

Three approaches to adapting literary texts for the classroom

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1. Abstract

This paper suggests three approaches for teachers and materials designers to use when they adapt literary texts for the language classroom and make them the basis for questions that the learners have to discuss or activities that the learners have to complete. The approaches – ‘tools’ for adapting a literary text successfully – are exploiting it on a linguistic level, a cultural level and a personal level. These three approaches are demonstrated with reference to a short story, *On the Western Circuit* (Hardy 1894) by the late 19th century/early 20th century English author Thomas Hardy. An extract from the story indicates how certain linguistic features of it can be identified, focused on and practised to make learners more aware of them. A synopsis of the story as a whole indicates how it can be used for cultural activities, for example, comparing aspects of the story’s 19th century setting with aspects of life today, and for activities where students develop such personal skills as empathy, reflection and moral judgement.

2. Sub-theme

This paper is categorised under the sub-theme of ‘Empowering teachers to teach literature’. It addresses the sub-theme of ‘Literary texts and how to exploit them for language and literature.’

3. Story

This paper deals with the challenge facing teachers or materials writers who have to use a literary text – a work of fiction, poetry or drama from a particular time and place – in a language classroom. How can the text be exploited? Which features of the text can be highlighted and focused on, and used as the starting point for learning activities? I would advise teachers and materials writers to use one or more of three basic approaches. No doubt there are other approaches as well, but these three seem to me most easily definable and correspond to three levels of content and meaning that exist in most, if not all, literary texts.

These approaches are the following:

1. Linguistic. This approach addresses how a literary text could be used to develop the students' language knowledge. What features of its vocabulary, grammar, etc, could be highlighted and exploited in a language classroom?
2. Cultural. This approach addresses how a literary text could be used to develop the students' cultural knowledge. What features of life in a different country, different society and/or different era could be highlighted and exploited?
3. Personal growth. This approach addresses how a literary text could be used to develop the students themselves – i.e. to make them more mature and empathetic as human beings and more effective as learners. What personal skills could a literary text encourage in the students?

The value of these approaches has been widely recognised, for example, by Collie and Slater, who identify 'cultural enhancement', 'language enhancement' and 'personal participation' as reasons for using literary texts for language teaching (Collie and Slater 1990), Hismanoglu, who similarly lists 'cultural enrichment', 'language enrichment' and 'personal involvement' (Hismanoglu 2005), and by Erkaya, who writes of 'the inseparable nature of language and culture' (Erkaya 2005)

To demonstrate these approaches during the workshop on which this paper is based, I used a synopsis of and an extract from a short story, *On the Western Circuit*, by the late 19th century/early 20th century English writer and poet Thomas Hardy. Hardy was famous for writing lyrical but often pessimistic stories about life in England's West Country, the real-life Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, although in Hardy's work this becomes a fictional area called Wessex. *On the Western Circuit* is a typical entry in Hardy's canon, in that it uses Wessex as a setting and shows Hardy's pessimistic and tragic worldview.

In the workshop, in the workshop the participants were first given a synopsis, telling the story of *On the Western Circuit* up until a key scene near the end. The synopsis was used because there was not enough time to read the short story itself during the workshop.

The synopsis describes how a young 19th-century English lawyer called Charles Rave meets, falls in love with and decides to marry a maid called Anna, whose employer is an unhappily married woman called Edith. Charles is based in London but has met Anna during a professional trip to Wessex. Although Charles is risking his reputation by marrying a 'low-class' woman, he believes Anna is intelligent and can be 'passed off' as an educated, high-class lady among his colleagues in London. He bases this belief on the letters Anna has written to him. What he doesn't realise is that Anna is illiterate and her employer, Edith, has written the letters for her. Edith has felt compelled to write these romantic and poetic letters on her maid's behalf, perhaps out of frustration about her own marriage.

At the end of the synopsis, Anna gets married to Charles in London and Edith is present at the ceremony as a guest. Back at Charles's quarters, he asks his new wife to write a note to his sister, who was unable to attend the ceremony. Anna goes to another room to do this and, when she doesn't reappear, Charles goes through to find out what the matter is...

After the participants had read the synopsis, they were given an extract from *On the Western Circuit*, which relates the ensuing, climactic scene. Charles discovers that Anna is illiterate, realises that all the correspondence he received from her was

actually penned by Edith, and confronts Edith. The scene ends with him exclaiming to Edith, “Legally I have married her... in soul and spirit I have married you...!”

The remainder of the workshop saw the participants working in three groups. Each group was assigned one of the approaches – the language model, cultural model and personal growth model. The participants focusing on the language model approach had to discuss the extract describing the climactic scene. The participants dealing with the cultural and personal growth models had to discuss the synopsis, which gave a general account of the story. All three groups had to identify features, story elements and/or themes that could be highlighted to students and used as the basis for questions, exercises and activities for them to consider, discuss and work on in the classroom.

Afterwards, during feedback, the groups identified the following items in the story as potential material for questions, exercises and activities:

1. Language model
 - a. Antiquated words
 - b. Article usage
 - c. Gerund usage
 - d. Narrative tenses
 - e. Punctuation – especially direct speech
2. Cultural model
 - a. Marriage between the social classes in 19th century England
 - b. Education in 19th century England
 - c. The legal system in 19th century England
3. Personal growth model
 - a. Discuss – who’s to blame for this?
 - b. Discuss – what should Charles / Anna do now?
 - c. Discuss – is this society fair? Why? Why not?
 - d. Discuss – would you marry an illiterate person if you loved them?

Therefore, from the suggestions above, applying these three approaches to *On the Western Circuit* would give a teacher or materials writer at least a dozen options for how to exploit the short story in the classroom.

4. Lessons and/or Recommendations

When workshop participants analysed the short story using the three approaches, they identified at least a dozen features or topic-areas whereby it could be exploited in the classroom. I would add here that from 2005 to 2007, under the auspices of the British Council, I was assigned to the English Department of Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, where one of my main duties was as a course and materials designer. During my time there, I was asked to design two courses around two different works of literature. I found that the three approaches outlined in this paper served as an excellent ‘toolbox’ for generating enough exercises and activities to fill each course.

5. References

Collie, J., & Slater, S. 1990. *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Hismanoglu, M. 2005. 'Teaching English through literature'. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* 1/1: 53-66.

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