

# *Learning Language Through Literature*

**A Sourcebook for Teachers  
of English in Hong Kong**

**EDITED BY PETER FALVEY AND PETER KENNEDY**



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## Introduction

This book is about *using* literary texts (with a small 'l') for language teaching. Although some writers would argue that there is an important distinction to be drawn between 'language' and 'literature', we maintain it is something of an artificial one. As Widdowson (1983) and Carter (1991) have pointed out, there are 'literary' elements in non-literary texts. There is metaphor in everyday language, the patterns of sound in poetry are also present in songs, nursery rhymes and adverts. (Some) jokes have the 'semantic density' of literary texts, while 'literary' vocabulary and syntax can be found elsewhere too.

For Stanley Fish, the American critic, a literary text is simply one we choose to *call* literary. It is an arbitrary classification for what gets taught in 'literature' classes. It may be more helpful then to think in terms of a continuum of literariness. Some texts have more 'literary' features, others far fewer.

Until the 1980s, it was received wisdom that literature had no place in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Now, in textbooks and on language syllabuses worldwide, literary texts are beginning to appear alongside other texts. The change is finding its way into public examinations as well. There are signs that Hong Kong language syllabuses are also reflecting this change. In the new Target Oriented Curriculum just being introduced into Hong Kong primary schools, and in the revised Advanced Supplementary syllabus, the importance of the aesthetic dimension is acknowledged and given greater prominence. Language Arts is no longer marginalized to 'Friday afternoon activities'. The old distinctions between the language and the literature syllabuses are beginning to break down.

## WHY USE LITERARY TEXTS AS A RESOURCE IN THE HONG KONG LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

### Text Content

The 1980s saw a preoccupation with *technique* in English Language Teaching (ELT) in methods such as the ‘communicative’ method, and the ‘Silent Way’. More recently, the importance of *content* has come to be recognized. Selecting interesting texts to be read for disinterested pleasure may arouse suspicion in a wealth-producing economy, but such texts have an essential role to play in effective language learning.

Hemingway remarked that ‘the dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water’. This holds true for texts that have greater depth and are worth reading for their own sake. Unfortunately, we don’t often find original, subtle or memorable texts in ELT textbooks.

In Chapter 3, Tyrrell recalls a moment many teachers will recognize, when ‘. . . that lesson went well because the subject really *caught the students’ imaginations*’. Texts that are more likely to catch students’ imaginations are those that evoke familiar experiences but ‘re-present’ them in a new light and with greater clarity (‘what oft was thought but ne’er so well express’d’). Tyrrell gives an example of such a text and shows how it might be used in the Hong Kong primary classroom.

Unmodified texts such as business letters, tax forms etc. are often included in English language coursebooks on the grounds that they are ‘authentic’ texts students may encounter later on in ‘real life’. Such shallow notions of authenticity have been called into question. Texts used for English language teaching and not for their original purpose can only have a spurious authenticity. A more fruitful approach is to select texts consonant with the interests and experiences of the learners. To catch the imagination a text needs to be ‘authentic’ in another sense — it should be writing that rings true, that connects directly with the students’ own lives. Harris and Leung, in Chapter 5, present an argument for using authentic stories on educational television because they are worthy of such presentation in their own right — because of their intrinsic motivational interest to young students.

Tibbetts shows, in Chapter 7, how classroom writing tasks are transformed when students are allowed to *produce* ‘authentic’ texts. When learners are given a chance to put ‘their personality and personal feelings into words’, what ensues is a powerful sense of ownership and a deep engagement in the writing task.

Velda Harris argues that, to become literate, a student needs to ‘get inside’ a text. In Chapter 11, she shows that an involvement with the text as *process* (as well as *product*) helps lift the words off the page and leads to an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the text.

Teachers may have misgivings about using literary texts because they feel the grammatical structures will be too complicated and the vocabulary too



difficult. Murphy demonstrates in Chapter 6 that this need not be the case. He shows there how textbook exercises may be adapted so that students move in easy stages from *literal* to *literary* texts.

Another perceived problem with literary texts is their ‘cultural distance’. The events, values, settings, people, names and historical references are thought to be culturally alien. Of course, culture is embedded in all ELT materials, even at beginners’ level (take, for instance, the rules of behaviour when greeting people). This problem can be minimized if we are careful to select modern texts which deal with universal themes, for example childhood or friendship. Anyway, the difficulty of ‘culturally alien’ texts can be exaggerated. After all, many of us read science-fiction and enter worlds we cannot possibly be familiar with.

### Language Study

In literary texts, language is often there to be looked *at* as well as *through* (it is like stained glass in churches rather than plate glass in offices). In Chapter 10, Kennedy shows how stories can be used to get students to *think* about grammar and so extend their understanding of the meanings of ‘familiar’ structures. In a story, lexical and grammatical choices are closely allied to the development of character and motive. Grammar teaching can be linked to the ‘grammar’ of stories. Chan, in Chapter 8, shows how an understanding of meaning in texts can be developed by using the connotative meaning in the lyrics of songs to assist students in their efforts to extract meaning from textual inferences, a task often neglected in the highly explicit texts commonly used in secondary English language textbooks.

### Classroom Tasks and Activities

All too often, students are asked to engage in ‘language learning’ tasks that can have little meaning for them. They may be called upon to mouth views that are not their own, to ask questions when they already know the answer, to feign surprise at something unsurprising and so on. The usual justification for getting students to perform these language routines is to help them acquire a knowledge of the language system.

As Mahoney points out in Chapter 9, real communication is spontaneous and unrehearsed. If students are to acquire more than just a few stock responses or ritualized language routines, there has to be greater scope for individual input. He shows how drama techniques and strategies can be used to adapt the grammar exercises and dialogues in some commonly-used Hong Kong textbooks. The tasks students are given then approximate much more closely to purposeful, real life communication.

Tibbetts shows how even that mundane classroom activity, the language drill, can be transformed if the patterns of repetition inherent in poetry are

harnessed. He demonstrates that creativity need not be achieved at the expense of accuracy. Laine, in Chapter 4, also advocates utilizing the patterns of repetition in stories to help primary pupils develop a greater sensitivity to how language is used.

It is sometimes argued that literary texts have no place in the language classroom because students won't need to read literature in their future jobs, nor will reading such texts help them get through their exams. As to the first point, the primary reason for using literature in the language class is as a *stimulus* for language learning not as a *model* to emulate. Narrow notions of 'usefulness', of literature as 'non-pragmatic', confuse the goals of language learning with the means. As to the second point, literary texts can indeed be used to fulfill the goals of the Hong Kong syllabus and to equip students for exams.

For instance, the HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education in English) syllabus stresses the importance of inference skills, of getting students to recognize that all written texts require interpretation whether they be legal contracts, business documents or newspaper reports. Standard EFL texts and tasks tend to be over-explicit, to spell everything out. Literary texts, on the other hand, come with 'holes' in them. The reader has to fill in the gaps. What is not said is often as important as what is. Literary texts lend themselves to more open-ended, information and opinion gap tasks. Exploiting the fruitful ambiguity of literary texts can help students develop interpretive procedures that are transferable to the reading of other types of text. As Harris and Mahon amply illustrate in Chapter 1, such tasks need not be complex or reserved only for advanced level students. Their chapter presents a wealth of ideas for helping primary school pupils develop a deeper awareness of the writing process. Chan too, in Chapter 8, shows the value of using the lyrics of songs as a vehicle for increasing students' ability to infer meaning from a text.

If tasks are properly graded, it is possible to use with literary texts the techniques and activities which are already very familiar in the language classroom — cloze, multiple-choice, matching activities and so on.

### **Affective Factors**

Learning a language entails more than just making grammar deposits in a language bank account. It is not only an intellectual process but is tied up with values and emotions. All the contributors to this book concur in the view that the forgotten emotional content must be put back into language learning.

As Margaret Falvey points out in Chapter 2, learning the language for a job or to pass an exam may be effective as a motivating force for adults or senior secondary learners but it is unlikely to motivate primary school pupils. Instead, there must be 'immediate and constant reward'. The chapter offers many lively and refreshing examples of children's games and rhymes that can help ensure the language learning process is an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

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At all levels, the 'affective response' to literary texts leads to greater personal engagement. Students can individualize their language learning by bringing their own ideas, opinions, and values into the classroom. This book grew out of a shared conviction that literary texts (small 'l') have an important role to play in motivating learners and in making language learning in Hong Kong more meaningful and memorable. Although there are a number of books which deal with the general issues of using literary texts in language teaching, there is no book designed specifically for Hong Kong teachers. All the contributors have extensive experience either as teachers in the Hong Kong primary, secondary and tertiary sectors or as teacher trainers. Their observations and the examples they give are grounded in that experience.

A crucial factor determining the success or failure of the approaches advocated here, is the teacher's ability to communicate her own enthusiasm for reading literary texts. As Peter Falvey points out in Chapter 12, if teachers are also willing to engage in the kinds of creative activities they require of their students, they will not only increase their own credibility in the classroom but also encourage their students to 'have a go'. We hope that this book will encourage the readers to use literary texts with their students and that the ideas presented here will help enrich and enhance their language learning.

### Note

Readers will note the regular use of the terms L1, L2, ESL, EFL, TEFL and TESL: L1 — the mother tongue of students, L2 — Second Language, ESL — English as a Second Language, EFL — English as a Foreign Language, TEFL — the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language, TESL — the Teaching of English as a Second Language. All refer to the same phenomenon: the learning and teaching of English to Hong Kong students. As the status of English in Hong Kong has not yet been satisfactorily resolved, these terms are used synonymously throughout the book.



## **Introduction to the Primary Section**

The first section contains five chapters, all focusing on the issue of how 'literature', in its broadest sense, can be embedded in the ELT primary classroom.

Although the first two chapters, by Harris and Mahon, and Margaret Falvey, deal with different topics (writing, in the first instance, and rhymes and riddles in the second), they have been placed first in order to provide the reader with a sound theoretical applied linguistic and educational foundation to the use of literature in the language classroom which helps to underpin the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 1, Harris and Mahon discuss the need for a process approach to creative writing. They demonstrate the benefits that a creative approach to writing can bring. Margaret Falvey, in Chapter 2, provides an analytical description of the benefits that can be brought to the language classroom by the use of rhymes and riddles, demonstrating some of the major elements involved in motivating young students.

In Chapter 3, Tyrrell's account of 'big book' work and Laine's description, in Chapter 4, of story-telling in the primary classroom, provide rich resource material for the teacher who wants to attempt such approaches, both of which have been used successfully by these teachers and others in Hong Kong and Asian settings.

In Chapter 5, Harris and Leung describe the reasons why Hong Kong's Educational Television Unit chose to make a series involving the presentation of authentic stories for use in the primary classroom. This chapter contrasts the major differences between the rather arid readers which are often presented to

children and the richness of the language used in genuine stories written to be told to children. One of the stories chosen for the series is 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' which Laine presents in Chapter 4.

Chapters 4 and 5 should be read together because they demonstrate how one useful and necessary activity can be approached in two complementary ways: either in the classroom, with the teacher reading or with the teacher using the stories from the television as a valuable and exploitable resource.



## **Introduction to the Secondary Section**

Whilst the first five chapters focused on the primary classroom and the role of 'literature' or literary techniques in language work with primary pupils, this section focuses on the secondary school language/literature/language arts classroom. In Chapter 6, Murphy discusses the need for less boring, more interesting texts in the secondary classroom, echoing a theme raised earlier by Laine and Harris and Leung in Chapters 4 and 5.

In Chapter 7, Tibbetts treats the topic of poetry in the classroom. Readers should read Tibbetts in association with Peter Falvey's chapter in the third and final section. In Chapter 7, Tibbetts shows his own and his students' poems. In the third section, Falvey shows his own and his student-teachers' poems. Both chapters demonstrate what and how much can be achieved with encouragement and example in typical student or student teacher classrooms.

In Chapter 8, Chan who often demonstrated to the public what can be achieved by using 'literature' in a typical Hong Kong language classroom when he was the Panel Chair (Head of English) at Tuen Mun Government Secondary School, shows how songs have qualities which can be exploited with secondary students of English.

Mahoney, a practising playwright, discusses the use of drama in the classroom in Chapter 9. He shows how the use of role play, simulation, improvisation and other techniques which are part of the repertoire of training strategies used in the theatre are now an integrated part of the typically active language classroom. He demonstrates how these techniques can be used to enhance language learning.

Kennedy, who has worked with secondary school students, adults and

teachers in training shows just how interactive the use of the short story can be with active language practice. In Chapter 10, he provides examples of language work based on the use of the short story. This demonstrates that stories can be used to fulfill the goals of the English syllabuses for Hong Kong secondary schools. They can be interesting and motivating and still provide opportunities for valid language activities.

All five writers demonstrate clearly that there need not be an artificial gulf between literature and language. They show that language teaching can benefit greatly from the classroom techniques and strategies usually associated with good literature teaching and that the judicious use of 'literature' can strengthen the typical language class and its activities.

It is important to note that the introduction of the Target Oriented Curriculum will provide teachers, materials writers and textbook writers for secondary schools with a wonderful opportunity to exploit the use of literary texts and literary techniques because of the experiential dimension in the language work provided in the TOC syllabuses and Bands of Performance. Opportunities for students to react to life and literature will need to be provided.



## Introduction to the Tertiary Section

In this section, two chapters are devoted to a discussion of the active use of drama and poetry activities with tertiary level student teachers. In Chapter 11, Velda Harris, drawing on her extensive experience in UK and Asia with student teachers, demonstrates how participatory activities taken from theatre practices can aid textual comprehension and act as a stimulus for speaking and writing.

Several years ago, Richard Via, writing in the *TESOL Journal* of his experiences in the USA and Japan, demonstrated how successful such activities can be with second language speakers. Velda Harris, using more recent methods, demonstrates the same points, focusing on the use of Shakespearean text for language enhancement.

In Chapter 12, Peter Falvey stresses the importance, in the literature/language poetry classroom, of teachers leading by example in order to lend credibility to their teaching and to provide interest and motivation for their students. He maintains that just as teachers must provide good examples for their students, so must teacher educators. The chapter also discusses the uses to which poetry writing can be put in the language classroom. The data for this chapter is drawn from examples of student-teacher work at the University of Hong Kong.



## Conclusion

One theme appears constantly throughout this book. It is that in the English language classroom, whether it be at primary, secondary or tertiary levels, high interest and positive motivation can occur through active learning when literary texts, literary techniques and literariness become regular features of the class.

There is an increasing trend, worldwide, to incorporate both literature and literary techniques into the English language classroom. Since Hong Kong already possesses a forward looking Form 5 and Form 7 A/S Level syllabus, there is no reason why the good work which often occurs at the end of students' school lives should not take place much earlier, from early in primary school.

There is an opportunity for this to occur relatively soon in Hong Kong because of the introduction of the TOC. It is within the context of the TOC that a number of contributors have mentioned the experiential dimension which is part of the English Language TOC. Once TOC is implemented throughout the primary and secondary school system, it will be necessary for textbook writers and teachers to create materials, activities and assessment tasks for this dimension. The texts, techniques and tasks mentioned throughout the book can provide easily accessible resources for this dimension which encourages the student to experience the feelings and emotions which the typical classroom text does not stimulate or encourage. Indeed, many of the practices described here allow the student to not only access but also to express feelings and emotions through literary genres such as narrative, creative writing, poetry, the short story and drama.

- In virtually every chapter, contributors make a number of recurring points:
- literary texts are authentic texts written to be read and enjoyed;
  - literary texts are enjoyable for the second language learner if they are chosen with care;
  - the motivating features of literary texts and techniques can greatly enhance the work of the language classroom;
  - typical students are capable of being creative;
  - a lively, highly motivated class, enjoying their language learning are likely to be able to use English better than the class which consists of students who are unmotivated and bored;
  - literary texts allow students to access and express emotions and feelings which fit in with the experiential dimension of the Target Oriented Curriculum;
  - what the contributors are describing have taken place with ordinary students in ordinary classrooms in Hong Kong and Macau;
  - what they are describing is not difficult to carry out if a teacher has enthusiasm.

It should be noted that Falvey (1996), in talking about the dearth of English teachers in Hong Kong who are both subject and professionally qualified, discusses the need for special treatment for teachers of English. This is because so many are not capable of exploiting the many appropriate texts and techniques which are readily available to them.

Furthermore, it is quite clear from preliminary research work on language benchmarks for teachers (Coniam and Falvey, 1996) that many teachers who possess neither content knowledge nor professional training in teaching English are totally 'book-bound' in their struggle to survive in the English language classroom. In order to survive, they slavishly follow the textbook, not always understanding the pedagogic points which it promotes. It is impossible to ask teachers such as those described here to use literary texts, to work creatively with students, to have the confidence to tell stories, to write poems, to use short stories instead of textbook texts.

Does this mean that the approaches advocated here must be abandoned? The answer is an emphatic 'no!'. Hope is at hand. Once language benchmarks are implemented, we will have a teaching force whose English language ability will be benchmarked, whose subject content knowledge/language awareness will be benchmarked and who will all have professional training. Once these conditions are met, the good work which is already taking places in a large number of Hong Kong classes can be spread to other classrooms with other teachers. It will then be possible to see the types of texts and techniques advocated here used on a regular and systematic basis.

The hope for the future of English language teaching in Hong Kong rests on the implementation of a number of initiatives which are currently being promoted. They are:

- the implementation of TOC principles,
- the establishment of language benchmarks for teachers of English at all levels,
- the decision that all teachers will be professionally qualified by 2004.

Once these three factors are fully implemented, it will be possible for the ideas presented in this book to become reality for the majority of English teachers in Hong Kong.

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