

## Reading Beyond the Lines

### *Extensive, Extended or Creative Reading?*

#### **The Call for Help**

The mission, if I can call it that, was to see if there was anything we could contribute to classroom activities based around extensive reading for our colleagues teaching English in Portuguese state schools. These colleagues would refer to this section of the National Curriculum with grim countenance and a roll of the eyes. Some were known to mutter menacingly under their breath at these moments.

The extensive reading requirement was there for all to see, and applied to years 10 to 12 (15 to 18 year olds). From the beginning let's be clear about the terminology. 'Extensive reading' is defined by Day and Bamford (1998) with a ten point check list which largely point up the importance of this activity being student driven by including words like 'pleasure', 'out of the classroom', 'own pace' and 'easily understandable'. A key point tells us that '*Students select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.*'<sup>i</sup>

The Portuguese National Curriculum provides a list of selected titles which it advises teachers to use as a guide for extensive reading purposes. For years 10 and 11 these titles are primarily collections of short stories, while for year 12 they are novels and plays. The majority of teachers tended to treat the list not as an advisory guide but as a mandatory directory of reading material from which they had to select and deliver to their students. The idea of student choice, not to mention the freedom to toss the book aside if it did not interest, did not even come up as a question. About seven out of Day and Bamford's ten 'Characteristics of an Extensive Reading Approach' weren't even being attempted. In fact, the activity wasn't extensive reading at all: extended reading, perhaps; a drudge, certainly.

There are a number of reasons why this was so and the results of some elementary enquiries we undertook paralleled those of Alan Maley<sup>ii</sup>

- Insufficient time. Books were selected by teachers to create a short cut to the desired aim of ticking the box: Reading task ✓
- Too costly. The variety of reading materials required to give students a genuine choice simply wasn't available and school libraries were scantily clad with suitable reading material in English.
- Undervalued. Though linked to the syllabus, extensive reading was not underpinned through inclusion in the assessment process which led some teachers to undervalue it.
- Downward pressure. Institutional pressure from above to conform to the textbooks.

Maley also includes a reference to '*Resistance from teachers, who find it impossible to stop teaching and to allow learning to take place*'. In our experience resistance from teachers was strengthened as a result of their own reading habits, or lack of them. Day and Bamford's 10th Commandment for extensive reading says:

*The teacher is a role model of a reader for the students - an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.*

Few of the teachers we spoke to claimed to have time to read, and many clearly had themselves never seen reading as an enjoyable activity and were thus unable to pass on a positive response to their students. While this may arguably be a result of cultural history, it meant that extensive reading as a genuine classroom activity was doomed from the start.

### **The Case for Literacy**

Why, then, would we want to go to the trouble of encouraging teachers to engage in activities which seemed to have so many reasons for not being successful? A large part of the answer lies in a response to the question of increasing literacy *per se* amongst young people (regardless of the language).

It has been argued that reading is one of the essential antidotes to contemporary life, not just as an alternative to the breakneck speed that most of us are required to live, but in the formation of the intellect through contemplation of language, argument and nuance, something which the personal, introspective nature of reading allows us to develop and that other forms of information gathering don't. Reading is the main player in the tussle between 'word' and 'image', representing the struggle of the mind over instinct that underpins much of contemporary society,.

Some would claim that the current trend away from literacy<sup>iii</sup> is *'robbing us of the intellectual and linguistic tools to separate illusion from truth. It reduces us to the level and dependency of children. It impoverishes language.'*(Chris Hedges)<sup>iv</sup> He goes on to say *'the more we sever ourselves from a literate, print based world, a world of complexity and nuance, a world of ideas, for one informed by comforting, reassuring images, fantasies, slogans, celebrities, and a lust for violence, the more we are destined to implode.'* A passionate plea for literacy if ever there was one.

Few would disagree that a society that ceased to read would be in a serious state, though some lonely Cassandras tell us that this is, indeed, the way we are going. Debbie Hicks of the UK Reading Agency, on a more positive note, tells us that

*'Research indicates that the benefits of the reading journey can be far reaching. Reading is a source of pleasure and entertainment, a way of relieving stress, a form of escapism, a means of finding things out, of learning and improving knowledge and of self development. In building the individual it can also contribute to the building of better communities, offer common ground on which to create new reading focused partnerships and deliver on national and local policy priorities such as social inclusion and lifelong learning.'*<sup>v</sup>

The role of the written word in education seems so obvious to those of us brought up in an age where this was the predominant form of knowledge storage that we are in danger of overlooking the other qualities of print based information retrieval. Comparing the way that children were brought up in the 20th century with that of those being brought up in the 21st, the neurobiologist Baroness Greenfield tells us that while 'we' had books; 'they' have computers and what we get from books and the written word is guidance. An author will steer us through disparate material and give us a conceptual framework of understanding. We may not agree with it, but we can read other books and gradually our own framework develops and grows.

*One might argue that this is the basis of education - education as we know it. It is the building-up of a personalised conceptual framework, where we can relate incoming information to what we know already. We can place an isolated fact in a context that*

*gives it significance. Traditional education has enabled us, if you like, to turn information into knowledge.*<sup>vi</sup>

Children educated in this century are spending on average six and a half hours a day using electronic media - often 'multi-tasking' with two or more different devices on the go at once. Increasingly, the electronic media rely more on the icon than the word. *But most of all the quick-fire, fast-moving nature of much electronic media militates against building up a personalised conceptual framework.* (John Humphries)

In case we are lulled into thinking that any kind of written word will do, the Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen, warns us that

*'Children who come from homes where books are being read get access to the kinds of abstract and complex ideas that you can only get hold of easily through exposure to extended prose. The rest are being fed worksheets.'*

And just to make sure that we are clear about the message here, Alasdair MacIntyre states that if we are foolish enough to *deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and in their words.*<sup>vii</sup>

It appears, then, that reading extensively is of vital importance to education in general. Within the broader requirements of maintaining or increasing literacy in its own right, there is a special area requiring attention, where reading in a foreign or second language is being attempted. Literature in foreign language teaching in its present context *tends to emphasize its role in improving communicative competence and providing a springboard for the development of critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation and create an awareness in students on the culture and society of the relevant country* (N.C. Premawardhena)<sup>viii</sup>. While it can be argued that improved communicative competence and the development of critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation are shared with literature being taught in a first language, the extra dimension to reading literature in a first language is raising cultural awareness of other societies. At an advanced level it might also be argued that some degree of comprehension of the cultural underpinning of the language which the student is learning is essential to attaining proficiency. At a more basic level simply using language in the natural setting of storytelling removes the reader from the linguistic strait-jacket and cultural deserts of most course books. Alan Pulverness, amongst others, tells of the problems caused by an aversion to examining culturally specific content in published teaching materials since the 1980s, and assumes *'that language teaching and learning invariably involve issues of sociocultural meaning, and that approaches which disregard the cultural dimension of language are fundamentally flawed'*<sup>ix</sup>

### **Adjusting the Focus**

Our principal brief was to look primarily at narrative fiction as the principal source of reading, and this decision, at least in part, was reached because fiction is frequently a collection point of many conceptual frameworks of understanding and cultural exposition. A further refinement that we considered was to use contemporary fiction, that is by authors who were still writing, not least because this gave access to contemporary language and because the action and the setting were frequently of topical interest, but also because of the practical consideration that we might want to work with the authors themselves in preparing a learning programme. Thus we were planning to work with what John McCrae calls literature with a small 'l' rather than canonic, or big 'L' literature.

Thus, properly fortified as to the virtue of our mission, we return to the situation in English language classes in Portugal. Whilst the impression may have been given of general disinterest amongst the teaching community in the area of extended reading, there were, in fact, a significant number of English language teachers who recognised the need to develop new strategies and techniques for extended reading and they asked us to join them in finding a solution. We knew this because of our close working relations with the national English language teachers' association, APPI, and the first step was to form a small working group, consisting of representatives of APPI and the British Council, to map our plans and devise a means of achieving our objective.

Motivation was the key to making the extended reading element of the national curriculum a positive rather than a negative influence on both teachers and learners. In both cases it was an understanding of what triggers self interest that provided the means. For the majority of teachers a relatively simple approach to meeting their self interest was all that was required, and we started with the curriculum and thus the syllabus from which they taught. We reasoned that if we helped teachers to fulfil their obligations by developing connections between the chosen pieces of literature and the broader requirements of the syllabus then this would increase a teacher's motivation to use the pieces of literature intelligently. The trick would be to go from motivation to enthusiasm and, we reasoned, the only real recourse we had to this was through producing effective and engaging materials. This, however, led us to the far trickier problem of motivating the students within the classroom. For this we decided to rely on the ancient tradition of storytelling, albeit with its own twist in the tale.

The story tellers in the project were to include the students themselves. It is our firmly held belief that all societies are no more nor less than the sum of their interwoven stories, from the grand epic tales of nations to the humble everyday stories of its citizens as they go about their daily lives. There is no analysis of human endeavour that can fail to take this into account. What is more, every single person has a story to tell. Lives are made up of intertwining tales and part of any child's education should be to understand how the many strands of narrative that swirl around us connect, and how their particular story fits in with all the others. The trick, of course, is to keep that story unique and this is probably where we fail most miserably, and where we are guilty of squandering the talents of our young people. Nevertheless, it is in recognising this (sometimes latent) ability to tell a story that we can slot into what is already known by our students and take them into other, interlocking narratives. The trick is to get them to see the connection between their stories and their worlds and the stories and worlds of the imported story teller - the author. The voyage to get to that point, however, crosses a few frontiers, a journey that some teachers find most uncomfortable.

### **Unique Narratives**

The problem with concentrating on the individual's ability to recognise, create and empathise with narratives is one of ownership. The learning traditions of most countries, Portugal included, produce passive learners heavily dependent on teachers as a result of teacher-centred learning in schools. From this grows a reluctance by students to express opinions and take their own decisions, and in its place we witness collective thinking and an inability to work independently. While this may impede progressive language learning, it makes classroom management easier and if - as is usually the case - the end purpose is an ability to mechanically pass exams rather than learn then this method is sufficient. As a result, many teachers are reluctant to move away from this model. Effective communicative language learning is only witnessed in a minority of language lessons for this reason (and many so-called communicative language lessons do, in reality, little more than follow a well trodden

path of ordained grammar sets.) To go the further stage and develop interaction based on individual narratives is a step too far for many.

Early in the project we recognised the fundamental contradiction in education systems the world over, expressed as a clash between linear and non-linear processes. It is a contradiction recognised by most teachers, though not always expressed as such. In conducting straw polls with groups of teachers from a variety of countries during the pilot stage of the project we confirmed our suspicions that most teachers saw themselves as non-linear practitioners working in a linear world. Of course, they didn't put it quite like that and had, in fact, been given the choice between representing themselves as industrialists - with targets to achieve and a mechanistic way of achieving those targets with the greatest efficiency and least variation resulting in a largely predictable outcome (the product)- or as farmers. The farmers also had to achieve a target, but were beset by far more unknowns than industrialists, and whose ability to adapt rapidly to current conditions was a major asset. The unfair choice being offered to teachers was between a hard-nosed producer and a flexible nurturer. The vast majority chose to see themselves as farmers - those who followed a non-linear course of action. The few who didn't, and who represented themselves as following a linear course of action, were quizzed further. In every case their choice was dictated by what their perception of reality: this was how things were; it was not a reflection of how they would like to be.<sup>x</sup>

The same groups of teachers, when asked if they considered the education system (the curriculum, the exam orientated culture etc) to be a linear or non-linear system of action always chose linear as the most apt descriptor. When asked to reconcile their views of themselves with the system in which they found themselves working, the emotional level of the meeting rose. Clearly most teachers were unhappy, but most had learned to adjust. In other words, while they saw themselves ideally as farmers, nurturing and taking care of their charges, they recognised that in reality they were, at best, industrial farmers, churning out produce in much the same way that industrialists mass produce goods. There was some attempt to extend the metaphor at this stage and to recognise the parallel between education systems with their exam-led curricula and large chains of supermarkets demanding standardised produce from farmers: fruit of a certain shape, colour and size, for example. We felt collectively guilty about the waste in western countries, where up to 40% of food is thrown away by supermarkets because it doesn't meet their standards, not just because of the criminal waste of food, but because of an implied similar fate of those who fail to meet the requirements of the education system.

### **Creative Ownership**

Looking back at the course plotted for the project it is easy to forget the fog that seemed to obscure the landscape when that process was being worked out. With the clarity of hindsight let us briefly review the key elements, starting with recent events.

In February 2010 we were working with the British Pakistani poet, Moniza Alvi, on a project ('Flash Poetry') which involves secondary school students creating animated film to accompany some of her poems. The students in this pilot stage of the project were exceptionally well motivated, and were producing some excellent pieces of work. Their teachers were thrilled, but also amazed at the degree of participation. They hadn't necessarily thought this would be so when the idea was first discussed and, regarding one group of 15 year olds, the teacher had expressed concerns that it wouldn't work with them, that they would be less than interested or that it would be hard to motivate them in a poetry project.

However, as it turned out all the students (one group aged 15/16 and another 17/18) were producing work that astonished their teachers. The degree of involvement was impressive: from the word on the page, interpretation led to new ideas being formulated and these ideas were shared with others with the aim of creating a story board for short film. In other words each student's individual interpretation was being negotiated and, where necessary, defended within a small group. The group had to maintain the confidence to turn ideas into reality and, at an intermediate stage, present and explain these ideas to the poet whose poems had initiated the process. By this point a lot of language had been used, some of it in L1 but the majority in English. Moniza Alvi's observations were important at this stage, and she expressed surprise and excitement at the degree of active and creative involvement that virtually all the students were showing in the project. It was certainly different from other events she had taken part in with secondary school students, and given that she had been a secondary school teacher of English herself for many years as well as years of taking her poetry into schools, this was an observation worth noting.

After two days of feedback from students from different schools we discussed what we had witnessed, and were looking forward excitedly to the final results of the pilot project. The key, we understood, was in the apparent motivation of the students. It was precisely this that the teachers had predicted would *not* occur and which, in reality, exceeded any modest hope we might have had. Eventually we stumbled upon a description of the students' apparent enthusiasm - it was a 'creative ownership of language' and through this we were reflecting on the parity of interest which the students brought to a meeting with the poet: they had something to bring to the party, something they were proud of. The usual role of student sitting in awe (or otherwise) at the feet of the sage had been replaced by something approaching a partnership. The students were using the language to express something they had created and had possession of. It made the world of difference.

In retrospect that is precisely what the BritLit project had been trying to do over the years: give ownership of language to the students.

From the beginning the project had adopted an approach that concentrated on the subjective nature of reading rather than simply using literature merely as a tool for language learning in the same way that one would use a text book or course book. We argued from the outset that it was a matter of ownership of language, and that a greater sense of ownership would provide increased motivation for success in learning; hence instrumental rationality (the most efficient or cost-effective means to achieve a specific end) is transformed into self-confirming activity, or subjective rationality - a powerful driver and learning resource. We can simplify a frequently complex social model of language classroom relationships by pointing out that, from a typical student's point of view, the teacher enjoys a much closer relationship with the language being taught than the students. From this perspective, ownership is more likely to belong to the teacher rather than the student: the teacher has 'the answers' and is the source of most of the knowledge that unlocks the language to the student.

However, if we consider a student who is transformed into a reader, someone who forms their own, personal relationship with the text, and therefore the language that the text is presented in, then we will observe that the relationship between the reader and the language as represented through the text is closer than that of the student and the language as represented by the teacher. In social theory terms, there is a stronger bond due to the mixture of types of social action, and is not limited to instrumental rational action, but is value-rational as well. For this to be most effective, the text should be narrative fiction or poetry for this allows the

reader to bring their own experiences, memories and interpretation into the equation, and it is this positive and essential cultural investment that allows the reader to take ownership and create a subjective cultural 'good'.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Focus for Feedback**

While all this was clearly apparent in the 'Flash Poetry' project being worked on with Moniza Alvi, its presence had been no less important in the earlier stages of the broader BritLit project. An important element in providing suitable catalysts for interaction with the students had been in working with the poets and authors themselves and while this is not possible, or even desirable, on each and every occasion, where a writer is present at some stage the process of transaction which follows the acquisition of ownership become strengthened. Authors and poets with considerable experience of working with young people in schools, including Romesh Gunsekera, Ron Butlin, Francesca Beard, Patience Agbabi, Levi Tafari, Melvin Burgess, Louise Cooper and Tony Mitton have all commented at some stage on how those who had been involved in the BritLit project had been far more engaged audiences (both students and teachers) as a result of having become 'language owners' through interaction with the text than those who hadn't been involved in the project. *"In over thirty years of going into schools and universities as a professional writer, I have never come across any teaching programme that comes within a hundred miles of BritLit for excellence in results."*<sup>xii</sup> In one classic example, demonstrating a virtuous circle of creativity, some secondary school students had adapted an author's short story and turned it into a play, which they had the opportunity to perform in the presence of the original author. The author, moved by the experience and inspired into continuing interaction, looked further into the culture and history of the students' own society and later produced a series of new short stories inspired by his research. These stories were then fed back into the cultural mêlée and a new cycle of creativity ensued. In this way we might begin to consider the artist as the ideal facilitator.

However, let us be realistic. It is not usually possible for the feedback to the original author to take place face to face (though on-line, virtual links make it possible to reach far more). The important thing to realise here is not that the students are feeding something back to an original source of inspiration – as wonderful as that opportunity might be – but that they actually have something of their own to feed back. Any number of outside resources from the local community might be used to stimulate this activity – university, commerce, wider school community etc – any grit to help the process of making a pearl. The important part, then, is not the actual feedback but the preparation for it; the process, not the result. Referring to short stories in particular, the pedagogical trick is to beef up the amount of time spent on preparatory work – pre-reading activities and the like – concentrating especially on getting students to construct their own narratives (individually or in groups) based on some fragments of information drawn from the story itself. This will normally lead the student (or anyone else) to want to see the original and compare their own treatment with that of the author. Of course, there is a danger here that students will expect their own story to be 'right' or 'wrong' - how close was it to the original – which, after all, will frequently have been the sum total of their school experiences, especially in language learning. Ken Robinson warns us that *'We stigmatize mistakes. We're now running national education systems where the worst thing you can make are mistakes and the result is we are education people out of their creative capacities.'*<sup>xiii</sup> While being a sad indictment of our education system, perhaps, the teacher needs to tread carefully when introducing these activities for the first time, pointing out that there are no right and wrong stories, just different ones.

### **Pre-reading Activities**

It is difficult to argue against the premise that story telling (from reading stories at bedtime to more informal family stories, “Did you hear what happened to Aunty Ethel last Wednesday?...”) forms an essential part of language learning for native speakers of any language. It can be assumed, then, that the basic elements of storytelling or building a narrative are already well within the grasp of students of almost any age, and it is this basic building block that can be used to stimulate immersion into a new text. Pre-reading activities use this story telling and listening ability amongst students in a variety of ways, and the project has used the following activities to great effect:

- Picture/sound prompts to build a narrative base
- Building on (universally?) shared narratives
- Text ‘chunking’: using ‘stepping stones’
- Narrative building questions

### ***1. Picture prompts***

Using a sequence of pictures, or sound effects, can create a background timeframe onto which a whole range of possible stories can be grafted. It is important that the sequence of pictures denotes the passing of time, or else the narrative effect or dramatic sequence might be obscured. For example, when using the Louise Cooper story ‘The Storm’<sup>xiv</sup> in which a whole community is wiped out by a sudden downpour of what might (or might not) be rain, a sequence of pictures and sound effects showing a storm building and then subsiding creates a suitable timeframe. More specific guidance might be added after the initial exposure to the picture sequence, for example challenging the students to include certain characters or words or phrases taken from the original story in their narrative.

### ***2. Building on shared narratives***

It is said that there are only seven basic plots for narratives to tell in the whole world and that all stories are variations of one of these seven. According to literary critic Christopher Booker these are namely ‘**Tragedy**’ (hero with a fatal flaw meets tragic end), ‘**Comedy**’ (always with a happy ending, typically of romantic fulfilment), ‘**Overcoming the Monster**’, ‘**Voyage and Return**’, ‘**Quest**’, ‘**Rags to Riches**’ (the riches in question can be literal or metaphoric) and ‘**Rebirth**’ (central character suddenly finds a new reason for living).<sup>xv</sup> This makes recognition of narrative types easy to identify and share. Within these seven genre are some more or less universally shared stories which though they may vary in detail from culture to culture. Traditional children’s stories (Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel etc) are used as the basis for writers, often introducing a twist in the tale. The point here being that we can use a tale that is already known and shared to introduce a ‘new’ story – in reality a variation.

### ***3. Chunking***

The technique of ‘chunking’, or introducing sections of the text to be studied out of their original context, is useful in a number of ways, the principal ones being to encourage connectivity between the chunks (i.e. building a narrative), focussing on parts of the text which might provide the reader with particular problems (e.g. cultural or lexical stumbling blocks) and a chance to deal with them before the story is read for enjoyment, and providing a series of familiar sections of text for when the whole text is tackled (‘stepping stones’). Ideally all three of these principal elements will be used as criteria to choose the sections for ‘chunking’.

### ***4. Narrative building questions***

This is arguably the most effective way to construct a new narrative that encourages comparison with the original story. The idea is to ask questions about the story not yet read but which can be answered by anyone who has any knowledge of stories in general (i.e. virtually everyone). This apparently counter-intuitive idea of asking specific questions about a story yet to be read can produce stimulating responses. The questions are best presented in the order in which they occur in the original story. This allows a narrative structure to be formed from the outset, and leads the students to naturally give their answers in the form of a narrative.

We find that these kinds of activities allow the student to achieve some degree of creative response to the text they will shortly be reading. Their chances of gaining a sense of ownership from the creative process using language will depend very much on how the teacher allows their ideas to develop. It isn't so much to do with guidance as with permission: already alluded to is the usual, all pervading atmosphere of learning being a teacher driven, question and answer led activity and here we are suddenly asking students to develop their own lines of reasoning, follow their instincts, and defend their interpretations and visions. However, this is what they do all the time when they are not in school but when they are interacting with their friends, their families and when they are making sense of the world around them. What has changed in the formula is not the student but the presence of the teacher and the traditions of classroom learning. So really the biggest challenge when applying the techniques demanded by these activities is not to the students but to the teachers who are being asked to develop effective and affective non-linear models in their lesson planning. Teachers have to learn to gauge the appropriacy and success of activities by far more subjective criteria than they might be used to up to that point. Dealing with narrative interpretation doesn't have a simple cut and dried answer schemata to fall back on; while there can certainly be wrong answers, there are a multitude of 'right' answers, though thinking of this as whether or not the students achieved an appropriate response to the activity or not would be a more useful measure.

### **Encouraging teachers**

One way of making sure that reluctant teachers saw added value when using these materials was to make sure that links to the wider English syllabus were made available. This was done in a series of post-reading activities which took a very general approach to the context in which the stories operated, and traced a link between these contexts and the demands of the syllabus, especially regarding the broad themes encountered ('family' 'communications' 'the environment' etc). For example, a short story set in an improbable future in Wales seemed naturally to lead to discussions about attitudes to technology and from there to explore alternative technologies, for which the Welsh have a special claim to fame. Similarly, a story set in Sri Lanka allows for a natural exploration of English as spoken there and in other parts of South Asia, providing a useful link for the national curriculum requirement to present students with examples of varieties of English. There was also the chance to explore language development contexts such as grammar forms as well as vocabulary. However there was a certain reluctance to devote too much time to exploring this as it felt that it could easily lead the traditional minded teacher to make 'literature' simply another grammar activity, thereby defeating the whole object of the exercise. Rather we wanted to bring in a 'oh, and incidentally, there is this as well' type of reviewing activity. We still need to work on getting that balance right.

For those teachers who have made it over the Rubicon, the advantages seem clear enough. The most common responses from users of the material come in the form of relief that

comprehensive resources are easily available, and having access to many texts is clearly appreciated. Many teachers, though, express deeper motivations for being involved, and talk of the career enhancing effect that adopting the reader-centred approach required has had on them, and even that it has opened up new avenues for their approach to teaching generally. As the project has reached more and more teachers worldwide, this has been a common theme amongst those who have contacted us: the quality of the experience translates into other areas of teaching. Most importantly, positive changes in the response by students are noted: “the incorporation of the BritLit materials and projects adds a totally new dimension to how my students experience and react to literary works” says one teacher. Students themselves respond enthusiastically, especially when the author is present at some stage of the proceedings with some even claiming that the overall experience was “the best thing that happened in school”. Most revealingly, perhaps, the engagement of students whose application to the study of the English language had previously been regarded as weak, to say the least, took a turn for the better, and a number of incidents of students astonishing the teacher have been reported.

Since the project started we have worked with a number of authors in developing resource kits. Sometimes these authors have worked with teachers attending the Comenius supported BritLit summer courses run by NILE, and sometimes with members of the BritLit team or other British Council staff. The range of resources has shifted from its original focus on materials for secondary schools to materials across the whole range of English teaching from primary to tertiary. All in all 40 resource kits for students and teachers have been produced, ranging from traditional stories like Little Red Riding Hood to complex stories dealing with social issues such as Monica Ali’s ‘Loose Change’. Some were written especially for young readers, while others had no particular age group in mind. All of the stories used were originally intended for L1 readers, and the project has insisted on using unedited originals. The work has moved its centre of focus away from Portugal to include, first, other countries in Europe when teachers from southern and central Europe contributed to the resource bank and more recently the project has been attempting a broader global reach. We are currently embarking upon a programme of using original texts from authors and poets away from a UK-centric background, choosing tales which originate in other cultures and present their interpretation of the seven possible narratives within a new cultural backdrop and the first stage of this extension - using literature from sub-Saharan Africa - will be available for use by the end of 2010.

### **Whither Creative Reading?**

The original brief – to find new ways of stimulating interest in so-called extensive reading elements in the national curriculum in Portugal – was met and exceeded. It is estimated that over 1200 hours of classroom materials have been produced, and the project has helped to define the role of literature and story telling in the language classroom. Materials are available for students of English from primary school to tertiary education. In the later resource kits an increased use of digital technology has supplemented the original low-tech print and audio materials, and animation, video and interactive text are finding a niche for themselves. However, the most important development has been finding ways to put the student as a reader into the centre of the frame and by engaging creative reading. According to ‘The New Humanities Reader – What is Creative Reading’ ‘...*creative readers make sure that they know what the author is saying while, at the same time, devoting their energies to actively constructing otherwise implicit relationships between ideas, events, and contexts.*’

<sup>xvi</sup> Students have been able to develop their skills by working from their own, intuitive narrative abilities into shared environments, defending their interpretations and moulding

their ideas. At the same time they have developed their intercultural awareness by access to texts from a variety of backgrounds and by contrasting what they read with what they experience in their own environments. Altogether this adds up to a stimulation of their critical thinking abilities and experiences which, to paraphrase and move on from Maley's observation, *overcomes resistance from teachers to stop teaching and allows learning to take place.*

## References

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- <sup>i</sup> '*Extensive Reading In The Second Language Classroom*' Richard R Day and Julian Bamford, (Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- <sup>ii</sup> '*Extensive reading: why it is good for our students... and for us*'. Alan Maley. (Teaching English website December 2009.)  
<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/extensive-reading-why-it-good-our-students...-us>
- <sup>iii</sup> A third of Americans are functionally illiterate, more than 50 years ago and growing by 2 million a year (Living in the Shadows: Illiteracy in America. ABC. 2008)
- <sup>iv</sup> '*The Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy*'. Chris Hedges. (Nation Books 2009)
- <sup>v</sup> '*Creative Reading*' Debbie Hicks. British Council Literature website  
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-literature-activities-creativereading-intro.htm>
- <sup>vi</sup> '*Beyond Words*' John Humphries, (Hodder Stoughton 2009)
- <sup>vii</sup> '*After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*' Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame, 1981)
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