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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND ESL

by Sidney L. Jenson

The teacher is insulted, not the student. The teacher is bored, not the student. The teacher thinks the stuff childish, not the student. In a recent article (TESL Reporter, Winter 1974), Ted Plaister reported success in teaching English to twenty Japanese university graduates using Mother Goose

Rhymes. These sophisticated Japanese were not offended by Plaister's use of children's literature. They knew that the end, in this case, justified the means. But more important, the students found the Mother Goose rhymes exciting work. Hearing and analyzing these rhymes was fun and challenging.

In our reading classes at the Church College of Hawaii with our off-campus programs, we have used the Harrison method (Grant Harrison, Beginning Reading 1, BYU Press, 1972) for beginning readers. The early part of Harrison's program uses stories like: "This is a fan. This is mush. The fan is in the sun. The mush is in the sun. I mash the mush. The fan is fun." This is not very exciting reading for adult readers--adults, that is, who can already read. We have taught graduate students from Japan and Taiwan, Samoa and the Philippines, who could not read or who read very poorly. They found the reading of "This is a fan" very exciting--fun and challenging.

But as we trained people to use the Harrison method, we had many adults say, "But aren't the kids offended by this stuff?" None of the children I worked with, and none of the adults with whom I worked was offended.

There is a great concern and a growing demand for "adult" reading material for the lower grades. The Hawaii Department of Education, for example, is concerned about this "problem," they lack easy, adult reading materials. I do not see a serious problem.

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My answer is, any material will work as long as it is the proper grade level for the student. It does not have to be "adult" material.

This semester I am working with nineteen second language students ranging in ability from fourth grade to seventh grade in reading ability. Some are college graduates from Japan and Taiwan; some have never been to high school. The program¹ we are following

Sidney Jenson, an Associate Professor of English at The Church College of Hawaii, has taught at Utah State University, Southern Utah State College, and the University of Utah. He received his PhD degree from the University of Utah in 1972.

has two major components:

a one hour intensive in-class section and a one hour extensive out-of-class section. The in-class reading material ranges between grades five and seven. As a group we discuss vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, culture, and meaning. This material is usually "adult" material with controlled vocabulary.

In the out-of-class section we spend our time in the library, in the children's section. I select the material for the in-class work; the student selects the material for the out-of-class reading. The student is encouraged to find a book that interests him, and is relatively easy for him to read. For example, if he is now reading on a fifth grade level, he should find books in the second, third and fourth grade levels. The student is encouraged not to use his dictionary, but to make predictions or educated guesses from the context clues to discover work meanings. Some students will select books far below their measured reading ability; but they will read ten or twenty books in a week. Some of our students had never read an entire book, cover to cover, before. The finishing of a book, no matter how easy, gives them a sense of accomplishment and success they have rarely, if ever, experienced.

Our objective in this class is rapid, silent reading-not translation. Unless one reads at 200 words per minute or faster, he cannot really comprehend total meaning. If a student does not know almost all of the words on a page, he cannot really know

what a new word means, even with a dictionary. Reading is not a science; it is an art. None of us really knows how anybody reads. As Wallace Stegner has said, we attempt to analyze the experience of reading, but ultimately we cannot explain the reader's experience any more than we can explain the creative principle or act of the writer.²

Because of this, teachers really do not teach reading. Teachers encourage reading. Students must teach themselves. Teachers can teach some basic skills such as phonics or analysis of rhetorical modes. But ultimately we all must "learn ourselves" how to read. A teacher's main role is a guide, helping a student avoid what often is a boring and terribly frustrating experience. The teacher can help (1) help the student find material that is interesting; (2) help the student find material that suits his reading ability; and (3) encourage the student to read plenty of it. Plenty of reading, or what I call "mileage," is really the key. The only way to develop an extensive vocabulary is through reading; and obviously the only way to develop the habit of reading is by reading.

Our library at the Church College (Brigham Young University-Hawaii Campus) has many children's books which fulfill requirements one and two. I am trying to fill the third. For an hour each day, I and three other student assistants sit with the class in the library. The students come to us and ask any questions they like. For five hours a week we do this, and I have always been able to find a book I enjoy reading from the children's section. Maybe this says something bad about my interests and intellect. But what I think it really says is that I enjoy reading and that there are many good books in the children's literature section. With a little luck, the students also might acquire a taste for reading and develop a life-long craving for the stuff.

¹For a description of a similar program see David E. Eskey, "A Model Program for Teaching Advanced Reading to Students of English as a Foreign Language," *Language Learning*, 23, 169-85.

²Wallace Stegner, "One Way to Spell Man," *The Saturday Review*, 41 (24 May 1958), 43.