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Learner Response to Raymond Carver's "The Bath"& "A Small Good Thing"

John Fawsitt

Abstract

Literary Works are often simplified for consumption by language learners, due to fears that they will be over-taxed by longer more elaborate texts. It can also be said however that we are denying students access to the richness and authenticity of the originals by doing this. In this paper I would like to propose that we do not need to choose between one or the other, but that by comparison and contrast, students can learn more about the language itself and the ways it can be used. In this research students were presented with two different texts in sequence. Both were written by the American author Raymond Carver, and are very different versions of essentially the same story. The content language used in the second story being far more challenging and dense, and the story itself being much longer. The hypothesis that after having the basic story and its characters introduced in the shorter simpler story, the students would be able to read and enjoy the second story to a greater degree, was supported by the results in this limited case. I feel that this hypothesis might be further tested with graded readers serving as introductory texts or templates to original works and serve as equivalent and contrasting texts to illustrate various aspects of language.

Key words : Raymond Carver, English Literature, Textual Comparison

Introduction

Languages serve many purposes including utilitarian, aesthetic, religious, and emotional. Language learners also come in all shapes and sizes. No one facet of a language will appeal to, or prove relevant to every learner. Therefore if we are to provide a comprehensive range of avenues of learning we should take account when we are formulating our curricula of the variety of forms in which languages exist and the multiple purposes to which they are put and seek to provide materials that appeal to these learners in across as wide a spectrum as possible.

Many universities have decided to cut back on resources devoted to teaching literature as it is seen as an intellectual luxury with little connection to providing students with the skills they need to survive in the marketplace. This trend is reinforced by the field of EFL's growing emphasis on direct communication, and quantifying students' language acquisition via commercial tests.

Literature is now more commonly experienced by the majority of language students through graded readers, provided with a view to ease of reading and increased speed and comprehension. There is very little space for appreciation and expression. Original texts are seen as too difficult and disheartening for most students.

I hope to present an alternative point of view, that such simplified texts need not only be used as alternatives to the original but as a framework or entry point to the real thing and at the same time heightening student awareness of what the real literature can furnish both intellectually, emotionally and linguistically.

Literature can provide a springboard as a vital and interesting stimulus for a wide range of student oriented communicative

activities. I will report on my research in using "The Bath" and "A Small Good Thing" by Raymond Carver, in an English literature class with multi-level learners and present student-findings as to which of the texts were more difficult and more satisfying.

Background

It is recognised that reading has a large role to play in language acquisition. In fact for the majority of the history of language teaching it was almost the only way people could experience a foreign language.

In the world of TESOL the church of extensive reading has numerous apostles. The belief being that learners should read extensively without the pressures of evaluation at a level well within their powers of comprehension. This activity is expected to improve their grasp of the language in many areas from grammar to fluency. Few, if any, would argue with the premise that such activity is beneficial for language acquisition even if it is difficult to be exact as to the nature or extent of its influence on particular areas. However the next question is "What should they read?"

Answering this question has provided publishers with great opportunities. Over the past decade numerous series of graded readers have been issued. Often they are original stories, created specifically for learners. They are also often simplified versions of famous or popular works that the copyright has expired on. They show varying degrees of success in replicating the originals' on various levels. The quality of the work is of great importance in that the more attractive and inspiring the story, the more likely the student is to continue reading it. Consequently we arrive at considerations as to what makes a text attractive. Thus language learning arrives in the field of literature.

However there is an opposite impetus from the side from literature towards that of language learning

Alan Maley posited four benefits of, or reasons for, the adoption of literature in the EFL classroom

- authenticity (shorthand for actually what is out there)
- personal growth or involvement
- cultural enrichment
- language enrichment

That it contains or provides at least one of these elements is perhaps a test as to whether a text should be called literature. (Perhaps we can alter the word to a verb in that we can extract these things from almost any text. Perhaps this is the ability that we are providing our students with.)

However the barrier remains as to how to bridge the gap between what the student is capable of, and what is necessary to experience the literature. The use of the L1 in many EFL classes is simply an attempt to overcome that deficiency by supplying a form of support to the students. Such support while doubtless of immediate benefit, can be questioned as to how it effects students' ability to function solely in the target language over a longer period. Communicative Language Teaching suggests that we prioritize helping the student acquire the target language through the target language.

In theory the doctrine of extensive reading sees the learner following a steady and rising path as they progress through the curriculum and ideally, in the end, they transition to authentic materials.

The great task in a language class is to bring everyone with you. While literature can, in one text, help to engage students on several levels, we will probably fail to do maintain their interest if we expect our students to come rapidly to a deep

understanding of more challenging literary texts.

"Authentic" as it is used in foreign language teaching is that material which matches most closely language most used in everyday life. It is relatively rare to find authentic material in most mass produced textbooks. Literature is authentic in two ways in the EFL classroom in a way that other materials are not. Firstly, it actually is in use in the target society, whether in the printed or spoken form, and secondly, in that it usually seeks to reflect the authentic terms of life as it is lived.

The Texts

Teaching an English literature class of about 23 with a steep gradient of abilities and interest and an average TOEIC score of about 370. I was puzzled as to how to present real literature that, while interesting and accessible, would cater for all of the class members

Having come across Raymond Carver's works in a previous life I thought that they would be suitable for at least some of my students as they are written in a very sparse style. In my search I was lucky to find some of his works that might be uniquely suited to teaching English literature in an EFL context.

Raymond Carver is widely regarded as the preeminent American short story writer of the late 20th century. Besides his own personal issues his works deal generally with ordinary working class people in the United States.

His writes in a mostly unadorned and plain style. It is this very plainness which can create a tension and concentration that maintains the atmosphere of the story.

As a more contemporary and mundane writer than Ernest Hemingway his works can provide English language learners with insight into how English is spoken in ordinary intimate

circumstances. Conversations take place in kitchens, telephone boxes, pickup trucks, on sofas, patios and buses. They take place between people one critic labelled as "too dumb to give up." All of them feel there is something more to life but are without the tools to know what it is.

The two short stories A small good thing and The Bath are very similar and fall within the Carvers' normal milieu. They both are about people struggling to deal with sudden tragedy in their lives and have the same basic plot events, and characters. "The Bath" is much shorter than "A small good thing" and is written in a terse unadorned style that creates a sense of unreality and non-comprehension almost as if certain of the senses have been stunned or numbed. A small good thing is written with far more detail and discursion; the events are lived rather than observed, characters more minutely drawn and emotions more clearly expressed.

These two stories provides an opportunity to meet the challenge of teaching students who are interested in English literature but have not yet acquired the skills to read it unaided and at the same time without depriving them of a communicative English environment. I myself have found myself in the catch-22 situation of not being proficient enough in Japanese to read anything interesting, but not reading anything because there is nothing interesting to read.

Using these stories also provided me with an insight into what constitutes 'difficulty' to the student and obstacles to their enjoyment of foreign literature. I had thought that the more unadorned the language the easier it would be for them. However a questionnaire distributed among the students brought this assumption into question. The bulk of the students found that the lack of detail in the Bath prevented them fully understanding the progression in the story and from becoming engaged with the characters. Consequently they said they

enjoyed the longer, seemingly more complex, A small good thing more. This leads me to speculate whether we might be both missing an opportunity both to provide an experience of genuine foreign literature, an expansion student language awareness.

Method

The students were informed about Raymond Carver via: Comments about him made by Murakami Haruki when he included him in his anthology "Birthday Stories" (2011 Random House), which was a collection of short stories linked by the theme of birthdays, photographs, a brief biography, and access to the relevant page on Wikipedia and comments about his style and place in American Literature.

The shorter text "the bath" was presented in class and read and studied in groups of 4 students in several stages. Each stage consisting of group reading and study and then a teacher-lead read-through with explanations, followed by questions from the students and then another group reading session.

Students were free to annotate and discuss the text in their own language.

In the third class students were asked to write a page dealing with their reactions to the text and story and also their ideas as to what happened next in the story after the story ended.

They were also asked to write about their favorite parts and the parts they found most difficult, could not follow, or could not see the point of. After this the students were surveyed as to their opinions of the story and how its level of difficulty suited them.

About three weeks later after reading several other pieces I presented the next story which was part of Nan 'undos tandem collection published in 1984 "Two delightful stories" by Raymond Carver & Fletcher Flora: ; edited with notes by

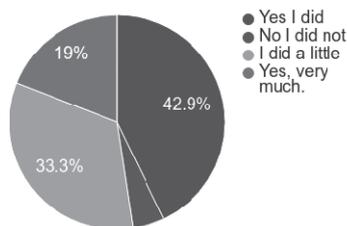
Kazuhiko Yoshida & Kaneaki Inazumi.

The reading process was the same except for the first few minutes of the class students were convinced that I had made a mistake and was giving them the same story again. It was not

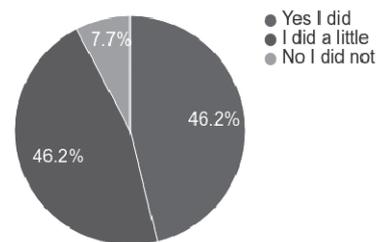
until the few students who had brought their copies of “The Bath” with them and I had pointed out differences in the text did they settle down to begin. It took four and a half classes to finish “A small good thing”

Results

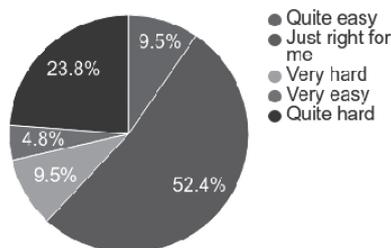
Did you enjoy The Bath ?



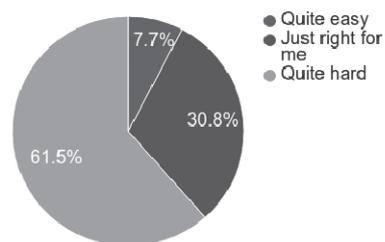
Did you enjoy " A Small Good Thing " ?



What did you think of 'The Bath's' language level?



What did you think of SGT's language level?



Discussion

Noticeable is the result in the question “What do you think of SGT’s language level?” in that both the categories of “very hard” and “very easy” have disappeared” with no respondents choosing those options even though “The Bath” has a much simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences. This leads me to think that students find a preparatory text aids their comprehension of difficult texts.. However no respondent replied that they enjoyed “A small good thing” “very much”. However “Yes I did” and “I did a little” both increased their scores considerably. Whether this reflects the increased

difficulty of the text or familiarity with the plot is difficult to determine. However In post-reading surveys student answers showed that they were appreciative of the changes in the plot, additional depth and nuance to characters, and a change from an ending that left the characters fates indeterminate to one where matters are resolved more definitely. This is indicated by eleven out of seventeen interviewed students showing a preference for “A small good thing”. Many of the answers citing the ending and the development of characters for their choice.

Did you enjoy The Bath?	Why?
Yes I did	Because, the story is easy to understand, and the character's feelings are written clarity.
No I did not	Because I don't like the ending
I did a little	Because it's quit difficult for me.
I did a little	I dont interesting story. but I can know vocablury.
I did a little	I reading understand word
Yes I did	
I did a little	Way of the calling is loose.
Yes I did	I can understand the story.
I did a little	I don't know the result of this story.
I did a little	It was not interesting
Yes I did	I think this story is fun.
Yes I did	Because, we had many group work
Yes very much.	Because I could image of this story.
Yes I did	The story is interesting. I can learn new Vocabulary and sentence
Yes I did	
Yes very much.	Because it was very interesting!
Yes very much.	The story was very fun and interesting.
Yes very much.	I like reading books.
Yes I did	Because, I read a book with together.
I did a little	I was sad
Yes I did	I found unknow thing.
Did you enjoy SGT?	Why?
Yes I did	I could know what Scotty was going, And this story has more information than The bath.
Yes I did	Because I felt warm what last page of this story. On the way, Scotty died, so I felt sad but last page is good for me.
I did a little	Story is a very long so I'm very tired.
Yes I did	Because, this story is very sad story but, I know Bakery's man have a big hart and good baker. His mother helped him.
Yes I did	Because before I read The bath, I can read more clear than the bath.
Yes I did	Occasionally, I understand this sentence. Then I thought i want to know about this story.
I did a little	This story practice my skills but It is sad story. I am feel sad...
No I did not	Deffcult and long story.
I did a little	Because Scotty die. But, this story is interesting.
I did a little	
I did a little	The story is interesting to read
I did a little	Because story is a little difficult.
Yes I did	Scotty had an accident, but he is recover.

Student Answers

The data is questionable as several students did not participate in the final survey and interview, and several preferences expressed in the interviews did not show up in the surveys. While a greater preference was shown for “A small good thing” this might have been somewhat influenced by more engaged students forming a greater proportion of interviewees.

One surprising part of the student response was that they craved more detail in “The bath.” “Simpler” did not mean “easier” for them.

Conclusions

Overall it seemed that students preferred the richer text, the extent to which this was aided by the plainer version is unclear. What is clear was that students remained engaged with the longer story.

While I limited my use of the texts to simply finding the differences in style and in content. They could also be used to teach the students about vocabulary, grammar, and usage through comparisons of paragraphs and sentences.

While literature is not seen as an immediate need for many third level students, I believe that unless we want our students to fall prey to dubious or fatuous narratives in later life we must introduce them to higher level texts.

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