

The Dual Purpose of Teaching Literature: to Provide Stimulating Course Content and to Develop Students' Communicative Abilities.

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Abstract

It is the individual reader's freedom to interpret a text according to his own outlook on the world that makes the study of literature such an exciting and liberating experience. This paper will look at some of the issues and ways in which literature can be exploited in the classroom and focus on the use of short stories as alternative materials that can encourage learners in a variety of classroom activities: from vocabulary enrichment to communicative abilities. Categories that encourage learners to develop the powers to interpret the texts are plot and suspense; characters and relationships; major themes; methods writer uses to communicate his attitudes; and reader's response. Short stories can also lend themselves to intercultural values comparisons. Finally, it is expected that this paper can offer insights to other language teachers who are in similar settings.

Keywords: *literature, individual reader, interpreting, analysis*

Quite recently, there has been an escalation of interest in the use of literature in the language classroom. Many writers stress the benefits of using a literary texts as the basis for imaginative, interactive and discussion activities (Ghosn, 2002; Shrestha, 2008). Law (2012) and Ibsen (1990) have underscored the value of fiction and roleplay activities in developing not only students' oral language skills but also their imaginative sensibilities, so they will be receptive to a literary text and be better able to make a personal response to it. Other writers (e.g., Laurez and Nieto) are prepared to make larger claims for the power of literature. They believe that a study of literature can develop students' character, help build emotional maturity, and equip students with new critical faculties.

Now, while not wishing to dismiss the value of courses that reflect the ideas of these writers, I am concerned that the present focus neglects the core literary experience: the text itself. The essence of any literary experience must be an examination of how the text provokes an inter-subjective experience that generates readings and interpretations.

A genuine programme for the study of literature needs to go beyond merely providing a range of communicative and drama-based activities. What needs to be worked out is a feasible framework for structuring analysis and discussion of the text itself. Students need to be guided towards an appreciation of the processes whereby a literary text generates meanings and elicits a response from the individual reader. Also teachers' experience in using literature in their classes need to be exposed to ideas that reflect modern literary and semiotic approaches. At present, the debate is too narrowly presented in terms of either the currently popular communicative/drama-based approach, or the more specialized stylistic approach, which, with its concentration on discovering the ways in which literary discourse breaks the conventional rules of the language system, seems to demand a background in linguistics (see, for example, Widdowson, 1975). On the other hand, teachers who have had little or no experience in dealing with literature obviously need a lot of guidance. To be more precise, they need to be shown the pedagogic implications of current thinking on the status of literary texts and the interaction between the reader and the writer to which they give rise. What I want to explore in this article, then, is a possible framework that can be used by teachers to lead students to an awareness of how the literary text codifies its meanings and challenges the reader to react to its theme and representations of human experience.

Old opinions and new ideas

Modern critics have exploded many opinions about the study of literature. However, language teachers, unless they are provided with a framework on which to base their pedagogic treatment of the literary experience, are quite likely to hold the very same opinions about literature that were transmitted via their own education. Chief among these opinions is the reverence due to certain texts because of their status as 'classics.' As it has been pointed out, such is the reputation of these 'classic' works that their value is virtually unquestionable – as if the fictional world of the text is an authoritative insight into the human condition which has unquestionable moral value for all readers in all ages and cultures. For those who

accept the status of the classic texts, the sole purpose of literary study is to recover the truths attached in them.

Modern critics have challenged the authority of the classic texts, and the authority of particular readings of them. Their approach to literary texts is based on the belief that each reader has the freedom to assess the coherence of the writer's work and interpret it in the light of his or her own experience and attitudes to the world. As Dunning (1989) says: "There is no elusive 'right' interpretation of a text." Of course, the possibility always exists that a significant number of readers will agree that a text relates to their interests, or presents some aspect of the human condition in a manner that is very compelling. Nevertheless, this consensus can in no way dictate what the next individual reader's reaction and interpretation will be. In a very real sense, the meaning of literary work lies in each individual's reading of it. Dunning (1989) expresses this point well: "We do not approach a text empty-handed, but bring to it our own emotional baggage." Central to any informed teaching of literature is the principle that a text is sure to elicit a plurality of responses; and it is this difference in individuals' responses that makes the study of literature such a suitable basis for interaction that will result in a development of students' language skills.

Another prevalent myth surrounding the study of literature is that the quality of a literary text relates directly to the degree to which that text reflects reality and gives the reader insights into its workings. The most worthwhile texts are, according to this view, those that give the reader a natural representation of life and human relationships. Once again, however, current critical trends have pointed out the grave difficulties with using criteria of this order as a basis for approaching literary texts. First of all, the fictive world of a literary text cannot be granted any absolute status as the representation of our human world, since the writer is a product of a particular society and culture. Writing does not occur in a vacuum. The writer is himself a product of a particular environment and society. His or her writing is bound to reflect these decisive influences, no matter how perceptively the human condition is presented in the text. Secondly, a group of influential readers often agree that a particular text is wonderfully 'realistic' precisely because the author articulates

through it their group's attitudes, obsessions, and prejudices. In other words, as both Barthes and Sartre have pointed out, certain works may have been considered 'classics' because they presented the world through the eyes of their privileged group of readers. It is clear, therefore, that literary texts must be accessible to students so that they can respond to them in the light of their own socio-cultural experience.

The third and most prevalent myth is that the meaning of a literary text can best be discovered by relating it to the writer's own life. Modern literary criticism is highly skeptical of this approach. Attempt to make a direct connection between the fictional world of the text and autobiographical details of the writer are seen as simplistic and betraying an ignorance of the dynamics of the writer/reader relationship. Modern critics are more concerned with the themes and desires that inhabit the text. These need not always be a product of the writer's conscious intentions. Such thinking cannot be accepted by supporters of the biographical approach, since they seek a single 'right' interpretation of the text that can be linked to decisive events in the author's life.

Another myth that many teachers may have picked up via their own education is that studying the right kind of literature is of moral value to students. Now, I do not want to maintain that a study of literary work cannot be of moral value in terms of heightening a student's ability to reflect on his or her ideas, emotions, or experiences. This could easily happen, but it might not. If we attach some guaranteed moral values to reading certain literary works, we seriously misrepresent the literary experience. Individual readers react very differently to the same text. What must always be countenanced is the possibility that students may react negatively to works that others find inspirational. Any absolute claims as to the moral value of literature must therefore be viewed with deep suspicion, since they represent a threat to the freedom of the individual reader in the literary reading process.

It is, then, the individual reader's freedom to interpret a text according to his own outlook on the world, beliefs, and experiences that makes the study of literature such an exciting and liberating experience. Furthermore, to sustain a course there is

a need for some concrete content that can stimulate genuine communication in the classroom. A literary text can satisfy this curiosity by raising themes and issues that are of real interest to all players in the language-learning game.

Practical considerations

The actual choice of text is clearly of crucial importance to the success of any attempt to introduce literature into a language course. Several considerations must determine this choice of texts. My comments come with the idea of selecting prose texts, though my comments are obviously relevant to poetry, too. Generally speaking, prose texts are more suited to the needs of language students, since prose texts provide an extensive exposure to language in which stories and themes are more easily generated than in poetry. Prose writers vary in the complexity of their use of language. The language features of Hemingway's prose, for example, are obviously less demanding for the student than the writing of, for example, Henry James, though this does not mean that Hemingway's themes and stories are simpler than James's. It is clearly important that texts for courses should be within the range of students in straightforward language terms. It is important, too, to consider students' reading speed and reading habits, and to select a text that can be digested in the time available for the class. Short stories are ideal for students' first exposure to literature.

Modern prose texts that feature a lot of dialogue and contemporary forms of expression are likely to appeal strongly to students. However, unless students' target language is highly specific, for example, group of students who are going to study or work in a particular region of the USA or UK, there is no need in choosing texts that highlight particular regional dialects. Therefore, I prefer not to give my students any additional burdens caused by having to interpret archaic language, unfamiliar dialects, or unusual stylistic devices.

A text that is going to be selected for a course must, however, be accessible in more than simple language terms. Students must be able to appreciate respond to the text's coding of its cultural and emotional experience. In addition, it should have a story line and characters that engage students' interest. The text's themes must also

relate in some way to students' life experiences. These conditions are essential if literature is to fulfill its dual purpose: to provide stimulating course content and develop students' communicative abilities.

In many language-teaching situations, there are strong cultural pressures that affect the choice of texts. These pressures must be recognized and sensible choices must be made so that the literature course component is acceptable in all directions. In some societies, texts that deal with certain aspects of human relationships or political themes might well prove to be problematic. Students and teachers should feel comfortable with a literary text. They should not feel that they are engaged in a study that is somehow improper or dangerous. If students are to effectively come to deal with a text, they must feel free to voice their ideas and opinions. If the text is not appropriate to the students' age or the cultural and educational environment, then it causes to be counter-productive in language-building terms.

Categories for text analysis

I suggest that in order to talk meaningfully about a literary text it is necessary to organize activities according to a number of categories. These categories reflect our current awareness of the relationship between the reader and writer of imaginative texts, and the different levels at which a prose literary text operates. A course that uses these categories as an organizing principle for its development of activities should be able to deal with the text in a serious way which ensures that the fundamental issues will not be neglected. At the same time, the examination of the different categories or levels by which the text communicates its meanings should help students to develop the powers to interpret independently other literary texts. Of course, the sophistication of course materials based on the categories will depend on the students' level of English and previous exposure to literature. Here are the categories:

1. Plot and suspense
2. Characters and relationships
3. Major themes
4. Methods writer uses to communicate his/her attitudes

5. Reader's response

These categories are not meant to lead the student towards an exhaustive knowledge of every aspect of literary experience. They represent, rather, a realistic basis for approaching texts. They ensure that the substance of any engagement with a text will be the basis for classroom activities.

To illustrate how these categories are actually supposed to relate to a text, I have selected a short story, "The Hartleys," by John Cheever (1979) and have discussed below how the categories I propose would work out in terms of this text. I think this text could well be used with a group of advanced learners. The story is written in a direct style, the vocabulary used is not too specialized or difficult, and the story contains a certain amount of dialogue. With its focus on family relationships and holidays setting I feel that the story is not very problematic from the point of view of cultural accessibility for students. In the discussion of the story below I have tried to give some indications of the pedagogic implications of this approach to the text.

Plot and Suspense. The first concern must be to focus students' attention on the skeleton of the plot structure. Given that students will, to varying degrees, be faced with basic language – processing difficulties, it cannot be assumed that they will be able to readily follow and sequence the flow of events that make up the story. Also, until students grasp the basic plot structure, it is not possible to attempt any deeper level of text treatment. In "The Hartleys" key events like the following could form the basis for activities: The Harley's previous stay at the inn; Mr. Hartley's skiing lessons for his daughter; Mrs. Harley's getting upset and going to her room; the death of her daughter; and Mrs. Hartley's drive back to New York. These events could, for example, be presented in a jumbled order for students to arrange after reading the story. Alternatively, a longer list could be provided, and students could be asked to select the events that were of prime importance. This activity would certainly generate a lot of discussion among the students.

At this initial stage of involvement with the text, it is also possible to alert students to the ways in which a good story quickly arouses our curiosity and creates suspense. Prediction activities can alert students to the way in which questions and

expectations are aroused in the mind of the active reader. Thus, after a reading of the first three paragraphs of “The Hartleys,” one could usefully base activities on questions like these: Why do you think the Hartleys appear so exhausted? Why do you think that Mr. Hartley remembers the exact date of their previous stay at the inn? Do you think they will have a happy holiday? Such questions will also show students the line of interaction with the text that the role of the reader demands.

Characters and relationships. The second category for text treatment is the characters in the story. The aim is to encourage students to analyze the role of the different characters in the story. As an initial activity students can be asked to draw up a profile of the major characters. Later activities could be based on the students’ differing personal reactions to the characters. Students should also be asked to consider the relationships between the major characters. One activity could be to represent these relationships diagrammatically. Carrying on from this, discussion activities could be centered on a closer examination of these relationships. Students could be asked to discuss in “The Hartleys,” for example, Anne’s dependence on Mr. Hartley and the strained and the strained marital relations of the Hartleys. Of course, it is always possible that the students will come up with different views on the characters’ relations than these statements imply. This will be very valuable if the students can provide textual evidence to support their views, since this will allow a meaningful discussion to develop in the classroom.

Major Themes. Activities can be aimed at identifying the central themes of the story and consideration of the importance that each individual reader will attach to them. While it is clearly not desirable to be too absolute about the major themes that can be identified in a text, one could usefully structure thematic activities on “The Hartleys” with these in mind: The way in which Mr. Hartley transgresses normal cultural codes with respect to family relations by overindulging his daughter and neglecting his wife; the suffering of the wife when marital relations turn sour; the way that the child becomes the real victim of the breakdown of a marriage. One possible activity would be to give a long inventory of possible themes and then ask students to select the prime themes of the text or to rank the themes in order of relevance to the text. Students could also be asked to collect textual evidence for the

importance of themes that they put forward or select from a teacher-provided list. Such activities will surely spark a lot of discussion, since students with different personalities and background will, if made to interpret the text for themselves, come up with different ideas on what the story is really about. A plurality of response to a text of this kind is welcome not only in terms of current thinking on the dynamics of literature, but also in terms of the conditions created for genuine communication in the classroom.

Writer's Methods. In this category of text analysis the teacher and students seek to uncover the methods by which the writer communicates his own attitudes towards the unfolding story. For example, in "The Hartleys" it is clear that the writer tries to steer our emotional response to the story by frequently making us view events through the eyes of Mrs. Hartley. This is the case when Mr. Harley and Anne go ice skating. The description of the scene communicates both Mrs. Hartley's physical view of the scene and her emotional anguish at being excluded from its intimacy.

Again and again they would circle the little rink, earnest and serious, as if he were explaining to her something more mysterious than a sport.

The writer often presents the action in such a way that we will be aware of Mrs. Hartle's feelings. This happens in the account of the day when it rains and the ski slopes are closed. When the maid goes past the Hartleys' room, it is Mrs. Hartley's anguish questions she hears about why they keep trying to rediscover the past instead of facing the facts about their marriage:

Why do we to come back? Why do we have to make these trips back to the places where we thought we were happy? What good is it going to do?

Interestingly, Cheever does not allow Mr. Hartley to respond in the text to his wife's criticisms, and we are left in the dark as to what as to what his own feelings might be. If one were to ask students to speculate on Mr. Hartley's state of mind and heart in relation to this scene, it would make clear the extent to which the writer seeks to elicit sympathy for Mrs. Hartley in order to find out the writer's attitude to him.

Metaphorical use of language is one of literature's most effective ways of communicating thoughts and emotions. In "The Hartleys" Anne's death on the wheel of the ski tow obviously carries more meaning in terms of the story than a simple tragic accident. Students need to be made to think about whether the writer connects Mr. Hartley to Anne's death, since it is he who teaches Anne to ski and trains her to use the tow rope that finally drags her to her horrible death. Discussion of this point could lead into analysis of the symbolism of the death on the wheel. Different ideas might be put forward, but it seems clear that Cheever wants to make it symbolic of Mr. Hartley's destructive attempts to force the marriage to continue when it is beyond saving, and his excessive closeness to his daughter, which will not help her to become an independent person. Students need to be sensitized to the way in which a writer makes certain objects or events symbolic of a whole train of thinking or feeling that is built up throughout the text. An interesting discussion could be set up regarding the possible symbolic significance of the inn itself and the Hartley's night drive back to New York behind the hearse.

Reader's Response. Though a writer clearly has certain intentions regarding the way in which the discourses of a text will be understood by the reader, the possibility nevertheless exists that the individual reader will interpret the text in ways that do not correspond to the writer's intentions. Each reader has his own personal history, outlook on human experience, and field of interests. In "The Hartleys," for example, readers' own life experience is sure to affect their reading of the text. Some readers will see the central discourse of the text to be related to the suffering of childhood, while others will find the story's significance as some kind of statement about the politics of marital relations. Readers with an interest in psychology might interpret the writer's keenness to blame the father for the family's unhappiness as evidence of some kind of deep-seated hostility to his own father, which he is trying to come to terms with through the fictional story.

The fact that such a variety of interpretations of a text can be found should not be a cause for concern. The desirability of personal response is rather a gift, since it matches so ideally the agenda for learner-centered language development. The study of literature can provide the content basis that will foster genuine needs to

communicate, since, as has been stressed, a plurality of responses to any given text is the ultimate goal of a structured analysis.

Conclusion

My discussion of the proposed categories for text analysis has hopefully indicated pedagogic lines of approach for a serious use of literary texts in the EFL/ESL classroom. The approach outlined sensitizes students to the levels on which a text works and also emphasizes the degree to which the text draws the reader/learner into an interactive experience. And it is this personal commitment required of the student that makes a literary text, if taught well, the ideal content basis for developing communicative skills. So, the purpose of language teaching on the agenda, to provide stimulating course content and develop students' communicative abilities, is well-achieved.

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