

# Blood, Body Water, Hard Work and Eye Wash

By Stephen Colbourn

## EFL Readers: Adaptations v Originals – An Old Debate

Dr Thomas Bowdler's Family Shakespeare first appeared in 1807. Its intention was to allow fathers to read the plays aloud to their children without fear of encountering lewd and licentious lines; and it was a success. Charles Lamb published his Tales from Shakespeare in that same year, imitating Bowdler by making decorous changes and giving King Lear a happy ending.

Is this adaptation or expurgation? It's a bit of both. Instead of simply crossing out the mucky bits, Dr Bowdler offered tasteful emendations. In Henry V the character Pistol has two bullets to his gun and not a brace of balls. He also primes his piece instead of cocking his weapon. In A Midsummer Night's Dream the weaver Bottom is translated to Bo Tom, while Pompey Bum in Measure for Measure is reduced to merely Great.

The EFL reader did not come into its own for over a century after Charles Lamb, but it followed his lead in writing simple stories for kids. A familiar recipe in the 1930s was to take a famous book and cut out all the awkward parts. 'It was a bright summer in 1295' is okay, but Walter Scott gets difficult from sentence two, and there's all that frightful dialect.

What to do to make a reader? Well, there are broadly two paths to take with several intersections along the way. The first of these, or PLAN A, is to do a complete make-over. Take a book and rewrite it from scratch, keeping the story but jettisoning the author's language. The result is much shorter than the original and the rewrite is written according to a language plan – as far as possible.

The 'as far as possible' is a necessary rider because even when reducing a story to its bones there are problems. Places, historical events, cultural references – these cannot be built into a language plan and need glossing. What is a Dickensian workhouse, for example, and will the students believe it to be an aspect of the modern educational system.

PLAN B, which arose in the 1920s, took a more rigid line. Where students follow a prescribed course, that course will determine what is permitted in a reader – meaning if you are working to a list of the 400 most frequent words, then your readers at that level will contain no words outside that set of 400. This militates against literary adaptations and dictates that readers be originals.

Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy took this approach, by and large, when he wrote simple readers to promote literacy among peasants in the first decade of the twentieth century. It is indeed the old graded reader approach for native speakers followed by Janet and John in British schools, and it makes sense.

## Blood, Body Water, Hard Work and Eye Wash

EFL readers have tended to be more rigid on the issue of permitted words and structures because they are intended for non-native speakers of English. Linguistic research on patterns and frequencies in texts, together with literary criticism, took Ogden and Richards along this route in the 1920s. Working together in Cambridge they proposed a core vocabulary of 850 words as sufficient for BASIC English. This they promoted as a real international language, as opposed to the contrivances of Esperanto and its misbegotten derivatives. Richards spent much of his time in the 1930s on selling this notion to the great and the good.

BASIC English was to be taught in colonial schools and used on the BBC to speak peace unto nation. Lord Reith, General Manager and later Director General of the BBC, was attracted by the idea – as were writers such as H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. Another adherent, in theory, was Winston Churchill – until (so it is alleged) he heard his Blood, Sweat, Toil and Tears speech turned in Blood, Body Water, Hard Work and Eye Wash. After the Second World War, BASIC English was sold off to the British Council who have kept it for their own ever since.

Before and during the war, Josef Goebbels had taken an interest in applying the BASIC idea to the German language as a means of communication throughout the Greater Reich. BASIC or Ground German was to be taught to the slave caste in conquered territories so that they could obey the orders of the master race.

BASIC English is depicted as the language of Newspeak in George Orwell's novel 1984. Its function is to control thought by removing all words for opposition to the prevailing regime. Big Brother is Dr Bowdler in charge of the Thought Police. Citizens are not to be exposed to words outside a closed set.

Of course, students of a foreign language cannot handle that language in the same way as a native speaker. Authentic text is beyond them and this naturally invites the use of simplified books aimed at their stages of learning. But there has always been a conflict over whether it is more important that students should want to read the texts or whether it is sufficient to ensure they are only exposed to texts that they are certain to be able to read in terms of course prescription.

Do the classics of literature hold no intrinsic interest that helps to surmount the difficulties of language? Unless original EFL writers are capable of writing as well as the greats, an original reader in closed set English is likely to be more worthy than captivating. Even in their watered-down forms, such classics as *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *My Cousin Rachel* continue to smoulder. And which is more hydrated – an adaptation of Raymond Chandler or an original reader written in imitation of Raymond Chandler?

Let the students suck and see!