

## Bringing literature into the class: CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES

The main purpose of these notes is to suggest how to teach literature in order to exploit it as a really advantageous language lesson, useful to improve the ability of oral understanding and oral production, in a real context of communication.



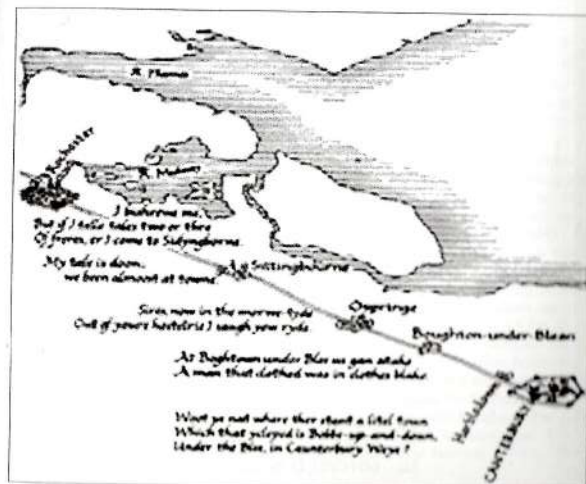
Several times students who start studying literature wonder why they read and analyse extracts from old texts, such as, for example, the descriptions of the pilgrims or some tales from *Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer; the answer from the teacher is often the same: considering that this great poet is the father of English literature, the first author to write in Middle English, his masterpiece cannot be ignored while teaching literature through a chronological approach. Therefore teachers start reading the usual extracts and they often feel discouraged to think there is no other possibility but to read in a modern version some descriptions of the characters in the prologue or one or two tales, unfortunately very often without catching students' attention or arousing their interest because they think they are doing something routine and aimless. In addition the translation of the authentic literary version, written in poetry in Middle English, into modern English does not diminish the difficulty, especially for students at the intermediate or lower intermediate level who still possess a limited knowledge of vocabulary and structures.

So why don't we abandon for a while the traditional concept of literature as exclusively related to written works and we start the lesson with an oral approach?

Don't we narrate stories of **different** types in real life, on **different** occasions and for **different** purposes, when we are together with a group of people, sometimes only to relax and have fun? The

language we use is, of course, colloquial and informal. As Chaucer clarified in the **Prologue**, the pilgrims, coming from different places, met at Tabard Inn, in Southwark in London and immediately became friends and decided to go to Canterbury all together and he himself became one of them. Harry Bailly, the host of the inn suggested that each pilgrim on the way to Canterbury and on the way back, could entertain the others by telling stories, precisely two for each pilgrim in each way (1); because of this plan their journey would be more pleasant, and also safer because they were all in a group and travelling alone those times was not advisable. The best would also win a prize: a supper, at the other pilgrims' cost.

The lesson starts exactly at this point: the oral narration of some of the stories recounted by the teacher; students must simply listen, as they normally listen to a story told by some friends or somebody else, without having the written version. The analyses of the written text is not the target. (2)



**STEP 1: preliminary activities**

The teacher can start preparing the setting, giving a short talk following these main headings and deciding to concentrate to all or some of them:

- the medieval pilgrimage
- the pilgrim route
- Canterbury as a place of pilgrimage
- the murder of Thomas Beckett in the Cathedral
- Geoffrey Chaucer: his life and career
- the framework of his masterpiece: Canterbury Tales
- introduction of the pilgrims, in particular of the ones whose story he decides to narrate.

**STEP 2: while listening activities**

The teacher chooses to narrate a story and the students have only to listen and enjoy it. They do not need any written script. According to the level of the class, what they only need is the preparation of some vocabulary, if the teacher realizes there are some words students cannot understand.

While listening they can concentrate on one or two key questions:

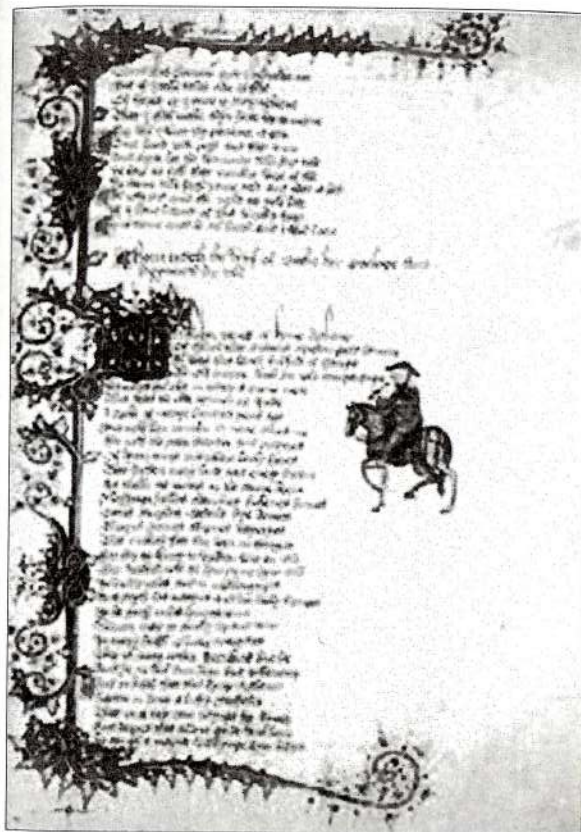
- What is the moment of great suspense in the story?
- What do you think the moral of the story is? Or which lesson can we learn?

Here are the short versions of the stories I have found from an Education Resource Pack for students at intermediate level (3) and they can give an idea of how to simplify the stories to tell students:

**The Wife of Bath's Tale**

The setting is during the glorious days of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. The hero of the story is a young knight who, while walking to the forest, forced his attention on a beautiful young girl.

ropes



The opening page of the Wife of Bath's Tale, from the Ellesmere manuscript of The Canterbury Tales 1405-1410

The knight was summoned to the Round Table to answer for his actions; the penalty for his dishonourable behaviour was death! Queen Guinevere took pity on the young knight and offered him the chance of a reprieve. "Since this young man seeks to understand the nature of women," she said, "let him find the answer to this riddle - What is it that a woman most desires?" The knight was sent off to roam the land for a year and a day, to find the answer to this question. At first he thought that the task would be easy; however as he asked more and more women he began to despair of ever getting the right answer - every woman seemed to want something different! The months passed and the time drew nearer when the knight must return to the court of King Arthur: if he did not find the solution to the riddle soon the knight knew he would be returning to certain death.

Then, when his time was nearly up and the knight was wearily returning to Camelot, he rode through a forest glade, where he saw 24 maidens dancing in a ring. All of a sudden these maidens vanished, leaving only an old wizened woman, hideous to behold. She asked him what he was seeking, and when he told her she cackled and said "I can tell you the answer to that my boy, but you must promise me something in return." The knight was so grateful that he rashly promised she should have whatever she wanted. The old hag whispered into his ear, and the knight rushed to tell the answer to Guinevere.

At Camelot the hall was crowded with people who wanted to hear whether the young knight had returned with the answer, or whether he

was still to die for his misbehaviour: The knight dropped to his knees before Guinevere. "My Lady", he said "I have the answer to your question. What women most desire is to have their own way in everything - in a word, sovereignty over men!"

Guinevere was amazed. This was indeed the right answer, but she could not believe that a man had managed to work this out for himself. She was right, for as soon as the knight had received his pardon, the old woman appeared,



demanding that he should pay his debt to her. The knight was horrified when he heard that what she wanted was to marry him! But, in front of everyone at King Arthur's court there was no choice but to agree. When they were married, the old woman offered the knight a choice. "Would you rather have me as your wife old, ugly and faithful to you, or would you rather I was young, pretty and attractive to other men?" she asked. The knight could not decide, so he said "I don't mind, you choose, my dear." At that there was a sudden transformation of the old woman. She changed from a toothless old hag into a beautiful young girl. "You gave the right answer", she said, "You remembered that women like to have their own way. And as your reward you will have a young, pretty and faithful wife!"

*He has learned to respect women and their power.*

#### The Knight's tale

It is a story of love, rivalry and chivalry, set in the glorious days of Ancient Greece. Duke Theseus was the ruler of Athens, a state at war with Thebes which was ruled by King Creon. The battles between the two states were long, fierce and bloody, with over two thousand men fighting hand to hand and sword to sword. Two young men were captured by the Athenians, and taken to Athens, where they were locked up in the prison tower of Duke Theseus' palace. These two young men were Arcite and Palamon; they were cousins and devoted friends. They whiled away the tedious days in their prison tower by talking about past adventures, and taking turns to look out of the narrow arrow slit which was their only window. They were able to see into the palace garden where one day Duke's Theseus' young sister in law Emily came to gather flowers. Emily was so beautiful that both young men immediately fell in love with her. They began to quarrel, for the first time in their life, about who had seen her first and who loved her best. Soon after this Arcite was released and was sent into exile. He returned secretly to Athens under a false name so that he could be near his fair Emily. One day, Palamon escaped and stumbled across Arcite in the forest. The two men fell on each other and fought like wild beasts.

Duke Theseus, who was out hunting in the forest, found the two men fighting and dragged them apart. When he heard the reason for their quarrel, Duke Theseus was lenient. He gave them one year to



gather one hundred men at arms, to take part in a tournament to prove the extent of their love. The two men agreed to this, and in one year they returned, having gathered the cream of the fighting men for the struggle.

Before the battle the two men prayed to the ancient gods, as was the custom before a tournament. All Athens was there to see the outcome, but the most interested of these was, of course, fair Emily. What was to be her fate?

A fierce battle ensued. At last Arcite emerged as the winner of the tournament and fair Emily. But, as he galloped around the tournament field in victory, the god Saturn intervened and brought him crashing to the ground. With his last breath Arcite begged Emily to love Palamon instead!

### The Pardoner's Tale

This is the story of three young men; they were sitting in an ale house after a long drinking session. They heard, through a drunken haze, the sound of the church bell tolling. "Who are they burying?" one of them asked.

"I believe it's an old friend of yours," said the pot boy "carried off by the Black Death, like every man, woman and child in yonder village".

"Carried off where?" another asked "What right has this Death to come and take people away? Let's hunt out Death and kill him".

"Yes!" cried his two companions "Let's kill Death!" And lurching to their feet, they staggered out of the ale house to track down this mystery person.

Soon they saw an old man, bent double with age. "Why hasn't Death carried you off?" they asked. "you are old, he should have taken you by now".

"I know" replied the old man, "I want to go, but death won't take me.



But I can tell you where to find Death. Follow that crooked path, and you will find Death under the tree". The three young men followed the old man's instructions, and reached the tree, brandishing their weapons, looking for Death. All they saw a large pot of golden florins - treasure! All thoughts of hunting down and killing Death were forgotten, as the three planned what to do with the treasure.

They decided that they could not move it until nightfall, and the

youngest was sent to the nearby town to buy food and wine to sustain them during their wait. While he was gone, the other two plotted to kill him, on his return, with their swords; after all treasure divided two ways was better than treasure divided three ways! Unknown to these two traitors, the youngest had a similar plan... Whilst he was in the town he bought poison from an apothecary, pretending he needed to kill some rats. He carefully poured this poison into two of the three wine bottles he had bought, marking the safe bottle so he knew which one to drink from himself. He then returned to the other two, who were lying in wait for him.

The two jumped out from behind a hedge, and killed the youngest. It was such an expected attack that there was hardly a struggle. "Thirsty work", said one of the murderers, reaching for one of the unmarked bottles of wine...

Later, Death returned to collect his treasure, leaving the three bodies of the young men to be picked clean by the crows. Indeed they did find Death, up that path and under that tree.

→ PEARL JEWELL

### STEP 3: follow-up activities

All the activities the teacher already knows and is used to organizing in the exploitation of a story can be introduced at this point. In this way language and literature effectively work together and both contribute to develop communicative skills.

As a suggestion, the discussion can start from the answers to the key questions in groups or from teacher to students.

If students have already read the description of the characters, another stimulating debate could also guide them to find out:

- if the story reflects the world the character belongs to
- if the story reflects the personality of the pilgrim.

- (1) Canterbury Tales were never completed, because Chaucer died before he could finish editing it. Not all the pilgrims tell their stories, only 24 tales were written.
- (2) This is exactly the purpose of **The Canterbury Tales Visitor Attraction**, organized as a Museum in Canterbury, England. It is a sort of medieval adventure: while walking in a medieval setting, as being part of a group of pilgrims going on pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas Beckett, the visitor stops and can hear the story from some characters, wax characters, who are exactly the copies of the pilgrims, as Chaucer described them in his Prologue. The official website is <http://www.canterburytales.org.uk/home.htm>
- (3) another simplified version, more or less the same language level can be also found on the website <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/cantales.html>

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## Communicating (through) Languages Improves Learning<sup>1</sup>

According to the White Book of Education of the European Commission, the knowledge of three languages are fundamental to strengthen a real interaction among the European citizens. So, let's discover the potential of CLIL (Content and Languages Integrated Learning), which represents an excellent strategy to attain this European objective. This is just the first part of some articles devoted to this issue.

The term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) was originally coined in 1994, and launched in 1996 by UNICOM, University of Jyväskylä (Finland) by David Marsh and the European Platform for Dutch Education, to describe educational methods where 'subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focussed aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language'. This was later extended to include learning through any language that is not the first language of the learner. CLIL can be thought of as a generic

'umbrella' term that covers a range of different approaches in diverse educational contexts: "language cannot stand apart from content learning; rather language should be acquired through content learning just as content through language" (Met, 1994). In other words, students in classes where teaching focusses on explicit acquisition of learning strategies at the same time that language is being taught through content progresses further and more rapidly, than those in the "protected" environment of language, also in terms of language skills. Since students need to be cognitively challenged, CLIL improves their motivation: the student feels more involved in what he/she does and in the learning process so his/her acquisition become deeper and deeper.

CLIL conceives second acquisition in the same way as the first-native one (Krashen 1987, 88) and is based on the assumption that both languages operate through the same Central Processing System (Cummings, 1980) allowing

<sup>1</sup> The materials shown in the attachments of this article have been presented in the poster session in the 30th TESOL-Italy convention held in Rome September 23-24, 2005.