

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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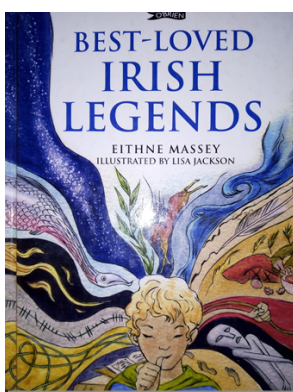
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Literature as a Bridge between Cultures.

by Vanesa Polastri & Stella Maris Saubidet Oyhamburu

Ireland and Argentina are 11,143 kilometres apart. One is in the Northern hemisphere; the other, in the Southern hemisphere. One is an English-speaking country, the other one is Spanish-speaking. One is European, the other is Latin American. There is an ocean in between. Many contrasts separate these two lands, yet there is something that connects them: literature. The following is an educational experience that took place in the subject “Language and Culture 1” at the English Teacher Training College N° 41, a state-run institution in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. We decided to develop a teaching sequence around Irish and Argentinian literary texts. In spite of the obvious differences in these cultural artifacts, the especially selected stories gave us the chance of not only working with authentic material as a source of L2 (English as a foreign language), but also dealing with their varied layers of meaning, as well as reflecting about self and other. As a result, we were able to appreciate points of contact that Ireland and Argentina share, through literature as a bridge between both cultures.

“The literary sources were chosen with a clear idea in mind: they would become bridges that would enhance intercultural mediation.”



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Fionn and the Giant

The literary sources were chosen with a clear idea in mind: they would become bridges that would enhance intercultural mediation. The first text selected was “Fionn and the Giant”, and it was taken from *Best-Loved Irish Legends*, a book written by Eithne Massey and illustrated by Lisa Jackson. According to the CEFR levels, our students belonged to the B2 level of proficiency. Yet, we decided to use authentic texts with them. This meant working with material that was developed for native speakers of English and even more specifically, those based in Ireland. Following a top-down reading pattern (from general to specific), we started by analysing the paratext, both the title and the illustration on the first page, so as to predict characters, setting and conflict. Then, while reading aloud, we checked comprehension and focused on inferring from textual hints. We asked students orally about the purpose of the character's actions and whether their reactions were the expected ones or not. We also explored literary devices, such as onomatopoeia

(“Bang, bang, bang”), alliteration (“tartan trousers”), hyperbole (“the giant was five times bigger than she was”), and cultural terms such as “haggis”, which is a typical Scottish dish. Finally, as a single group, we reverted the reading pattern, going bottom up (from specific, the details we analysed, to general, whole storyline) we built the narrative structure together: Introduction - Conflict - Resolution.

The Legend of Neuquén and Limay

Aiming at connecting both cultures, not only did we use sources from Ireland, but also from Argentina. The second literary text used was “The Legend of Neuquén and Limay” (names of two rivers that flow into a third river: *Río Negro*). This story was taken from *Legends from the Southern Region*, written by Fabrizio Origlio and Mario Cali, and illustrated by Iñaki Echeverría. In this case we selected a legend from the *Mapuche* community, native inhabitants from the Argentinian territory. We argued that English can be used to tell the world about our culture and our roots. Our students had to read it silently and individually, gaining autonomy as we moved away from the teacher read-aloud. Then, they had to reconstruct its narrative sequence collaboratively in pairs, putting into practice what we had discussed in the previous lesson.

Afterwards, the students shared their reconstructions in a whole-group oral discussion. The changes in the interaction scheme, from teacher-whole group in the first lesson to student-text, student-student and sharing afterwards with the other mates provided different steps in the scaffolding of task complexity and also enabled the progressive autonomous use of English.

Points of contact

After analysing the legends from these two distant and distinct countries our students were able to see the differences between them but were still unable to identify their connections. Finding those connections was our next challenge. We compared those texts to discover what they had in common. We agreed that in both literary sources there was a fight between two characters and the explanation of a geographical landmark: the Giant's Causeway and the fusion of two rivers into one. Our teacher trainees completed a Venn diagram to synthesise the comparison and contrast of the stories. They did online research on relevant information about the geographical spots in question, they inferred the protagonists' driving forces and judged the decisions taken by them. Such varied cognitive tasks, together with enough thinking time and the appropriate scaffolding led them to dive into the different layers of meaning in the legends.



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Finally, as a follow up, the students had to invent a non-scientific explanation for the creation of a natural element from anywhere in the world. They worked in groups and uploaded their written productions to the forum section in our virtual classroom.

Intertextuality

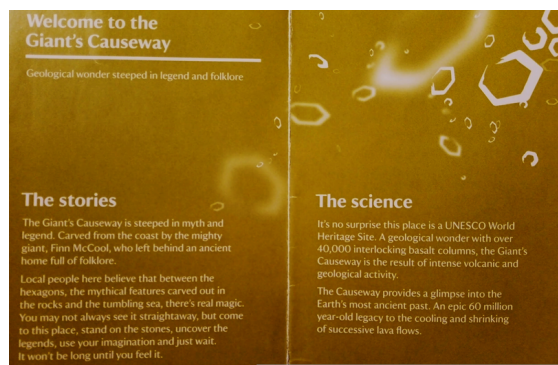
Within the actual paradigm of teaching foreign languages, we consider it enriching to work with a variety of literature genres in the ELT class, and better still, to explore genre intervention (Pope, 1995), i.e. paying attention to meaning, students are invited to go from one genre into another one, turning the text into a different genre, “playing” with genres. In this respect, in our next lesson, we began by plunging into a different version from the legend of “Fionn and the Giant” this time, in Spanish and made into a comic strip by the Argentinian (of Irish origin) writer Olga Drennen. We asked our students to put the panels in order, based on their knowledge of the plot from the previous lessons. Then we made them reflect upon the differences between the hypotext and this hypertext. They realised that this version had many more contextual details and explanations because its intended audience was Spanish-speaking children from our country, unfamiliar with the story and its characters. They also paid attention to different aspects: from genre characteristics to the exploitation of onomatopoeia. A key point in choosing a text in Spanish was making it clear that our mother tongue has no lesser value than that of the target language, reinforcing, in this way, our identity. Another genre that enriched our classes was a brochure from the Giant’s Causeway, another piece of authentic material. At this stage, our students obtained a scientific explanation of the formation of the marvellous hexagonal basalt stone pillars through a non-literary text. In this way they were able to delve into the richness of both fictional and nonfictional texts.



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Conclusion

Dealing with an array of genres -two legends, a comic strip, and a brochure- together with reading strategies and adequate scaffolding gave our students the opportunity to reflect upon the singularities and similarities of apparently two different countries and to bridge cultural distances. In order to deal with literature it is compelling to see texts as fields of meaning-making and as discourse, i.e. situated language in a communicative context, in intertextual relation (“bridge”, in our words) with other discourses (Bombini, 2005; our translation). As educators of future teachers of English we make use of literature for multiple reasons. Literature brings the context for the language to be analysed in use. It is concretised in different genres with distinctive features whose recognition fosters autonomy as readers, writers, listeners and speakers of a foreign language. But mostly, it tells about ourselves and others allowing for intercultural sensitivity development, as well as identity construction. Therefore, it is our purpose to contribute to our students’ training, not only as language proficient users but also as intercultural mediators.



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