

## **Assessing the Concepts of Genre and Context in EFL Learners’ Interpretation of Literary Texts: “Things Fall Apart” as a model**

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**Abstract:** Interpreting a literary text by EFL learners, in our context, is often characterised by the students’ use of their traditional comprehension methods such as answering general questions, finding synonyms and antonyms, and so on. This indicates that the lack of appropriate strategies to get in-depth understanding and extract hidden meanings is still lagging behind, and that the implementation of new strategies is not only an inevitable practice, but also an important aspect that must be taken into consideration. The belief that what students need is the literal meaning of the literary text has emerged out of our modest experience as teachers of English language classes and the recurrent passivity of students’ treatment of texts as far as we are concerned. Genre and Context are significant factors which enhance the attainment of knowledge from and about texts and are the core of the present study, alongside assessment strategies proposed by the researchers. By reviewing some related literature and, at the same time, relying on our observations, this communication aims to investigate the study of literary texts from different perspectives

**Key words:** EFL learners, traditional comprehension methods, implementation of new strategies, Genre and Context, and assessment strategies.

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## **1. Demystifying Basic Terminology:**

### **1.1 Evaluation:**

Evaluation is a natural activity that can be formal or informal. It is something that may not always be made explicit, but may actually be undertaken unconsciously (Rea–Dickins, Germaine, 1992: 2). It is not always something we do in a principled and systematic way. In education, however, evaluation has different aspects. It becomes important to make explicit the criteria used in our judgement. Ill-prepared and inconsistent evaluations are unfair, uninformative, and unreliable. In this context, evaluation is a process through which teachers judge the quality of their work, their own or their students. The principal aim of evaluation, in this context, is to make sound choices. It is, then, concerned primarily with decision making (Richards, 1996, cited in Cohen, 1980: 3). Such decisions are based on informed judgements. They need to be careful in collecting information and thoughtful about interpreting that information (Genesee, Upshur, 1996).

### **1.2 Assessment:**

Assessment refers to the process of quantifying the characteristics of a person. Quantifying then, means measuring in mathematically precise terms the ability or area to be tested. Quantifying, thus, means measuring in mathematically precise terms the ability or area to be tested. Bachman (1997) points out three distinguishing features of assessment: quantification, characteristics, and explicit procedures. First, quantification refers to the assigning of numerical or non-numerical categories. Second, characteristics concern mainly mental attributes and physical abilities. The third distinguishing characteristic in assessment is the one concerned with quantifications and how they should be performed. Generally, the procedures and techniques to be followed have to be clear and well structured. In other words, this means that when quantifying there is no room for arbitrary or blind assigning of grades to the characteristics of individuals; rather, there should be a certain assigning based on principled criteria.

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### 1.3 Genre:

Genre is a “category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterised by a particular style, form, or content “. *Genre*, according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, is a given type or style of literature, art, film or music that we can identify because of its special features (p. 561). In the same vein, The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and literary Theory defines *Genre* as a French term referring to a kind or a literary type such as the novel or the short story (p. 342).

From a broad perspective, there are four categories of genre. In brief terms, these are: Nonfiction, Fiction, Drama, and Poetry.

**Nonfiction:** it is about writing that is true.

**Fiction:** it deals with imaginative writing

**Drama:** it is a play or script.

**Poetry:** this concerns verse and rhythmic writing with imagery.

### 1.4 Context:

Context is defined as the circumstances that surround a given text. It is considering how a short passage is significant to the whole or how the whole affects the passage. In this sense, context deals with all the circumstances that somehow contribute to the meaning of a text. In addition, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines *Context* as the situation in which something happens and which helps the readers to understand it... ( p. 282). The importance of context is because of external forces that affect the general reception or understanding of a work.

## 2. The Research Problem:

At the tertiary level, some teachers and learners focus mainly on understanding **texts**- defining terms, identifying characters, and so on. They stick to questions whose answers are already found in the text.

From the above problem, the research question has been formulated as follows:

To what extent is the consideration of **Genre** and **Context** important in determining the meanings that learners are supposed to make (interpret) from the text?

### **3. Understanding our Reality:**

In order to understand our reality, a set of questions about genre and context have been raised. These questions are intended to help both students and teachers to know how to analyse a literary text in terms of these two components.

#### **3.1 Questions about genre:**

- 1- What genre is this text?
- 2- How do you know? Or, What are its main features?
- 3- What should you think about and notice as you read a given genre?
- 4- What details make this text fiction, no-fiction... ?

#### **3.2 Questions about context:**

- 1- What is the cultural, educational background of the author?
- 2- What are the values and aesthetic concerns of the culture of the author?
- 3- What are the political or economic issues of the times?
- 4- What cultural issues may have influenced, challenged, or inspired the author?

Questions such as the abovementioned ones can be answered by the fact that after the second world War many African writers, in the west and east of the continent, were all writing in European languages, attempting to treat themes like the clash between indigenous and colonial cultures (El-Dessouky, 2010). In addition, African writers did only write in the languages of the colonizers, but

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they were also influenced by their literary products. The title of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, was taken from 'W.B Yeast's 1921 poem The Second Coming, which prophesies the end of the present era and the entrance on the world's stage of another that is radically different''(ibid, 99).

### **4. Analysing Genre and Context:**

Below are some considerations one needs to highlight before analysing texts. They reflect in a way or another the essence of the above questions.

#### **4.1 Analysing genre :**

Genre analysis gives the idea that the analyst wishes to understand the features of communicative discourses in given situations. In other words, the analyst targets the building of texts and their objectives ; analyzing genres enable the analyst to discover the knowledge of the writer and that of the readers in a specific society (ULUM, 2016, p. 604). The analyst then must consider these actions:

- Placing genre in its context.
- Surveying the existing literature.
- Selecting a corpus.
- Levels of linguistic analysis.
- Consulting with specialist informants.

#### **4.2 Analysing context:**

In understanding literature, the aspect of "context" is very important. " Postcolonial criticism, particularly Edward Said maintains that the 'text' is 'worldly' for it exists in the world and about the world. In any reading of the literary text we have to take the author, the text, the reader and the world into consideration" (Walia, 2014, p. 322). That is, a good grasp of the text is determined by "all" the conditions

under which it takes place ; i.i it is written. Therefore the reader, or rather analyst, must go through the following actions :

- Looking for historical background.
- Looking for social/ cultural biases, trends.
- Looking for Political situation at the time.
- Looking for Any other relevant information (biographical information about the author).

## **5. Genre and Context- based Model for Analysing Texts**

In order to put into practice and verify the previous assumptions, the researchers suggested the following model. This latter stands for a concrete example where students are provided with pertinent questions and answers relevant to interpreting a text that has been read and analysed before, but from different perspectives. The contribution of this model lies in yielding in-depth analysis that transgresses superficial comprehension of « Things Fall Apart » as a case study.

**Example:** Chinua Achebe's « **Things Fall Apart** »

### **5.1 Questions to analyse genre:**

- a. What genre is this text (Novel) ?  
*Fiction (folktale) that illustrates culture...*
- b. How do you know ?  
*In chapter seven, Okonko tells stories to his sons.  
People in the Ibo region use proverbs to fully communicate.*
- c. What should you think about and notice as you read this genre.  
*Imagination, setting (s), characters, problem and conflict.....  
Oral tradition, morals and lessons.*

### **5.2. Questions to analyse context:**

- a. What insights do readers acquire about the author's life?  
*Clash between the coloniser and the Ibo people.  
Ibo culture prior to its contact with Europeans.*

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*Closer look at the Ibo people and their life.*

- b. In what way did history influence the writer’s outlook?  
*Achebe paints a vivid picture of the Ibo society before and after the arrival of white men.*
- c. What political events are significant to the text ?  
*British colonialism (1890) in Africa.  
England, France and Germany divided Africa into 50 countries.*
- d. What religious/ethical/ political beliefs does the author favour?  
*Achebe is against Christian ethics which tried to/destroyed his society.  
Achebe favours indigenous culture and tries to describe it in details.*

**6. ‘Things Fall Apart’ from a postcolonial perspective:**

Colonisation and all its attendant evils were matters of discussion and a fertile area for the majority of African writers after independence. Some of these writers portrayed the coloniser as being inhumane, describing and criticising its effects on their societies.

*Things Fall Apart* was written by Chinua Achebe to defend the bad representation of African culture in general and the Nigerian culture in particular by European writers such as Joseph Conrad in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. *Things Fall Apart* was written to depict the 1890s clash between the Igbo culture and that of the Whites. Achebe included in the novel proverbs, folktales, and songs which enabled him to capture the underlying foundation of the Igbo culture and protect its values.

*Okonkwo* is the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*, living in *Umuofia* and representing a tribal leader. Under its own regulations, leaders in the village of *Umuofia* were chosen for their words and courageous acts. People in the village believed in gods and deities, and they worked the land. These characteristics of community’s social and religious life contradicted with the Whites’ models. As a result of this contradiction,

*Okonkwo* resisted the new political orders for fear to lose his status which was gained following the traditional standards.

After a period of time, an increase in the number of people who converted to Christianity was notable which, in turn, gave rise to questions about identity. Besides, the Europeans succeeded in establishing educational institutions which divided Umuofia in terms of acceptance and refusal of change. Consequently, Okonkwo committed a suicide.

From a pure post-colonial perspective, Achebe succeeded in presenting the cultural identity of Africans in a colonized society (Nigeria) by using the most appropriate words and style. Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is a text which draws a real image of the life of an African tribe at a time when the European colonialism dominated Africa. The words used, or rather messages are clear and direct and fit all the intended meanings (Yıldız, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

To recapitulate what has been presented and discussed so far, the following points are believed to be of paramount importance and have to be taken into account:

- Interpreting literary texts should go beyond the boundaries of superficial comprehension.
- Genre and Context are of paramount importance to interpreting texts.
- Genre gives the text a stamp that distinguishes it from other texts.
- Context identifies the background wherein the text was produced.
- Teachers are kindly invited to consider these two elements when assessing learners' interpretation of literary texts.
- Students should avoid superficial understanding of texts and focus, instead, on developing in-depth analysis.

Context is and remains so important because words are supposed to stand alone and 'Our ways of presenting and interpreting them almost

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always rely on our knowledge about the artist’s life, the historical circumstances surrounding the work’s production and reception, or comparisons with other works of art or literature” (Ladegaard & Nielsen, 2019, p.1). As for genre, the students’ or readers’ knowledge of the different types of texts gives them a general understanding of purposes and knowledge of texts and whether or not to read a given type; i.e. whether or not they need some particular information from what they are about to read (Beghtol, 2001, p. 18).

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