

A READER-RESPONSE PERSPECTIVE TO READING AND COMPREHENDING THE LITERARY TEXT

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ABSTRACT

From the findings of two questionnaires delivered in two Algerian universities, we noticed that literary texts reading has practically become concerned with vocabulary development and comprehension in which the literary text is used as a sample for extracting meanings and enlarging vocabulary. In such classes the teacher enjoys a dominant role. He usually supplies ready made interpretations, sometimes his own and other times taken from other writers.

In order to reconsider the effective role of literary reading in EFL classes, it is highly worthwhile to know first the literary text itself and its characteristics; and second how it should be processed. Opting for intensive-extensive reading within the reader-response approach seems to be a very eminent way to help students fully understand and appreciate literary texts with certain autonomy, far away from the authority of the teacher.

1. THE LITERARY TEXT:

Before probing into techniques and strategies related to literary text reading and comprehending, it seems convenient to draw a clear definition and the main characteristics of this type of text. Alderson (2000) affirms that

Any discussion of text types is incomplete without at least some consideration of the distinction popularly made between literary and non-literary texts. (65)

Clearly, before discussing how learners should read and comprehend literary texts, it is necessary to distinguish it from the other types of text. Lucas (1990:27) divided texts into two major types: artistic and functional. Artistic texts include novels, short stories, essays, poems and plays. Functional texts include whatever texts other than the artistic as shown in the figures below:

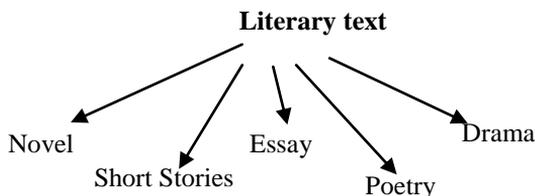


Figure 01: the literary text

From the diagram above, we deduce that literary text is artistic, as opposed to functional text, with five major literary categories which are typically the literary genres: novel and short stories- generally referred to as fiction-, essay, poetry and drama.

Furthermore, it is assumed that literary texts are somewhat harder to comprehend. Alderson (2000) explains this that literature uses formal devices like deviation in order to defamiliarize language and hence raising special effects, the thing which would lead readers to reflect and process literary text differently. He also explains this by the use of figurative language like metaphor which makes the reader use more personal associations according to the reader's socio-cultural knowledge of the text.

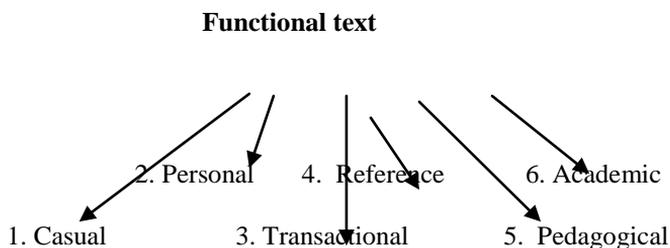


Figure 01: The functional text

Functional text comprises six categories:

- 1- Casual texts include newspapers, magazines and non-fiction
- 2- Personal texts include letters and diaries.
- 3- Transactional texts include business letters, legal documents, reports and instructions.
- 4- Reference texts include dictionaries, catalogues, directories and inventories.
- 5- Pedagogical texts include text books and encyclopedias.
- 6- Academic texts include research papers, theses, specialist books and journals.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERARY TEXT

Arab (1993) considers four main characteristics for literary texts:

- A literary text is a sample of *language use* to be read and understood.
- The illustration and expression of artistic sensibility embedded in a specific literary genres (fiction, poetry, drama) having its own history and its own formal laws.
- An artefact to be related to its socio-historical context of which the writer's biography is one element.

- A semiotic construct with a set of devices and codes which definitely marks it off as literary and which therefore open to interpretation and evaluation.

Accordingly, literary text is an artistic product with its specific genres (fiction, essay, poetry, drama) and with some artistic features and devices which distinguish it from non-artistic text.

These features manifest generally in grammar deviation and the use of figurative language. Also, literary text should be studied within its socio-cultural context in which the writer's social conventions and personal convictions have to be highly considered. Thus, it seems insufficient to apply approaches and methods developed for non-literary text in order to fully understand and evaluate such highly marked kind of text. Readers therefore need to acquire some literary competence as well as literary text reading techniques that would eventually enable them comprehend and interpret literary texts adequately.

3. LITERARY COMPETENCE:

Most of English language learners are familiar with Chomsky's term grammatical competence which refers to native speakers' mastery of internalized knowledge of rules and norms which govern their language and make them generating and understanding meaningful utterances. Yet, few of them are not aware of literary competence. Lazar (2000) argues that:

Effective readers of a literary text possess 'literary competence', in that they have an implicit understanding of, and familiarity with, certain conventions which allow them to take the words on page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meaning. (12)

Literary competence thus refers to an analogous mastery and knowledge of the roles and norms of literary discourse. This implies how a literary work, as distinguished from non-literary, is to be read, processed, and comprehended.

Within literary reading, the reader is very often confronted with a language that uses metaphorical and symbolic meanings which include figures of speech, metaphors, simile, etc. Teachers of literature thus have to familiarize their students with such language use and should encourage them to process any marked deviations from ordinary grammar and language. Moreover, readers should be provided with the necessary knowledge to enable them recognize literary genres since each genre will require some specific knowledge on the part of the reader. Thus, reading a poem would activate the reader's schemata – knowledge – on rhyme, meter, rhythm, alliteration and images while reading a novel would require readers to concentrate more on plot, characters, point of view, tone and so forth.

Each literary genre actually presents a particular set of features which makes it read and handled in a particular way with particular skills and activities. Besides,

reading a literary text poses a crucial problem at literary terminology level or metalanguage. Readers then have to be acquainted with the necessary key literary terms to enable them explore a literary text appropriately. For instance, if readers do not know foregrounding, foreshadowing, irony, apostrophe, etc, they will just rely on literal meanings of words, expressions and sentences that make-up the text.

Literary competence is dependent on the reader's awareness of literary text's devices, techniques and terms used by writers. This implies deviations from literary language, the use of metaphorical language; and the specificities of literary genres, since each genre presents a particular type of reading and knowledge; and literary terminology which helps the reader add meanings that are not apparent through the literal reading of language items.

On the whole, the more a reader is aware of the literary style, devices, techniques, genres and terms, the more literary competent he will be. So, teachers of literature have to consider the importance of literary competence through incorporating some tasks and activities in literature course.

4. LITERARY TERMS:

As distinguished from non-literary texts, literary texts exhibit considerable use of metalinguistic terms or what is commonly known as literary terminology. Lazer (2000) affirms that:

Using terminology means ensuring that students are familiar with it and encouraging them to apply metalinguistic terms to any text that they are reading and studying. (45)

It seems quite important to equip students with the necessary literary terms to enable them processing any kind of literary texts. In view of the importance of literary terminology in understanding literary texts and genres, Lazer (2000) argues that presenting a list of literary terms with definitions is not sufficient to help learners cope with such kind of terms. He, therefore, proposes matching activities to ensure a good manipulation of these terms. This includes an immediate list of terms (necessary terms that will be used for the text in hand) with definitions on a column and on other column real examples from literary texts and the student is asked to match them with arrows. Other activities like multiple choice questions are also possible

5. READER-RESPONSE APPROACH

The reader-response approach is an adherence to the interactive reading model which maintains that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. The reader thus reconstructs meaning from literary text through bringing his or her knowledge, emotions, and personal experiences.

With respect to the reader-response approach, the learners should not be considered as passive recipients, but active participants in extracting meaning from text and then responding to the underlying messages. Each reader will contribute to

the final outcome depending on their socio-cultural background, previous experience and expectations. The teacher's role thus will be that of a mediator to help learners interact with the text. As McRae (1991:97) supposes: "The teacher's role is as intermediary between author, literary work, and receiver in order to open up a multi-directional sphere of interaction."

Therefore, the teacher has to assume a role of facilitator and mediator, in order to lead his learners towards an independent ability to read, assimilate and appreciate literary texts and at times stimulate their students to be aware of what they bring to the text through providing them with clues, hints and also limits to any deviant or exaggerated interpretations.

6. LITERARY EXTENSIVE READING

Since literature is a reading-centred activity extensive reading, or reading extensively, seems to be a very efficient strategy to cope with the great body of literature particularly for pleasurable reasons. Susser (1990) points out that:

Extensive reading is (a) reading large quantities of material or long texts, (b) for global or general understanding, (c) with the intension of obtaining pleasure from the text.
(3)

By definition, large quantities of books are very essential. This could be achieved by exploiting the large quantities of novels, anthologies and readers.

Literary extensive reading energizes and motivates students to read whole books and works mainly for pleasure and culture enrichment. It is actually as a native of a language reads full literary texts in his own language. In fact, he rarely encounters linguistic barriers. He often seeks pleasure and entertainment rather than learning. Thus, if properly used by teachers, it provides the potential for reinforcing language acquisition, ensures sustained interest in reading whole works for pleasure, and helps students to build strong confidence with long extended texts.

7. LITERARY INTENSIVE READING:

Intensive reading is basically a study technique which aims at obtaining a high degree of comprehension and retention over a long period of time. Zhenyu (1997:40) states that: "Intensive reading as its name suggests, requires students to read a passage (often called a text) very carefully and in great detail."

In an intensive reading class, the students are expected to go through the text slowly, explaining key words and phrases and analyzing grammatical structures whenever necessary. The teacher has to encourage his students to read as much and as fast as they can, often aided by study questions so that they will be able to grasp the main ideas of what they are reading. Moreover, the students are encouraged to give their own interpretations of the text; this will entail critical reading as explained by Zhenyu (1997):

Learners are now in a position to devote part of their attention to the analysis of logical relation between sentences and paragraphs. While reading, students should learn to identify the main idea of each paragraph and to make a logical and reasonable judgment as to the writer's intended message. (42)

At the first stage of intensive reading, the overall aim of student's reading activities and tasks is to be able to decipher the message conveyed through words, phrases, and sentences that are syntactically arranged and juxtaposed. As students progress with these basic elements of the text, they enter a more sophisticated stage that is of analysis and interpretation. Intensive reading, thus, should lead students to an ultimate objective, which is enabling them to look for meaning beyond the author's own words. This kind of processing is generally called critical reading.

It is assumed that intensive reading course starts with pre-reading tasks and questions to focus students' attention on the main ideas in the text. This involves reading for gist, in other words skimming. More than this, the students are supposed to read closely to find only the information necessary to answer specific questions. Thus the teacher has to opt for scanning.

On the whole, Intensive reading is meant to encourage students to reach a high level of comprehension and retention by associating skimming and scanning activities which, in turn, should foster the students' interpretive ability to the reading text. For applying intensive reading programmes, **SQ3R** which stands for *Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review* can be a very useful strategy to help students follow a step by step method in order to reach high degree of assimilation and retention of key ideas and messages conveyed by authors.

8. CONCLUSION:

In fact, reading literary texts in our university classes has become too much concerned with vocabulary development and comprehension in which the literary text is used as a sample for paraphrasing. When it comes to critical composing, the teacher of literature enjoys a place of a dominant *know-all* master who supplies ready made interpretations and explanations usually taken from writers and critics about literary works.

In order to reconsider the effective role of literary reading in EFL classes, it is highly advisable to develop an adequate pedagogy which will assume a place for the teacher to lead the learners towards an independent ability to read and appreciate literary texts as well as to enhance their language skills and cultural awareness about the target language.

Within reader-response approach, reader and text mutually affect one another as labelled by Rosenblatt (1985:40) "a transaction with the literary text." She also maintains that transaction is an aesthetic reading through which the reader engages with ideas in the reading text relying on his/her prior experiences. From this transaction the reader creates a new unique and personnel experience. The learners therefore should be encouraged to express themselves freely about a literary text and

slightly assisted to appreciate a literary text since literature encompasses artistic, social and cultural elements that are detected and approached in several ways by different readers.

Accordingly, reading instruction should not seek to control the reader's experience but to facilitate the reader's own structuring of that experience. Hence, the teacher would assume a role of an enabler for the transmission of knowledge. This implies motivating students by selecting appealing works to which they can respond emotionally and linguistically in order to render reading a literary text an enjoyable and responsive experience. Moreover, the reader-response approach stresses the necessity and the pedagogical value of developing the students' critical abilities and awareness so that they would become critical readers and not passive accumulators of what has been delivered to them in class by their teachers.

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