

Teaching Literature Through Stylistics: A Link Between Linguistics And Literary Criticism

تدريس الأدب من خلال الأساليب: الصلة بين اللغويات والنقد الأدبي

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Kara Mostefa-Boussena Leila

L.boussena@univ-chlef.dz

Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages,

Hassiba Ben Bouali University, Chlef, Algeria

Abstract

This paper examines ways in which the traditional canon of teaching literature can be expanded to foster both students' literary appreciation and greater language understanding and to encourage students to think creatively and independently, to appreciate not only the stimulation, but also the enjoyment derived from the study of literature. As a teacher of literature, I was concerned with how to help the learners overcome the greatest difficulty, namely that of interpreting and understanding the symbolic nature of literary texts and its cultural, historical, and social dimensions. FL learners' inability to read and respond to literary texts is a serious issue. Thus, this paper first reviews some issues underlying the literary pedagogy in our universities. In response to the problems identified, some suggestive accounts are made for a pedagogic change.

Key words: Literature, process-oriented approach, stylistics, motivation, EFL context.

الملخص بالعربية:

تبحث هذه الورقة في الطرق التي يمكن من خلالها توسيع الطريقة التقليدية في تدريس الأدب لتعزيز التقدير الأدبي لدى الطلاب والفهم اللغوي الأكبر لديهم، وتشجيع الطلاب على التفكير بشكل خلاق ومستقل، ليس فقط تقدير التحفيز، ولكن أيضاً المتعة المستمدة من دراسة الأدب. بصفتي مدرسة للأدب، ومهتمة بكيفية مساعدة المتعلمين على التغلب على الصعوبة الكبرى، ألا وهي تفسير وفهم الطبيعة الرمزية للنصوص الأدبية، والأبعاد الثقافية والتاريخية والاجتماعية. إن عدم قدرة المتعلمين على قراءة النصوص الأدبية والاستجابة لها مسألة خطيرة. وعليه، فإن هذه الورقة تستعرض أولاً بعض القضايا التي تكمن وراء التربية الأدبية في جامعاتنا استجابة للمشاكل التي تم تحديدها لتغيير الحسابات تربوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب، المنهج الموجه نحو المقاربات، الأسلوبيات، التحفيز، سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

The teaching of Literature in Algerian universities: Some observations:

My humble experience in teaching has shown me that our students display a low level of enthusiasm for studying literature. The students (Chlef University) whom I approached for an attempt to understand the reasons behind this have all said that what prevents them from reading literary texts is a

feeling of frustration they are left with whenever they approach a literary text. This is because, on their account, the courses neglect their minimal background and experience in literature. With no preparation in the previous years, students are expected to be able to read, analyze the texts and express their appreciations, an expectation which is according to them far from realistic if compared to their previous learning background which lacks any training in the study of literature and in which their exposure of English reading and writing was limited to the study of lexical and syntactic features of short passages.

Moreover, our students often complain about the difficulty of the literary language which tends to bring a set of deviations from the norm. For FL learners, who are still struggling with the varieties of the norm in the language, these deviations bring further obstacles. It follows that one difficulty in teaching literature stems from the long split between literature and language study. For under the auspices of utilitarianism, the inclusion of literary materials in basic skill courses is largely banished from the language classroom. What is obvious in the aforementioned is the difficulty in literature study and teaching; for students are being asked to deal with literary texts when their previous exposure to literature in language classes is too little to allow them to do so successfully.

Another difficulty which surrounds the literary pedagogy is the teacher- centred model which dominates literature classrooms. What underlies these lectures is the traditionally transmissive approach which renders the teaching of literature a mere receptive study of literary criticism, biography of authors, literary schools and movements, historical and cultural backgrounds. According to Widdowson (1978), the result of this overemphasis on critical opinions in literature courses is 'a pseudo-competence in which students learn to manipulate . . . critical terms without understanding, and to repeat for examination purposes the recording of received opinions. Thus, our students, who rely both on their teachers' lectures and on critical comments, become passive learners. They are not helped to experience a literary text in all its textual linguistic details, experiences which would enhance their reading faculties, their understanding of the functioning of language and which would also promote the students' interests in reading literary texts.

Instead of helping the students to rely on themselves and to experiment with language, they are made to rely exclusively on literary critics' judgments. Besides, the teacher is perceived by the student to have a normative authority in matters of literary interpretation because of his/her familiarity with the author, the text, the period, the genre. This perception is the result of the academic study of literature which has often accustomed teachers to deal with literature in a normative way. The appreciation of the text in accordance with an established aesthetic canon and put back in its historic and cultural background

is a further obstacle to a group-centered communicative approach; for it does not encourage the reconstruction of the text necessary for its appropriation by the readers. Protherough (1985) argues persuasively that passing over the ready-made interpretations simply short-circuits the process by which the students develop their own response to the work.'

This mode of teaching does not increase our students' self-assurance in their ability to carry on reading autonomously. With this mode, the students have been accustomed to rely on outside authorities, teachers and critics, and to hear about the text; this indirect way of learning literature does not foster the student's reading faculties. With such teacher-led approach, students scan opportunities to open and close conversations, practice discourse skills, express what they think, and experiment with language. It follows that this literary education, conducted in unidirectional teacher-led process (teachers, students), may be indeed of modification in a number of counts.

Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature

In order to obviate the foregoing difficulties, one recommended method is the process-oriented approach, which has become in recent years an important educational strategy in the language classroom (Vermunt 1998; Bolhuis and Voeten (2001), Carter, R.A. & Long, M.N. (1991). It is based on extensive classroom experience. In a process-oriented classroom, the aim is to sensitize the students to the process of literary creation, i.e. reconstructing the process whereby the author has created the text to sensitize the students to the options that were rejected and the things that were left unsaid. This way, they come to be able to understand, appreciate and evaluate the choices that the author made. Carter and Long (1991: 2001) argued that 'it is only through process-oriented teaching rather than product-based or transmissive teaching that such goals of further interpretation can be reached.'

With traditional transmissive approach, the teacher conveys valid information about literary texts without directing the students' reading by providing them with tools for analysis. It follows that what is needed is a way of enabling students to reach an aesthetic appreciation of a text which connects its specific linguistic features with intuitions about its meaning. On recommended approach of doing this is stylistics. Widdowson describes such a method as mediating approach between linguistics and literary criticism. Stylistics provides a link between the two in that it uses linguistic analysis to understand how messages are conveyed. It creates the interplay between story and discourse. With the stylistics, students can be helped to look at the nuances of point of view, at the intricacies of structure, at characterization, at irony, at imagery and so forth.

To apply stylistics to the teaching of Literature, the reading and analysis of excerpts of literature should be carried on in reading classes, 'reading laboratory', parallel to the lecture courses and should be language-oriented. They should be made genuinely investigative and exploratory, with the possibility of more responses exercise to ensure that the students are properly engaged. In these classes, students are expected to engage with text. These classes should be dedicated to the study of literary text as discourse. On Widdowson's account, 'literature functions as form of communication...' and should therefore be studied as any other form of communication. The main aim of this stylistic analysis is to try to explain how when we read, we get from the structure of the text to meaning. Students would benefit from knowledge of stylistic analysis as it would help them to understand how meanings get into literature and how to back up views they have about literary texts via a close examination of them. If students become accustomed to hearing about the texts, to learning literature in an indirect manner without such a preliminary basis, they will still be unable to provide and explain their responses with a direct reference to features of the text even after learning and reading literature for years.

It follows that in a preliminary stage in studying literature, the teacher should help the learner to foster the ability to reflect, to construct meaning and to appreciate literature on the basis of their linguistic insights.

The specific didactic goals of these classes are:

Increasing the students' linguistic competence and understanding of how the writer manipulates language to achieve his or her communicative effect.

Arousing the students' interest in carrying on reading the literary text once they have been introduced to its themes and its characters through the excerpt being studied.

Practical Analysis:

Let's turn to practical suggestions as to how these outlined principles might be applied effectively in the classroom. How to get the learner to explore a literary passage in order to establish principles of understanding which can sharpen the students' reading faculties?

The sample texts that I have used with my students are drawn from contemporary works of fiction. Though fiction may be, as Short states 'the hardest genre to analyze stylistically' (1993: 25); it nonetheless offers a great variety of linguistic features for study and a fertile terrain for stylistic analysis. As each text displays different foregrounded features, it is the teacher's responsibility to choose passages that exploit a variety of different stylistic devices. The passages chosen exemplify different rhetorical types: physical description, dialogue, interior monologue, narrative of events. Not to lose sight of the

primary aim: that of the pleasure to be found in reading which would encourage the students to carry on the reading experiences out of the class, teachers do not have to use the metalanguage and precision of advanced stylistics. Often this will render the reading experience an overly-painstaking dissection of a text and will threaten one of the goals of this approach, namely to sharpen the students analytic skills to promote their interest in reading literary text. Likewise, no attempt at an in-depth analysis of the entire extract should be made. Instead, in each passage, attention should be focused on only two or three predominant stylistic features

Pedagogic steps:

One procedure for implementing the analyzing a literary text from a stylistic point a view involves the following step:

Step 1: The 1st preliminary step would be to encourage students to voice out their own understanding of the literary text in question and the different appreciation they arrived at.

Students will be encouraged to make some considerations regarding the narrative structure of the text, the narrator and the overall development, the themes. This step is indispensable for two reasons: First, it will permit the students to see the difference between their own appreciations with the more sensitive/deeper understandings which will result from the close study of the literary text. Secondly, giving the students the chance to discuss their own responses to the literary text will exclude any rigid, mechanical application of the approach which would de-motivate the students.

Step2: The students read and re read the micro texts on their own. Students will be asked to identify the linguistic features that most immediately strike their attention, i.e. linguistic features which are particularly noticeable. Here, students should be provided with a series of questions or work sheets which alert the students to some salient features in the text to guide and orientate their search and to help them not to overlook essential linguistic clues. For, the students' reading faculties are not sharp enough to cope with linguistic intricacies of the text. From the resulting list, the teacher will choose two or three that she/he feels can be most profitably exploited in creating a stylistic profile of the text and in making associations between text and its themes or characterization.

Step3: With the teacher's guidance, students suggest possible connections between the stylistic choice and its communicative effect. Bearing these features in mind, students are encouraged to reach an interpretation or an appreciation of the text.

I applied this procedure to different extracts of James Joyce's short story 'Araby'.

Step1: While asking the students about their impressions and understanding, I gathered that most of them understood the story as a young boy's 1st love: a boy, who is completely infatuated with his girl image, tries to buy a present from a bazaar, Araby, to his girl as a promise he made to her when he 1st talked to her. Though their understanding goes right, it was just the tip of the iceberg. When asked to comment on the ending of the story: the boy failed to buy something from the bazaar though he arrived there, the students found the ending rather unexpected and unpredictable. For, on their accounts, the boy had to achieve something minor, purchasing something for the girl to prove his love; yet he failed though he had eventually the opportunity he waited for. This ending did not meet the students' expectations. This failure according to them was unexpected. As to the point of view of the story, there was a consensus amongst students that the short story is narrated in the 1st person, from the boy's perspective. When asked

Step 2: In the detailed analysis of the short story, Students were asked to read the opening scene and to detect some noticeable features concerning the description of the scene and what does it tell about the boy's life and how does it contribute to the overall theme of the story? What does the language tell us about the boy's existence? Within the same task, students were asked to classify the different imagery the author used and to what effect?

This analysis of the language results in the following:

1) The students identified that Araby begins with definite reference, North Richmond Street. In theory, one might expect stories to begin with indefinite reference. This is what we find in simple narration like folk tales, fairy stories as there was an old man who lived in a shoe... Students were invited to compare between the effects of definite and indefinite references on the reader. The former are meant to make the reader feeling close up to the events and the setting, pretending that the reader already knows which street is being referred to. The latter, by contrast, tends to have an effect of distance. The use of the definite reference matches well with use of the 1st person narrator which also aims to elicit sympathy with the main character.

2) While scrutinising the description of the setting, students were encouraged to proceed at componential analysis of the writer's lexicon. Students identified lexemes sharing some component (atom) of meaning): absence of light. The list includes: blind, short days, dusk, sombre, dark, glow, gloomy, twinkling, night. At a larger scale, students identified other lexemes related in their range of meaning to the element of unpleasantness: musty, wild, dust, cold, damp, rusty, detached. The students noticed that the writer keeps on using and stresses such dark references whenever he talks about the boy's environment. This speaks volumes about the boy's reality which is deprived of joy

The author uses dark and obscure references to make the boy's dull existence in the gloomy town of Araby more vivid.

3) When asked to examine the setting in the 2nd part of the story, the students noticed a shift to light reference. This mention of light was immediately followed with a change in the content. Some thing that the students failed to predict: the boy moved to describe Mangan(sister, the girl he is fond of.).Again the writer keeps the bright light references as an ingredient of the setting whenever he mentions the girl. The students succeed to gather different linguistic clues which enhance the element of light like: lamp, lit up, morning, bright, white ,n an instance in the story, the boys says that he leaves his shadow and walks up to her steps. The bright reference is used to create a fairy tale world of dreams that the boy builds in sharp contrast to his ugly reality. This contrast between the tow worlds: reality and fantasy is strengthened all along the story through the use of darkness .Here, the students came to understand that there is more to the story than a 1st boy's love. At much deeper level, the story is about struggle between ideals, fantasy and reality: the story depicts the yawning gulf between the world of fantasy, dreams and real world: The boy undergoes the pressure of a conflict between emotions and reality conflict between the harsh dirty reality and emotions. There is a far cry between the two. It was only through a careful examination of the language that students arrived at an insightful interpretation of the story.

4) In examining the end of the story, students noticed that the last sentence contains four words that deal with the sense of sight: gazing, darkness, saw, and eyes. In this way the story ends up in a moment of seeing. The boy eventually sees the essence of his life: a moment that Joyce called epiphany, a moment of truth or revelation in which the characters came to realize the essence co f his life, a moment in which a truth makes itself felt.

Conclusion:

In this language-oriented approach, students are called upon to play more active role learning than is the case in traditional teaching of literature. With this approach to literature, the teacher's domination is removed giving way to enhancing students to play a participatory role in the learning promoting learners' autonomy. This intrinsic approach to literature seeks to open more opportunities for EFL learners to explore and interact with the literary text as contrasted to the passive one-way process of lecture. In stead of learning literature second-hand, it serves as a method of helping students to develop a response to literature through examining the linguistic evidence in the text, thereby providing as much explicit evidence as possible for and against particular interpretations of texts. The ultimate aim is to engage the students and to stimulate their contribution by presenting them with a

series of questions that demanded discussion, critical analysis, decision-making, and evaluation on their part hoping that this would thus promote their interest in reading literature.

Constructing meaning from literary texts seems to be a serious challenge; for our students lack interpretive and analytic skills, skills that they can not develop within the confines of lectures which are teacher-centered.

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