

How can we enable all children to access and enjoy the unfamiliar language and structures of literary heritage texts – as demanded by the new primary curriculum? **Bob Cox** presents a selection of strategies to open up a wide range of poetry and prose texts and inspire pupils to craft interesting and creative narratives of their own.



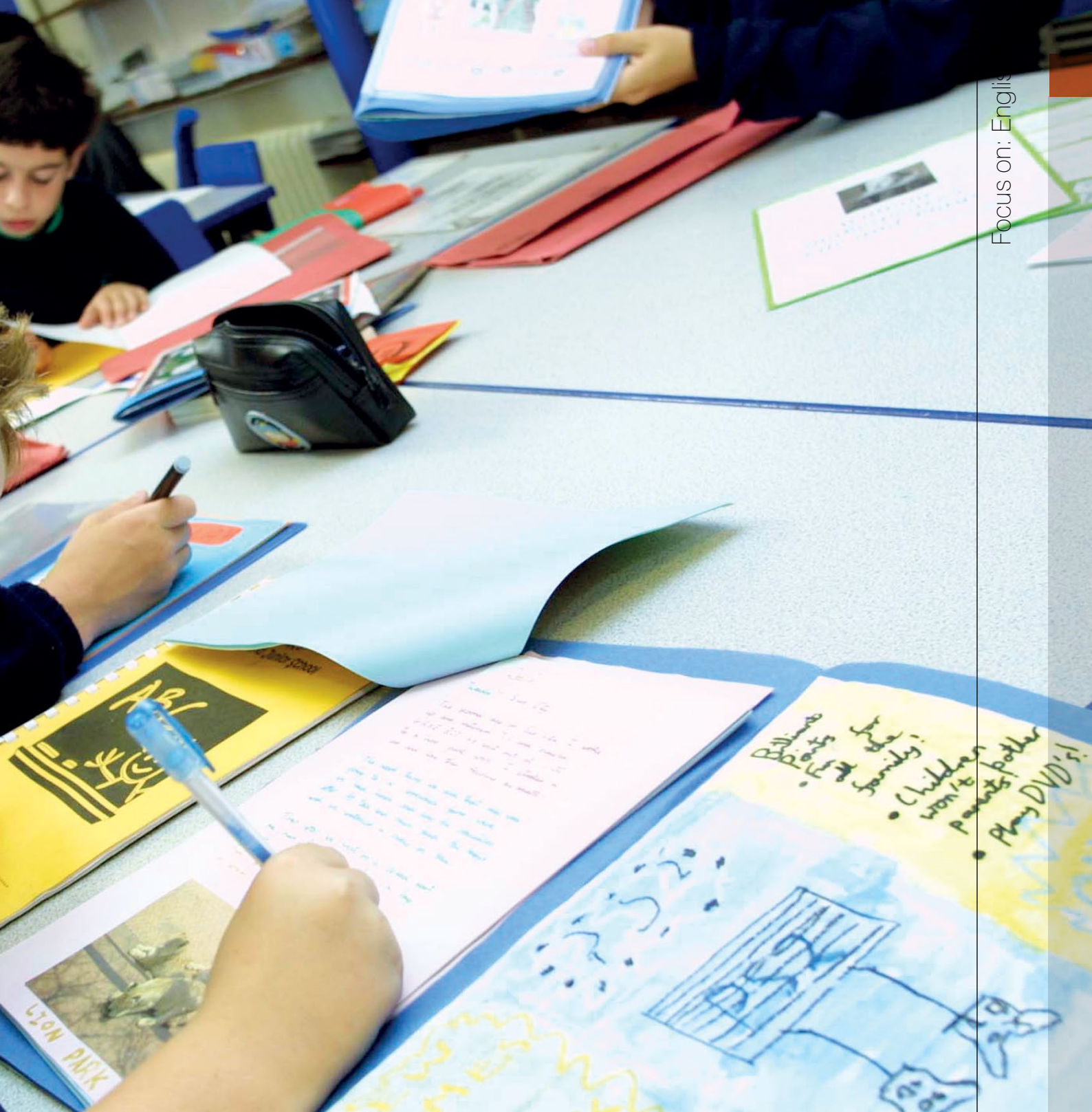
Creative approaches to teaching texts from the past

Last year (2014), the SATs reading paper included a passage from *White Fang* by Jack London, a novel first published in 1906. Responses were conflicting, with some feeling it was unfair as pupils were unprepared for 'that kind of book', and others genuinely delighted that pupils were given the opportunity to be inspired by such a great writer.

Since then, primary teachers have become more aware that a key aspect of the new, more challenging English curriculum is the inclusion of literature from the past as a way of stimulating higher level comprehension and quality writing. Shakespeare has been taught

in primary and secondary schools for a long time, but now, powerful works and poems from other authors are being celebrated in classrooms all over the country. It's an exciting development – even the youngest readers are able to share in a literary legacy and explore language in ways which are diverse and fascinating.

But, considering the often opaque nature of such texts – the archaic language, the unfamiliar sentence structures, the contextual influence of lives vastly different from our own – what sort of techniques are needed to teach them?



The power of literature from the past

As an educational consultant, presenter and writer, I can travel from one school to another and find that, at one school, pupils are being flooded with literary heritage works and wider reading but, at another, perhaps just down the road, there are few quality texts and often not much exposure to poetry. In addition, many pioneering teachers are fighting battles to encourage more reading at home, while others find that some of their pupils will read a set text in just one night! So, each school has to evaluate where they are and introduce quality

texts in appropriate ways.

Why is it such a good idea to use literature from the past? There is a clear argument on heritage grounds alone. When I ask primary teachers or secondary English teachers about their favourite books, some marvellous recollections follow: the tearful and dramatic scene in *The Railway Children* when 'Daddy' finally returns home; the inventive wordplay of 'Jabberwocky'; Boo Radley saving Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the profound images in Wilfred Owen's war poetry. Try reading *The Last Resort*, an incredibly imaginative book illustrated by Roberto Innocenti, in which

creativity is rediscovered via encounters with a whole range of characters from literature and film. It's one of my favourites!

These are fascinating conversations from teachers who have, at some point themselves, received the 'legacy', but now the new challenge is to pass on that culture of reading to a new generation and, simultaneously, raise literacy standards. If the texts are not enjoyed by all, the reverse of entitlement could occur; those already advantaged may be the ones gaining the most benefit.

Furthermore, using quality texts is the most important route to producing quality writing. I have worked with many primary schools developing creative, quirky and philosophical ways to engage with texts and inspire unusual and original writing.

Access through extracts

So, how can we creatively support access to literature that might seem impenetrable or mystifying to a young reader? Without access, the legacy cannot be passed on. We need the pupils to discover the wonder of the stories and poems for themselves, but with skilled guidance. The kinds of strategies needed are the kinds which will support able pupils to go beyond the limit and other pupils to engage with the narrative in inspiring ways.

How can this access be achieved? I have been sharing what I have called my 'Opening Doors' strategy with schools around the country and working with them on the journey that starts with quality texts and leads to quality writing.



'The Pavilion on the Links', a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson, lends itself immediately to responses based around mystery, adventure and setting:

'The pavilion stood on an even space; a little behind it, the wood began in a hedge of elders huddled together by the wind; in front, a few tumbled sand-hills stood between it and the sea.'

'[It] presented little signs of age ... and looked, with its shuttered windows, not like a house that had been deserted, but like one that had never been tenanted by man... The place had an air of solitude, that daunted even a solitary like myself; the wind cried in the chimneys with a strange and wailing note.'

This brief extract can be a starting point for two suggested pathways:

1. Inference and innuendo – what kind of atmosphere is being implied? Have the pupils stick the extract in the middle of a large piece of sugar paper and write questions about the text

around it. Another group can then try answering those questions – always with reference to the text!

2. Linked reading – I am constantly encouraging children to make links between one text and another. What kind of story might this be? What story might it remind you of? Can you compare it with any other setting you can think of? These kinds of links can become a regular part of the learning dialogue in the classroom, and they should improve the content and descriptive power of writing, as pupils become sifters and sorters of narratives and genres.

It is also an idea to start, at least with some pupils, with an illustration before reading the passage, such as the image to the right. Show the pupils the image and ask: Can you invent characters for this setting? What do you notice about the building?

The latter kind of open question tends to produce more creative responses than a more specific one. When comments are made about the shutters or the balcony, this can be followed up either by the teacher or across the class in a dialogic way. Sometimes, I ask the pupils to write a brief paragraph summing up the atmosphere of the setting, teaching them about inference and innuendo. They then compare their draft with Stevenson's with delight and are switched on to the language rather than restrained by it.

The more able can go much further. They can read a much longer extract and develop drafts which relate character to setting more coherently, imitating the adventure genre that Stevenson himself made famous. The teachers with whom I have worked all call it a fine judgement whether the whole class are ready for the longer extract, but what seems most



consistently successful, in terms of outcomes, has been to pitch as high as possible but have the access resources ready if and when pupils get stuck. Support is then coming at the point of genuine need and may just as likely be for the most able pupil in the class! It should be a healthy struggle.

Extending learning

Extracts are only tasters, but they do enable the kind of focus needed for deeper analysis and appreciation. The enjoyment of language and



literature pupils experience through the extract above will hopefully help teachers lead them to other celebrated adventure stories of the era, such as *Treasure Island* or *Kidnapped*. Why not track the genre through its development from these early adventure novels to the slightly later *Swallows and Amazons*, and maybe even modern series like 'His Dark Materials' or 'Artemis Fowl'?

The need to bring whole texts to life is critical, but tasters, pictures, graphic novels, role play of scenes and a range of thinking skills all support access at an age when it's all too easy to be put off. Some of the following simple techniques have supported engagement and new learning in ways which stimulate enquiry for the learner:

- Use Philosophy for Children to support literacy. Consider, for example: why do we like adventure stories? Is it essential to have a hero or heroine in a story?
- Establish a signal for risk-taking and feedback on progress. I call these moments 'Wings to fly' moments.
- Organise evidence circles, in which all conversations must refer to the text and pupils choose each other to debate an argument.
- Try continuum lines – ask pupils to stand along an imaginary line to assess a view or opinion based on evidence.

Remember, 'in dialogic classrooms, teachers and students act as co-inquirers, collaboratively engaging in a generation and evaluation of new interpretations of texts in order to "gain a fuller appreciation of the world, [them]selves, and one another"'.¹

Exploring poetry

Contemporary and classic poetry also plays a substantial role in the new curriculum, and should be explored with children as young as seven. Recently, I worked with pupils reversing the lofty heights of Tennyson's 'The Eagle' to write about the flight up from the 'wrinkled sea', devising sunset scenes inspired by Harold Monro's 'Great City', and unpicking the Pied Piper's journey from Hamelin to Koppelberg Hill and writing about what really happened inside the mountain.

Taking 'The Pied Piper', after I supported access using the single image of 'horses were born with eagles' wings', there was a whole explosion of ideas and imagery around the kinds of creatures that the children may have found inside the mountain. Our readings of parts of the poem were then received with interest, and some pupils imitated Browning well in their inventive poetry.

The best lessons on poetry I see tend to be when teachers are using objectives that teach specific aspects of a poem – whether a narrative technique or perhaps the effect of

stanza length – but showing how the technique contributes to the poem’s meaning. To bring past literature alive, we should never lose focus on the central theme that awakens our imaginations, makes us tingle or stirs our emotions. The pupils were gripped by the image of the multi-coloured piper, the opening in the mountain and, of course, the rats! But were the children really led to a land where honey-bees had lost their stings, or not?

Encouraging wider reading

Despite the obvious importance of the home environment in promoting wider reading, it’s often up to schools to provide pupils with a rich diet of reading materials. Happily, wider reading policies are now taking greater priority in schools. The new national curriculum is much more demanding of young readers, listing literary heritage texts at KS2, and has many references to the need for more poetry and more quality texts, and it will be hard to deliver this without effective school libraries and book availability.

Linking reading is pertinent here – by asking for links between texts, teachers can find out what pupils are reading outside lessons and build from there. Links will hopefully be made quite naturally between literature from the past and literature from the present. Frequent cross-references also make wider reading

seem part of the accepted curriculum, not just the icing on the cake or an optional extra. It’s good practice for pupils too; GCSE and A level English demand links between texts as standard.

The most important thing for teachers is to build your knowledge of famous writers and develop more in-depth understanding of poetry and poets to ensure you have the confidence to stretch and challenge pupils in the required ways. Social media will be your friend when looking for reading suggestions, but it’s vital the development of such skills also becomes a training priority for school leaders.

In no time at all, your pupils will be pursuing reading journeys with much more reflection and ambition, going beyond the limits of conventional comprehension and even delving into anthologies of poetry too. I like Michael Rosen’s advice on reading and writing journeys:

‘Surround children with books; let them choose; give them time to read what they’ve chosen; give them time to talk about what they’ve read.’²

Opening doors to heritage literature

My ‘Opening Doors’ strategy is designed to support challenging English by planning from and beyond the top, but with access for all.



Of course, there will still be barriers. Schools will need to do all they can to build a mindset for challenge among both staff and pupils.

Bringing literature to life will involve training, partnerships, online networking, and communication with secondary English teachers to ensure progression. Teachers will need to keep building their reading range in order to make links between texts, both historical and modern, and to be able to make personalised reading recommendations to pupils.

Ultimately, the point is to use literature as part of the big picture of literacy acquisition. The drive to introduce more children and young people to heritage texts has to be part of an overall desire to raise standards across the nation. Knowing about literature is an entitlement for all, not the preserve of the few. That's why the access strategies such as those highlighted above are so important – to open the doors to narratives, poetry and writing from across the world, from the past as well as the present.

Essentially, no matter the subject area, all great teaching is about access. It's what I see going on in the many schools I work with – that daily struggle to work out just how far out of the comfort zone a pupil can be persuaded to go by an equally ambitious teacher!

Bob Cox is an independent education consultant, writer and teacher coach, working nationally and internationally to support outstanding learning. Bob taught for 23 years, including 13 years as Head of English, and also became an advanced skills teacher.

Bob's book, *Opening Doors to Famous Poetry and Prose*, is published by Crown House Publishing and features 20 exciting units of work on poetry and prose from our literary heritage. For more information, visit: www.crownhouse.co.uk/publications/product.php?product=872.



References

1. Reznitskaya, A. (2012) Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Language Use During Literature Discussions. *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 65(7), pp.446-456.
2. Rosen, M. (2015) Surround children with books; let them choose; give them time to read what they've chosen; give them time to talk about what they've read. [Twitter] 2 February. Available at: <twitter.com/michaelrosenyes/status/562195676042645504> [Accessed 29 June 2015].

Knowledge trails

1. **The Morbach monster** – Crispin Andrews explains how to dissect a text with a primary school class, using werewolf legend 'the Morbach monster' to explore suspense, scene setting and the fantastic.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/clt-morbach-monster
2. **In pursuit of meaning** – Fiona Maine explores how children interpret meaning together through critical and creative thinking.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/in-pursuit-of-meaning
3. **The critical step** – James MacGregor introduces the application of 'the critical step' to the interpretation of Rilke's poem 'The Bullfight'.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/ctl-1-4_critical-step