ENGLISH TEACHING *essentials*

LITERATURE by Alan Pulverness

Things we need to know, things we thought we knew, things we tend to forget and things to think about.

Literature with a capital *L* is the label given to classic texts (eg Shakespeare, Wordsworth) as well as modern classics (eg Graham Greene, George Orwell). Literature in the language classroom can also be what John McRae calls literature with a small *l* – popular fiction, fables, song lyrics. Abridged and simplified versions, too, may be used to encourage learners to progress to the original texts.

What

There are four main genres of literary text.

1 Short stories

Some of the best stories (eg those by Ernest Hemingway) can be very short and easily read within a lesson. Stories typically focus on a single dramatic event, usually take place in one location and feature a limited number of characters. This simplicity of structure is often accompanied by relatively straightforward language.

2 Poetry

Poetry tends to share the advantage of brevity, though language may be a problem. Poets bend – or break – the rules more than other writers, and the language of poetry is often compressed and indirect. However, many contemporary poets (eg Brian Patten, Roger McGough) write in a very accessible style.

3 Novels

It is impossible to generalise about novels, which can range from short and reader-friendly (eg Graham Greene's *The Third Man* or Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*) to long and challenging. Students can read extracts in class, as a basis for extensive reading at home, or simply to give them a taste for reading at greater length. Highly episodic novels (eg Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, Willy Russell's *The Wrong Boy*) lend themselves well to the use of short extracts. Film adaptations of novels, both classic and contemporary, can provide an added incentive for reading, and an extra resource for the classroom.

4 Drama

Playscripts are written to be performed, which suggests practical drama in the classroom as well as discussion and text-based activities. Full-length plays may raise some of the same problems as novels, though extracts are an option. But many one-act plays (eg by James Saunders or Harold Pinter) offer the same advantages as short stories in terms of manageability.

Why

Literature can be ambiguous, eccentric and linguistically unconventional. Tastes in literature are very personal, and anyway, students may not read literature in their own language. So why make our lives – and theirs – more difficult?

Literature ...

1 ... is highly motivating and encourages personal involvement. It provides a stimulating basis for genuine interaction.
2 ... provides vivid contexts for language acquisition and helps learners develop language awareness.
3 ... helps learners develop text-awareness and enables them to become more confident – and more competent – readers.
4 ... provides a real-world reading experience in the classroom.
5 ... brings the reality of another culture – or other cultures – into the classroom.
6 ... shows ways in which language can be used creatively to express feelings.

Why not?

There are some potential difficulties, all of which can be overcome or at least avoided.

1 Selecting texts. Texts chosen as examples of 'good' literature or because they are the teacher's personal favourites may not appeal to students. Texts that work are those that students connect with in some way, or those that 'grab' the reader.

2 Dealing with vocabulary. Literary texts, by definition, are ungraded, and too much unknown vocabulary can inhibit the pleasure of reading. But the coherent structure of literary texts can also favour guessing meaning from context. As with any text, you can work on essential vocabulary items before reading, and many student editions of literary texts give strong glossary support.

3 Exploiting the text for language content. Nothing is more likely to kill students' enthusiasm for a text than exercises designed purely to practise language points. What is worth looking at, however, is the way the writer uses language to achieve particular effects.

4 Getting students to respond. Simply asking for a response is rarely very productive. Tasks, such as modifying, extending or adding to a text, involve students creatively and are an effective means of indirectly eliciting response.

How

1 Maximise pre-reading support. Students should be not only ready, but eager, to read. Use warm-up activities to introduce context, topic or theme, and prediction tasks as 'tasters' to draw students into the world of the text. Often, such pre-reading tasks will result in students mentally constructing their own parallel texts, which will act as powerful motivators when they read.

2 Minimise the extent to which you disturb students' reading. If you have invested plenty of time before they start, there should be little need to come between readers and text.

3 Draw students' attention to stylistic peculiarity. Tasks which help them to appreciate linguistic 'special effects' will sharpen their awareness of normal language use as well as the ways in which the writer departs from the norm.

4 Provide frameworks for creative response. Give students opportunities to respond to what they read by inviting them to step into the writer's shoes. By facing the same decisions the writer has made and experimenting with the paths the writer has *not* taken, students can discover for themselves how the text works.

And, finally ...

Encourage students to read widely, whether the 'literature' has a small *l* or a capital *L*. The more literature they read – and enjoy – the more they will want to read.

McRae, J *Literature with a small 'l'* Macmillan 1994

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