficit through creating a current news topics course, then through an *Animal Farm* course. I designed this as a sort of "Politics 101, through a novel" course, and incorporated study of all sorts of things, including the political spectrum, a quick run-through of early 20th century Russian history, rhetoric, propaganda, all through the reading of a classic literary text. I discussed this course earlier in these pages (Bibby, 2014b).

Well, such was my situation, and my course. But, I wondered about others doing similar things, and I wanted to talk about the use of literature with other teachers. I assumed that there would be a national group for this, presumably within JALT. But no, there was not one, so I decided

to set one up. Which, at the time, probably was not a very clever idea in terms of energy required, time and stress levels, and as a relative unknowing JALT outsider. After some initial struggles getting it underway, after some early kind help from friends and colleagues (Jane Joritz Nakagawa, Wendy Jones Nakanishi, Michael Herke, Gavin Brooks, Kurt Hartje (RIP), Bill Hogue thank you all!) getting it through the first year or so, then with steady growth, I think considerably thanks to the organisational skills of Tara McIlroy, here we are now five years later, continuing to publish, and continuing to grow. We are well-established, sizeable in member numbers, and with a solid cohort of patient, good-humoured, professional and hard-working volunteer officers. Things are good!

Q: Could you explain briefly about JALT, and about how LiLT SIG sits within the larger umbrella organisation?

JALT is set up as a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO). There are Special Interest Groups (SIGs), which are themed, and there are Chapters, which are regional. There is an annual membership fee, of which some of the funds go to the designated local chapter, and some to a chosen SIG. There are meetings three times a year, called Executive Board Meetings (EBM), at which representatives from both sets of groups meet with the JALT board to discuss, organise and plan. To start a SIG, you need a certain amount of names signed up to demonstrate ‘interest’, which is then put up for discussion at an EBM, ultimately with a “yes” or “no”. Generally, a tentative “yes” will be given, unless the idea is too wacky. That said, there have been some legitimate concerns raised about the growth in the number of SIGs, and there appears to be a general feeling of sorts that a loosely applied brake would be helpful in this regard.

LiLT is a mid-sized SIG with just over 60 members, and is stable. We promote the use of literature in language classes, and aim to help members as best we can by providing avenues to share ideas, to collaborate, to publish and to present. Intersections between chapters and SIGs occur as chapters have members and a venue for events, but often lack themes and speakers. SIGs have themes and can offer speakers, but lack a venue, so a helpful synergy is evident there. We worked with Kyoto Chapter who kindly hosted us in September 2016, and are looking to work together with Yokohama (I think tentatively set for June) and other chapters in 2017.

Q: How about the journal? How was it started?

The journal was prompted by the comments of a friend and then colleague, Gavin Brooks. He said that a key point emerging from one JALT Publications meeting was that “Members do not

want to publish in a publication that is not worth publishing in.” Informed by this, I thought that the best approach for members looked to be to set up something that was worth publishing in, which would have to be a journal. My query was then “What is required to be ‘a journal?’” And when you look around, and ask around, it is not terribly clear. The only way to do something is to do it, so I chose to do so, and set up a new journal, *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching* with Gavin’s editorial help, which was invaluable. The first issue was tricky, because one is seeking to conjure something out of nothing. Word gets out over time, more people come on board to help review and edit, and it does get easier. Tara McIlroy helped with workflow, putting some effective systems in place. Gregg McNabb, who is both Editor and Membership Chair, wow, now does a fabulous job organising workflow, double-blind reviewing and publishing. Thanks here go to our team of reviewers, who are rigorous and hard-working but, as reviewers always are, unsung.

Q: Onto the actual literature itself now. How do you choose?

Remembering, I touched on this in an earlier paper I wrote in these pages (Bibby, 2011, Bibby, 2014a). And Paul Hullah discussed this several years ago in an interview (Bibby, 2012). A key point that Paul made was that literature will often be for somewhat higher level learners, after they have been furnished with the language base that they need. This is coming after the massed input (for example through extensive listening and extensive reading), and the multiple communicative skills courses. Using literature comes along later, and as I see things, is not intended to replace the essential language study. This is not some ill-conceived “Bard for Beginners: An EFL Approach,” and we need to remember that. Nevertheless, there is a massive amount of “literature” one can use, so even on a single day for 90 minutes, students can experience the joy of reading some “real” English.

Summarising briefly, the texts should not be too long. The syntax should be manageable, and sentences should ideally not be awash with multiple-clause sentences, as these become impenetrable for the L2 reader. Evaluating the lexical level is tricky. Ideally, there should not be too many words at a level that leaves students baffled and lost. The texts should be of likely interest, though naturally this is difficult to guess — different people are ... different. But there is a certain shared humanity, certain human universals, so texts that likely offer something “human” to engage, to entice, and to provoke are likely to be effective choices for your students. And here we have a certain conundrum. While it is difficult to find such texts, — and this is the question I am asked most to recommend a book of short stories, or to suggest texts that “work” at tertiary level, and at

school level — they do exist. As native educators in this SIG, probably we should make a list for the benefit of others.

Q: Indeed, if that’s the question people ask, to save you from repeating yourself too often, can you suggest some texts for readers?

Yes, I can! For short stories: “The Lottery” (Shirley Jackson), “The Pedestrian” (Ray Bradbury), “Harrison Bergeron” (Kurt Vonnegut), “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (Ursula le Guin), “Bliss” (Katherine Mansfield) have all worked really well. “The Lottery” has a black-and-white film available in sections on YouTube, so watch that. There is a fun short animation of “The Pedestrian” which is worth showing to students, again available on YouTube. A 26-minute short was made of “Harrison Bergeron,” called 2081. It sticks closely to the text, and is a short of considerable emotional power. I’d suggest to read, discuss and then watch the movie short at the end.

For an actual novel, I recommend *Animal Farm* of course. It is just 128 pages in the Signet edition. It is 10 chapters which fit nicely into a fifteen-week university semester, with a suggested pre-reading set of primer activities, and a final assessment at the end. *1984* is too long. Do others have suggestions? Please share.

For poems, due to their relative brevity, they are much easier for teachers to look around and choose. Obvious ones, and ones that you will have read at school are “The Road Less Taken” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Robert Frost). Life choices to make, life choices made, regrets, life itself. Aside from the pertinent themes, these are suitable poems for introducing rhyme schemes and meter. It is worth noting that reading poetry to oneself, and reading aloud, can be useful tools for trying to minimise or extinguish katakana pronunciation, too.

Rudyard Kipling’s “If,” a classic, and a real British favourite, is made all the more horribly poignant, noting that it was written for his son, who died so soon after joining battle. What is it to be a “man,” or more generally, to be an adult? You can find Hollywood actor Harvey Keitel reading “If” on YouTube, and I have used this as an example of poetry reading.

I think it is helpful here to offer some less obvious suggestions, texts that are variously fun, bittersweet, everyday. Poems that appear relatively simple in structure and language, and which may suggest to students that using language creatively / using creative language is (well) within their reach. A personal favourite is John Hegley, a UK performance poet, who I once saw live, some twenty years ago. Consider also using the work of UK spoken word artist Mark Grist, a former

school English teacher, who became famous for his poem “Girls Who Read” and for his “battle rapping.”

Q: What do you think about using literature in translation?

This depends partly on the type of course, the course aims, and how the course fits into the overall curriculum. In a general English type class, I see no real issue. For the teacher, this is a case of finding short texts that offer language input, ideas, and issues to discuss. Translated Chekhov short stories would work. *The Stranger / The Outsider* (both translations of *L’Etranger* are used) by Albert Camus would be a plausible choice. However, for a more English Literature styled class, I ardently aver against. I remember asking a student some years ago what book she was reading in her English Literature class. *The Little Prince* was her reply (*Le Petit Prince* in French). This seems wholly inappropriate, as in designated “literature” classes the assigned texts have added weight as cultural artefacts (Carter & Long, 1991). A German literature course would not incorporate Dickens, and a Spanish literature class would not offer up study of Proust. To offer up from another language culture is, for me, not just wrong-headed, but is culturally fraudulent.

Q: Some ask: “I am not a literature expert. Can I use literature in my classes?” How do you respond to that?

Certainly, you can. I am not an expert either. Alas, I gave up English literature study at sixteen, due to a tedious teacher dictating “meaning” of a succession of ill-chosen texts, and due to the disturbingly narrow UK education system which requires one to drop all but three to four subjects after the age of sixteen. Regarding how I approach a course, I teach myself in the holiday before class about the text, and give myself a review course in “things literary.” So read around, teach yourself. Start with reading the chosen text by yourself, then with the “rough guides” such as *Sparknotes*, which you can read online. Then read more widely and deeply and your confidence will rise, and surely you’ll be ready. I’m not teaching “literature” as a major, but I am using literature to support language learning.

Key, I think, and where my own English teacher at school went so wrong, is to invite students to make meaning, and to do so with texts that are likely to appeal to them. As teachers, please do not dictate meaning. “Take notes. Write this down.” And regurgitate when required. “Yeah, this means X, this line means Y, what the poet really means in all this was Z.” While no doubt such a teacher is well-meaning, in response there is a serious danger that students will duly fail to engage with the text, and with each other. And duly students tune out, check phones, do their

make-up, and then doze off, as normal RULEs apply — Regular University Lecture Experiences. And I am not sure we want that. Instead, there is ambiguity, and we can celebrate this — the lack of clarity need not be problematic, but can be a comfortably intriguing place: a place of thinking and of inquiry; a place of themed discussion amongst peers.

Q: How do you get students involved? How can teachers invite students to try to make meaning and discuss texts?

That’s a good question. I am sure there are many ways, and I am sure that many of you, many of the readers here, will have wonderfully creative ways to do so. Please do share these here, in the present publication, and in presentations at the various events in Japan — at the Pan-SIG event, at biannual Mini-Conference and at JALT National. For our international readers, noting that we have reached beyond Japan’s shores, JALT National Conference is an international conference, so please feel free to apply to present, from wherever you may be.

I’ll humbly offer what I do, and what seems to have been effective in my classes. I am not suggesting that one size fits all, but this has been a good fit for higher level learners. Most of my students have been TOEIC 550-plus, but some have been in mixed-ability classes, from around 350 TOEIC level to fluent returnees. Prior to any reading, in the first week of the class, sometimes in the first two weeks, I would offer a range of related questions to get students thinking in useful directions. I sought to expose students to some of the ideas that would likely emerge later through the multiple texts, and have them think on their own, and to discuss these ahead of time. I offer sets of questions, grouped conceptually in paper handouts. Question sets are followed by a textbox for personal responses, and I allocate a period for responding. From this, put students in pairs or small groups (maximum four, perhaps three is optimal) to share responses and discuss. Walk around, prompt and probe a little to push the thinking, but do not give “answers.” Because there are not any, and also as this is setting up the course — students need to be able to think and to express views in a supportive environment. This is likely unusual for many students, perhaps the first time, and it needs setting up sensitively and carefully. Tiptoeing is the order here, not stomping.

Students sometimes will read in class, sometimes at home and I have varied that. It depends on what is happening and on class time. This is flexible. Some core comprehension questions help students to understand what is ‘happening’ in any text — the essentials. Students complete, share and co-construct. Sometimes students may misunderstand, often even. This is their L2, and they are reading blocks of unadulterated text, so this is to be anticipated. Students help each other, and then

the teacher can then bring the class together in plenary to work through and read through to ensure understanding. Reading aloud is a viable option, sharing the reading between students, with the teacher carrying the bulk of the reading. Helpfully, an early bout of reading aloud can be valuable for the teacher to quickly understand the continuum of strong to weak students.

Following comprehension of a text, then move toward consideration of possible deeper meanings, of alternatives. And this is done via a worksheet with question prompts and large textboxes in which students record their own ideas. There are multiple challenges here for our language learner students, not just linguistic, but also cognitive — engaging in a text in L2 (reading being a “psycholinguistic guessing game” (Goodman, 1967) — that just in reference to L1 reading), and seeking multiple alternative and “deeper” meanings, a reading between and beyond the lines. It’s tricky, and this needs always to be at the forefront of our teacher minds. The approach I offer above consistently works, and works well in scaffolding (Bruner, 1960) students from surface initial reading to deeper considerations. Students do offer interesting and varying interpretations and views, and have been able to justify these readings.

Q: Do you have a favourite text to use?

This is probably “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” because of the ambiguity of the ending, and the considerable possibilities for discussion of such ideas as scapegoating, of utilitarianism, of utopia and happiness, of responsibility, and of personal choice. Personally, “2081” is a wonderful film short, too, adapted from “Harrison Bergeron.” The look in the father’s eyes — a briefest tear shed of seeming recognition and of a fleeting understanding.

Q: Have there been any particular “wow” moments?

There have been many memorable moments, often of “life” discussion as much as of a blinding linguistic light being shone. I’ll offer several:

First, using “Bliss,” with three female students, I remember how this led to a discussion of family, and of one student’s grandparents, living with her in a not uncommon extended family set-up who were against her traveling overseas. There was a big discussion amongst the students about family, being female in Japan now, changing generations, and about independence. Another time was with a student who was a boxer, a forthright but pleasant guy who had kept failing classes. Not conventionally academic, but he had really thrown himself in *Animal Farm*, and had incredible passion in class discussions. (Spoiler Alert — skip to the next section if you have not read *Animal*

Farm). Another student who told me she had cried when Boxer died, and other students saying they had reacted in the same way. Third, using “Harrison Bergeron,” a student pertinently queried the level at which a desired uniform ‘equality’ would be imposed. “Why should equality be at a low level? Why should equality not be at a high level?” Finally, the last was a student engaging with Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” The final lines of the poem repeat, and are perhaps the most famous final lines of any poem: “And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep.” She suggested that the first is a literal sleep, while the second is actual death. An obvious reading to some of you perhaps, as mature educators with experience of reading a wide range of literature, but for a late teen working through such things in a second language, this impressed me.

Q: Have you faced any problems?

As a general point, satire is difficult, and possibly best avoided. Or if not avoided, prepared more fully prior, explaining the aspect that is to be satirised, as students are unfamiliar with the actual, so something satirising the actual just will not be understood. In films such as “Robocop” and “Starship Troopers,” the satirising of viewer fetishism of the militaristic will likely be missed by your students, as it was by mine.

A specific reference now. “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is a great text, but there is a huge chunk of description, of the town and of the festival. I reassure in advance that this section contains a considerable amount of vocabulary that will be unfamiliar.

Be wary that challenging texts can be too challenging, and that it’s not worth disciplinary issues over. I’ve not had any issues at all, but some of the dystopian texts have been perhaps near the mark, particularly “Battle Royale,” though this was a class option, which one group of students chose, and only used once. For *1984*, I used the older black and white version to support it. For *Animal Farm* I do warn students not to expect a happy-happy Disney affair, and that all life should not be expected to be cartoonish, with happy endings.

Q: Any final thoughts?

Literature offers content and context for the classroom, as I suggested prior (Bibby, 2014b). People meet, and what do we so often talk about? We talk about soaps on TV, about books, and the latest films. Conversations have content. And, it’s the same here with course content. For once,

students, assuming a high enough level, have some real (or “authentic” if that floats your terminological boat) stuff to read, to think about, and to talk about. The engagement drives the language learning. I am convinced of this. Readers, give some literature a language classroom try!

Thanks a lot for your time and insights, Simon. I’m sure you’ve given our readers food for thought. And best wishes for 2017!

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