

## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

*CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.*

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### Language Learner Literature<sup>i</sup>

Richard R. Day

This is the fourth and final article in a series of materials for teaching foreign language reading. In the first article, I challenged the assumption that *authentic* materials are preferable to other types of materials in teaching foreign language reading. I claimed that using authentic texts with beginning and intermediate students can impede foreign language reading development. The reason is, I argued, is that authentic texts are often too difficult. In the second and third articles, I examined the process of developing simplified reading material. I concluded that they have a number of strengths that are critical in teaching beginning and intermediate students how to read in a foreign language, but often such simplified material is not normal discourse (text written for communication), and, as a result, is not appropriate material for learning to read.

The purpose of this article is to answer and discuss the question posed at the conclusion of the third article: Are there materials that can communicate with their audience of learners and, at the same time, are at the appropriate linguistic level? The astute reader, one who has read the previous three articles carefully, will recognize that I am asking if it is possible to combine the strengths of authentic and simplified materials. As you might suspect, I maintain that there is. My colleague Julian Bamford and I called such material *language learner literature* (e.g., Day and Bamford, 1998).

We see the term language learner literature as exactly the same as other established genres, such as science fiction, mystery, young adult literature and children's literature—all of which are established genres in their own right. Language learner literature includes fiction and non-fiction, original writing and texts adapted for language learners. Regardless of its form, language learner literature is written to communicate with its audience of language learners, just as other genres attempt to communicate with their audiences. Language learner literature is genuine writing; it is not a watered-down version of something else but a fully-realized, complete-in-itself act of communication between author and audience. The basis for judging success or failure of language learner literature is therefore identical to that of other writing: the response of its readers—the sense they make and the experiences they have.

Those of us who teach English as fortunate to be able to use language learner literature in teaching reading. All of the major publishers of English language teaching materials have outstanding collections of language learner literature. It is rather easy to find this material. Simply get catalogs from the publishers and look for the category *graded readers*. You can obtain catalogs either directly from the publishers or by going on the Internet and logging on to their websites. David Hill has written an excellent

review of graded reviews (2001). In addition, the appendix to Day and Bamford (1998), written by Hill, is a listing of the best of graded readers.

Let's look at what this language learner literature has to offer the reading instructor. To begin with, the publishers *grade* their books according to the difficulty of the material. This is done by vocabulary. The publishers have their own vocabulary lists generally determined by frequency (e.g., the most frequent 300 words in the English language). If there are words in a book that are not in the level (e.g., 600 word level), they are found in a glossary at the end of the book.

In addition to the various levels of difficulty, there is a wide variety of material, including fiction and nonfiction. In the nonfiction category, there is biography, science, sports, and so on. This material is generally written specifically for the audience of language learners; it has not been adapted or simplified from material originally written for native readers of English.

The fiction category of language learner literature is large. There are books dealing with mystery, romance, comedy and so on. This material contains both books written specifically for the audience of language learners and those which were adapted or simplified. This latter includes best sellers from such authors as Stephen King and John Grisham as well as classics (e.g., Dickens and Shakespeare).

I suggest that you not be too concerned about the difference between books written specifically for the audience of language learners and those which were adapted or simplified. The most important criterion is communication. Does a book communicate with its intended reader?

Let me close this article with a brief excerpt from a book that I think communicates well with beginning learners of English. *Jojo's Story* is a Level 2 book in the Cambridge English Readers. Here are the opening paragraphs from the first chapter:

It's dark again. So it's evening. It's the third evening. No, I'm wrong. It's the fourth evening.

It's . . . Tuesday . . . Wednesday . . . Thursday. Yes, it's Thursday. Why do I count the days? Why do I say it's Thursday? There aren't any more days. There's just time. Time when it's dark, and time when it's light.

Everything is dead, so why not days, too? Yes. No more days. No more Thursdays. There is only now.

And there is only me. Why? Why aren't I dead, too?

I find these lines to be incredibly powerful. They immediately involve the reader in the story. We want to find out more about Jojo. Remember that this is a Level 2 book (out of six levels).

In conclusion, learning to read in a second language is a formidable task, involving time and effort on the part of student and teacher alike. Both deserve the best possible tools, in this case reading materials.

English teachers are indeed fortunate to have a strong and varied language learner literature that is inherently interesting and well-written, and which offers appropriate supports for reading. I believe that this material can be used successfully by teachers who wish their students to develop reading ability and a love of reading in English.

References:

Day, R.R. & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hill, D. R. (July 2001). Survey of graded readers. *ELT Journal*, 55, No. 3, pp. 300-324

Moses, A. (2000). *Jojo's story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!*

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<sup>i</sup> This is adapted from Day & Bamford (1998), Chapter 6.