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E-mail: m_j_watson@hotmail.com

Teaching Forum

Cutting, Pasting, and Learning Irish:
Poetry as Pedagogy

Roslyn Blyn-LaDrew
University of Pennsylvania

Stimulated by a presentation given by Dr. Mary Ann Julian on using literature to teach language¹, I decided to experiment with one of the techniques she suggested. Dr. Julian had given participants, teamed in pairs, strips of paper each containing one line of the poem "The Oxen" by Thomas Hardy. The object was to work together and assemble the poem in correct order, using such clues as rhyme scheme, word order, discourse sequence and narrative continuity. Even as one of few present for whom English was the first language, I found the project challenging and rewarding and decided I would eventually try it with my Irish classes at the University of Pennsylvania.

Upon examining several poetry anthologies, I found that selecting an appropriate poem would be a challenge. I considered some selections by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill since I knew the media attention she has received was of interest to my students. On closer examination, however, I decided the rhyme schemes were too irregular or too fluid for this purpose although they might be suitable for a more advanced class. I then turned to older traditional material and was reminded of the complications which would arise from the concatenations of internal rhyme characteristic of Irish poetry; the works may be very metrical but the rhyme may not be carried by the final word. Conceivably one could have students reconstruct internal rhyme schemes on a phrase by phrase basis, but I did not want to have too many tiny slips of paper! I also eliminated other selections with too much use the same final vowel which made end-rhyme useless as a clue and would make the project harder than necessary.

I finally settled on the ever popular "Mise Raifteirí,"² short but tightly constructed, and the more contemporary

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"An Doircheacht"³ by Seán Ó Riordáin, also very regular in rhyme scheme. I provided a list of the new vocabulary and explained the use of the dative plural ending ("-ibh") which appears in "An Doircheacht," but is not taught in most contemporary grammar books. The project was successful and the students collaborated with gusto. As review, on the next quiz, I asked them to summarize the poems in prose, providing them again with some of the new vocabulary which had been introduced. The summaries provided practice in grammar (changing from first to third person for "Mise Raifteiri") and practice in gisting (rewriting "An Doircheacht," which consists of two lengthy sentences of about 50 words each, in shorter sentences). Although the historical and literary analysis of these poems could certainly go far beyond what was accomplished in language class, they served as an interactive, engaging exercise strengthening grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension, providing one small key to the Irish language "through the back door."

NOTES

¹ 1995. Julian, Mary Ann. "Language through Literature -- Giving Learners a Key to the Back Door." Penn Language Center, University of Pennsylvania, February 2, 1995. (Dr. Julian is an Assistant Director of the English Language Programs at the University of Pennsylvania and teaches English as a Second Language.)

² 1981. Ó Tuama, Seán, ed. An Duanaire: An Irish Anthology --1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed, trans. Thomas Kinsella. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. p. 252. (The text is usually ascribed to Antoine Ó Reachtabhra (1784-1835) but Seán Ó Ceallaigh may also have worked on it.

³ 1975. Ó Laighin, Mícheál, and Bláthnait Ní Annracháin, eds. Bláth na hÓige: Duanaire na hArdteistiméireachta. Dublin: Ó Fallúin. p. 272.

*Department of Linguistics
619 Williams Hall
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305, USA
E-mail: rblyn@sas.upenn.edu*

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