

*Learning Language Through Literature  
in Secondary Schools*

**A Resource Book  
for Teachers of English**

EDITED BY

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# 1

CHAPTER

## Worlds of Words: Authenticity of Response and the Experience of Literary Texts in the Hong Kong Second-language Classroom

*Peter Kennedy and Peter Falvey*

### INTRODUCTION

Read this poem. Resist the temptation to skip this bit!

#### *Wires<sup>1</sup>*

*The widest prairies have electric fences,  
For though old cattle know they must not stray  
Young steers are always scenting purer water  
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires*

*Leads them to blunder up against the wires  
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.  
Young steers become old cattle from that day,  
Electric limits to their widest senses.*

Read it through again and, as you do so, note down:

1. your first thoughts as to what it might be 'about';
2. the feelings it evoked or any personal experiences that came to mind while you were reading the poem; and

3. the questions you asked yourself as you went along (e.g. were there any words you weren't sure about?).

Here are our initial responses.

#### Peter A

- **Title** What does the title refer to? What kind of wires are they? Telephone/telegraph wires? Barbed wire?
- **Pictures** It is cows in a field but it isn't a 'field' or a 'meadow', it is a 'prairie'. . . (mental picture of a combine harvester in an American landscape — Kansas? — wheat — breakfast cereal advert)!
- **Sounds** 'though old cattle know' . . . There are a lot of 'oh' sounds there . . . Why?
- **Questions** Old cattle and young steers . . . It is something to do with youth and experience? What?
- **Language** 'muscle-shredding' . . . Sounds like a Bruce Willis or Schwarzenegger film . . . 'give quarter'? Arthurian romance — jousts — knights, when one knight is on the ground and the other one has a lance at his throat. What is the exact meaning of the phrase? Check it in the dictionary.
- **Personal experiences** 'electric fences' . . . reminds me of holiday in Devon, when we tried to take a short cut, got stuck in the corner of a field and couldn't get into the next one because of an electric fence . . . buzzing. We had to walk the long way round to get back onto the road . . . very annoyed with the farmer. Why do they do that? How much of a shock do you get if you touch them? How strong would the electric current be?

#### Peter B

- The title, *Wires*, makes me think of concentration camps and films that I have seen — it reminds me of Steve McQueen, one of my favourite actors in that famous prison camp film.
- 'Prairies' sets me off thinking of the old Westerns and the battles between the ranchers who wanted wide-open spaces and the sheep-herders and farmers who wanted to enclose the spaces.
- The first stanza, however, brings me back and I begin to think of operant conditioning and the 'learning' that the old steers have encountered when blundering into the electrified fences.
- The 'purer water' makes me think of my days in the desert and the needs that drive animals — and humans.
- I wonder why the poet carries the last line of the first stanza over into the second stanza, but then I realize what a powerful image those two lines create, especially the phrase 'muscle-shredding' in the next line and the contrast of 'beyond the wires' with 'up against the wires'.

- I got to the end of the poem and thought ‘This is interesting’ but I need to read it again a few times.

The first reactions by Hong Kong University students to this poem are shown in Appendix 1.

### What Were We Doing As We Were Reading?

Although our responses to Philip Larkin’s poem *Wires* were very different, there were a number of things they had in common:

1. We looked at the title and started speculating as to what the poem might be about even before we read it.
2. We made inferences, e.g. ‘The poem appears to be about cows but is something to do with youth and experience.’
3. The poem sparked off associations. We connected the words with films we had seen, books we had read, personal experiences we had had.
4. We didn’t understand it all at the first reading. Even after a second reading, we were still puzzling it out using the clues in the text and asking ourselves questions, e.g.:
  - The poem has an interesting shape — ABCD DCBA. Why is that?
  - If you read aloud lines two and three, they have different rhythms/speeds. Why?
  - There is very little punctuation in the first stanza, but then two full stops and a comma in the last three lines. Why?

The poem provoked thoughts and evoked feelings simultaneously.

### THINKING AND FEELING

Ted Hughes reminds us that reading a poem is a physical, sensual experience. Poems present vivid pictures and open our eyes so that we begin to *look* closely at what we only *saw* before. Poems re-attune our ears so that we *listen* attentively to what we merely *heard* before. Poems refresh and awaken our five senses:

... words that live are those which we hear, like ‘click’ or ‘chuckle’ or which we see like ‘freckled’ or ‘veined’ or which we taste like ‘vinegar’ or ‘sugar’ or ‘touch’, like ‘prickle’ or ‘oily’ or smell like ‘tar’ or ‘onion’. Words which belong directly to one of the five senses or words which act and seem to use their muscles like ‘flick’ or ‘balance’.<sup>2</sup>

*Wires* evokes powerful feelings. However, the expression of personal feelings about a literary text isn’t enough. We must not lose sight of the text itself. A literary text is LANGUAGE used in interesting ways. It needs to be looked at as a linguistic artifact which can tell second-language learners things



about the language system, extend what they know about grammar and vocabulary (this does NOT mean ransacking it for verbs — see tasks below!). We have been talking above about what we would call the Experience Dimension of TOC, but the tasks in this book also fulfil the requirements of the other two dimensions necessary for full competence in English — the *Knowledge Dimension* and the *Interpersonal Dimension*. For instance, such goals as:

### Knowledge Dimension

- Using a range of language patterns for various purposes
- Employing contextual and syntactic cues to interpret words
- Making connections between simple facts and information not directly stated through clues

### Interpersonal Dimension

- Soliciting, sharing of experiences, views, preferences, attitudes and values
- Understanding other people's views, attitudes and preferences in conversational exchanges
- Discriminating between the different styles of writing used by different people in common relationships

A literary text appeals to both the intellect and the emotions at the same time. Reading is not a dry, cerebral activity. It does not entail taking a text to pieces and labelling the parts — its metre, rhythm, verbal texture, etc. — like a specimen in the biology lab. Neither is it just emoting at the text, using it as a springboard for fantasies. For, as Hughes reminds us:

there is the inner life, the world of memory, emotion, imagination which goes on all the time like the heart-beat. There is also the thinking process by which we break into that inner life . . . if we do not, then our minds lie in us like fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.<sup>3</sup>

## 'LITERARY' TEXTS AND SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING

More than 100,000 students a year take the HKCE English Language exam but fewer than 1,000 take the English Literature exam. So why bother with literary texts? We have put forward elsewhere, some of the arguments for using literary (small 'l') texts in the second-language class.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that Hong Kong children will not be sustained through thirteen years' schooling by the thought that one day they may need English for a job! Learning has to be — the three Ms — MOTIVATING, MEANINGFUL and MEMORABLE. Literary texts that are stimulating and worthwhile can put the intellectual content back

into language learning. The fruitful ambiguity of literary texts may be harnessed to generate tasks that engage interest and offer an outlet for students' creative energies. These striking texts and challenging tasks, in turn, help make the language more memorable.

But these words become slogans, just empty phrases to which we pay lip-service, if we lose sight of the central reason for the existence of a literary text — it was written for the reader to enjoy. Literary texts are killed stone-dead if they are treated just like other EFL texts, if they are read only for information not for pleasure, if individuals are not allowed to give their responses to the delights of the text.

### How NOT to Use Literary Texts in the Second-language Class

1. (Ab)using them to teach **grammar**. Ransacking them for examples of the present perfect, plundering them for new items of vocabulary.
2. Smothering them with worksheets which ask students to carry out dull **tasks**, such as underlining adjectives or answering pointless comprehension questions.
3. **Lecturing** on the texts and playing the 'Look how much teacher knows' game, rather than letting students make their own discoveries about the texts.
4. Asking students to formulate a response before they are ready or forcing them to share **personal feelings** in class when they don't want to. They can come to this naturally as examples in following chapters show.
5. Boiling the texts down to **moral** 'lessons about life'. Children shy away from books that preach or try to persuade them. (Much has been written about the traditional didactic role of literary texts in China and how this is traceable to Confucianism. In fact, as a Chinese scholar has recently pointed out, this is based on a misinterpretation of Confucius' writing. Although in the *Analects* he did stress that poetry should help 'observe social conditions' *guan* and 'give expression to complaints' *yuan*, he also said it can 'stimulate the imagination' *xing*.)<sup>5</sup>

### What Might We Have Done With the Poem (*Wires*) in a Hong Kong Language Class?

We chose this poem with teachers in mind. It is a bit more difficult than the texts you would normally use in class, but it *is* still accessible to an upper-secondary class.

We didn't come to the poem blank. We put a template of thoughts and feelings over it as we read. Any 'reading' of a text is, in part, a 'reading' of ourselves too. A literary text is a patterning of language not Reality. However, it presents *a* reality, a parallel world. Reading is an interactive process, a negotiation between the text and the knowledge, experiences and ideas we bring to it. In this sense, the reader is part of the creative process:

Interpretation of the text depends on the reader's ability to imagine a meaningful world in their interaction with the language of the text.<sup>6</sup>

For students to relate *Wires* to their imaginative and emotional lives, they must be given an opportunity to express their genuine reactions to the text, not channelled or directed. They need a chance to experience it first-hand, not to talk ABOUT or OUTSIDE it. What we are advocating is that students are taken through the same (authentic) PROCESS of reading as you went through earlier with *Wires*.

Here are some possible (pre-, while- and post-reading) tasks you may wish to use with the poem.

#### *Pre-reading Tasks*

- **Title** What does the title suggest to you? Students brainstorm and the teacher puts their suggestions on the board.
- **Visual prompts** Bring in magazine pictures, display them around the room but don't refer to them directly. Let students make the connections for themselves, e.g. a picture of cows in field, another of adolescents on a street corner and one of barbed wire.
- **Word association** Put the words 'prairie', 'cattle', etc. on the board and ask students to talk about their (personal) experiences or the mental pictures that they associate with these words.
- **Word association** The teacher says, 'You are going to hear a poem in which these (six) words appear,' and puts six words on the board, e.g. fences, cattle, wires, violence, limits, senses. Then the teacher says, 'What do you expect the poem to be about? What "story" do you think it will tell?'

#### *While- and Post-reading Tasks*

- After the students have read the poem, make two columns on the board. Put the words 'young' at the top of one column and 'old' at the top of the other. Ask the students to call out the pros and cons of being young/old, e.g. young people have more fun, old people have more freedom. The class debate the topic of *Youth vs Age*.
- Dictation/composition: The teacher reads the poem; each student writes down the words he/she can recall. Next the teacher reads the poem again and pairs of students, using their list of words, begin to reconstruct the poem. Then the teacher reads the poem a third time and groups of students sit together for a further reconstruction of the poem.
- Cloze/dictionary work, e.g.
  1. Students look up the words 'field', 'meadow', 'prairie' in the dictionary to understand the subtle differences between them.

2. Delete five words (which should include 'prairie') from the poem and give out the cloze version of the poem.
  3. Students fill in the blanks.
- To help students become more sensitive to (subtle) differences in meaning of the words the poet uses, put up on the board the words 'field', 'meadow', 'prairie'. Ask students why they think the poet chose 'prairie' and what the poem would lose if he had chosen one of the other two words, e.g. 'meadow' instead of 'prairie' (more domestic, less vast). The same procedure is repeated for the following:
    - e.g. steer, cow, bull (the OED defines *steer* as young, male, castrated and raised for beef!);
    - e.g. smelling and scenting.
  - Present the poem line by line on, if possible, an overhead transparency. After presenting two lines, stop and ask the students what they think the poem is about. Present another two lines and ask them again and so on. At the end, attempt to elicit how their expectations altered as they got more and more information.
  - Make enough copies of the poem for groups of four students. Cut up the text. Jumble the lines and put them in an envelope. Give each group an envelope. Ask them to organize the lines into a poem and stick them onto a clean sheet/card. Groups compare poems by reading them out or by swapping them. They then explain how they arrived at their version. Ask them to say what clues assisted them in ordering the lines. Was it the rhyme pattern, grammar, conjunctions, etc.? Give out the original poem and ask students to read and compare it with their own version.
  - Students write (three) questions about the text for another group to answer. This is a refreshing alternative to the teacher always asking all the questions.

### *Extended Activities*

*Wires* is a short poem but the mind goes on after the poem stops. Ask students to:

- draw a picture to illustrate the poem;
- rewrite the poem as a newspaper report (e.g. an incident in which an adolescent 'learnt from experience' or a smug adult was taught by an adolescent to unlearn what he/she thought he/she knew!); and
- write their own poems on the theme of *Youth and Age*.

## LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CREATIVITY

Employers in Hong Kong complain of a lack of 'creativity' and original thinking among school-leavers. If Hong Kong is to compete effectively, they say, schools need to foster in students the capacity for questioning and for critical reflection.

Viewed in this way, 'education' is not a matter of narrow skills training, but of **educing** — of developing the capacity for sustained enquiry. This point was made by the Director of Education:

Instead of just imparting knowledge, we should be teaching our children to be enthused about acquiring knowledge, to enjoy the experience of learning and to train their minds to be critical and analytical . . . to develop an attitude and aptitude for lifelong learning . . .<sup>7</sup>

For too long, second-language education in Hong Kong was concerned with skills training and with learning **about** language. 'Enjoyment' is not a word many children would associate with their (language) learning experiences! Abbs (1994) speaks of the boredom and disenchantment young people feel when education does not extend their sensibilities and intellects, fails ' . . . to turn their energies to the creative elaboration of their lives.'<sup>8</sup>

The Experience Dimension of the new Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) aims to develop the capability to use English ' . . . to give expression to real and imaginative experience' through the use of poems, plays and stories. These reforms hold out the possibility that the creative elaboration of the lives of Hong Kong children can now occur in the second-language classroom. The use of literary texts in the language class will no longer be a marginal Friday afternoon activity but will be central to the school curriculum.

This view has been boosted recently by a report on the Hong Kong Public Examinations System (Hong Kong Baptist University, 1998) which proposes that the range of achievements to be assessed at CEE and ALE should be broadened, and that school-based assessment should be adopted. This move towards school-based assessment would include the kind of projects, portfolios, class tests and assignments which lend themselves to experiential class-work of the type presented in this book. On TOC, ROPES suggests:

The innovation is likely to change from its original conception . . . [in] an on-going process of adaptation and modification.<sup>9</sup>

The intention is to retain the best of TOC but in a form which does not upset the well-entrenched view of assessment held by the Hong Kong public.

There is a further point to be made about language creativity. Recent corpora research — based on analyses of huge data banks of contemporary spoken English — has revealed that creative play with language is common in everyday English. Dialogue, it seems, is a verbal double act in which one person picks up a phrase another has used and modifies it when his/her 'turn' comes. It is a speech 'act', co-constructed and co-scripted. These patterns of inventiveness found in ordinary conversation — word-play, joking with fixed phrases, reformulating idioms — are features we normally associate with 'literary' language.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that getting students to use English 'creatively' is not something

that can be left to the end of the language learning process — until after the grammar and vocabulary have been mastered — creativity is inherent in ordinary language use. 'Literary' uses of language routinely occur in speech and in all kinds of texts. Learning to learn and developing learning strategies involve aesthetic understanding, appreciating the creative play and invention of language use. As Carter and McCarthy (1994) put it:

students' language development is best supported when they are exposed to a continuum of texts, both literary and non-literary texts . . . all kinds of creative and purposeful play with the resources of the language needs to be presented with the texts organized around related themes.<sup>11</sup>

If Hong Kong's prosperity is to be maintained, it must continue to look West as well as East. A lot of the individuality, creativity and critical thinking being constantly spoken about in education circles will need to occur in English as well as in Chinese. For this to happen, second-language learning can no longer be only about grammar and superficial communication. Linking second-language learning to the feelings, opinions and experiences of students can give them a chance to express their individuality in a second language. Using literary texts in the second-language classroom can also play a part in developing such creativity and critical thinking. Affective learning can encourage effective second-language learning. The following chapters in this book illustrate how this can be done, but before reading them, take a moment to glance through the words in Appendix 2 which have been used to define poetry, stories and drama.

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## NOTES

1. Larkin, 1955.
2. Hughes, 1982, p. 17.
3. Hughes, 1982, p. 57.
4. See Falvey and Kennedy, 1997, and Kennedy and Falvey, 1998.
5. Cited in Tang, 1997, pp. 151–175.
6. Semino, 1997, p. 9.
7. *South China Morning Post*, 25 November 1998.
8. Abbs, 1994, p. 35.
9. Hong Kong Baptist University, 1998, p. 179.
10. This point was made by Carter (1998).
11. Carter and McCarthy, 1994, pp. 166–167.

## APPENDIX 1: FIRST RESPONSES BY HKU STUDENTS AND (TRAINEE) TEACHERS TO *WIRES*

### Making Inferences

- The poet is talking about boundaries and experiences — the innocence or naïveté of the young and how experience makes them 'wiser' and ultimately limits their zest for new things.
- The old are complacent, willing to be confined in contrast with the adventurous young ones.
- There is a parallel between cattle and humans . . . the wires are the constraints of society and the limits of freedom.
- Older people seem to live behind 'virtual fences' that limit their thinking and behaviour.

### Feelings and Reactions

- Rules, regulations, discipline, laws, responsibility . . . the young possess guts, courage, fantasies, dreams but they will (learn to) conform.
- Wires, electric limits imply painful, often unseen, controlling forces.
- The electric limits are imposed — a corralling of freedom.



### Related Personal Experiences

- An image of open space made into a prison . . . widest prairies — USA at dusk.
- This is a poem about how young cattle 'learn their lesson' . . .
- I thought about how my students sometimes say they study in a 'prison', how they are stifled by all the rules.
- It makes me think of a prison. The young steers are the young, violent prisoners, the old cattle are like old prisoners who have been locked up a long time.
- The title *Wires* makes me think of nerves in the brain.

### Puzzling It Out

I'm not sure about the meanings of one or two words.

### The Poem As An Aesthetic Object

- I like the rhythms of this poem.
- I like the phrase 'beyond the wires'. It separates the two stanzas but at the same time links them together.
- The rhymes are organized in this way — the last sentence of the first stanza rhymes with the first sentence of the second stanza and so on.

## APPENDIX 2: POETRY? STORIES? DRAMA?

### Poetry?

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.

— W. Wordsworth

Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance.

— J. Ruskin

A parcel which will not come undone despite being hurled repeatedly at the wall.

— R. Graves

True ease in writing comes from art not chance,  
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.  
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence  
The sound must seem the echo of the sense.

— A. Pope



Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement.

— C. Fry

### Stories?

A patterned dramatisation of life.

— E.A. Poe

A true short story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short.

— B. Mathews

A story is like a horse race, it is the start and finish that count most.

— E. Hemingway

There are three necessary elements in a story — exposition, development and drama.

— F. O'Connor

With a short story, you have to be there on every word; every verb has to be lambent and strong.

— J. Cheever

### Drama?

A Muse of fire that would ascend

The highest heaven of invention.

— W. Shakespeare

Students making an imaginative leap from their actual roles . . . enter into the drama without fear of the consequences that might result from such a situation in real life.

— J. Somers

People watching film or TV tend to lean back, people in the theatre to lean forward. The body-language tells a truth . . . the theatre cannot shed the civic and religious importance it possessed at its dawning.

— B. Nightingale

Theatre is one of the inheritors of pre-industrial ritual: ideas and images, clown and gods, cosmos and chaos, all the sensory codes, music, dance, body language, song and chant.

— V. Turner

To use the simplest means — a person's hand or face, an inarticulate cry, an empty space — to draw together moments of performance that can seem an enhancement of an audience's own thoughts and desires.

— J.R. Brown