

Teaching english literature in an E.F.L situation

Sample lesson for First Year University Students.

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By way of contribution to the general debate on the teaching of English at University level I would like to offer a few reflexions on the teaching of English Literature at a first year level.

Considering the fairly low linguistic competence of students entering the University and expected to embark on a literature course, this paper seeks to offer a few methodological remarks and suggestions on how to approach a literary text in order to develop in the learner an attitude to language use and ultimately an attitude to a “literary” text and to literature.

Before giving explicit details on the lesson plan, I would like to start with some preliminary and essential considerations, emphasizing a number of prescriptions and recommendations which I deem essential for a successful teaching of a literary text at first year level.

English literature classes for First Year students to be effective as well as enjoyable should be based on:

- a short length text (not more than 2 pages).
- preferably self contained.
- written in fairly straightforward simple syntactical structures whose progressive difficulty is to be appreciated by the teacher.
- a text written in authentic English. ie: unaltered through simplification or otherwise, because simplification has its disadvantages. In the eyes of Honeyfield.

« Simplification tends to produce a homogenized product in which the information becomes diluted. The additional words in the text tend to spread the information out, rather than to localize the information. Furthermore, (he adds) the simplification of syntax may reduce cohesion and readability. Since proficient readers rely heavily on localized information and cohesive devices, deleting these elements will contribute little to the development of reading skills”. (Honeyfield, 1977. 434-5).

It is also important to add that at this stage, the teacher is well advised to avoid lecturing and opt, conditions permitting, for a tutorial or a seminar mode of teaching.

Besides the text has better come in the form of excerpts from works by such modern or contemporary writers as D.H. Lawrence, George Orwell, Somerset Maugham, E.M. Forster, J.B.R. Tolkien etc. In drama texts can come in the form of extracts from plays by some such dramatists as John Osborne, George Bernard Shaw, or Oscar Wilde. In poetry it is possible to think of the sonnets of W.B. Yeats, or the poems of Lawrence or even Blake and Wordsworth whose simplicity and modernity can appeal to learners. This list has no claim to exhaustiveness or otherwise; it is a mere indicator of the kind of texts both students and teacher need at this stage.

The teacher would therefore want to choose passages from the three main genres: self contained extracts from a novel or a short story, a scene or part of scenes, soliloquies or dialogues from plays, or simple short poems. Moreover when it comes to selecting a text a golden rule is to be observed: a text whatever its genre should be **exploitable**. (Nuttall, p.30). More explicitly:

A text should first enable both teacher and the students to ask interesting questions about the language and style of the text as much as about its contents.

Secondly it should develop and challenge the students' intelligence as well as their linguistic competence as English readers. The text should not make unreasonable demands on the learner's knowledge of English. This however does not entail that it is to be restricted to simple, unsophisticated English.

Thirdly the text should not present any major cultural inaccessibility through too many culture specifics, and should always remain a means to understanding the way other people feel or think – people with different backgrounds, problems and attitudes of their own. This humanistic aspect of literature is in my mind essential. If literature fails to achieve this essential goal e.i yield a universal heritage, a common humanity between individuals and people while also stressing differences it becomes an arid and useless activity and as such it will cease to command the readers' regard and interest.

Fourthly a text should stimulate the students' interest (it must be an enjoyable text). Experience has taught us that it becomes much more difficult to do a good job with a dull text. The students' – teacher interaction is livelier and more rewarding if the text they study appeals to the learners as well as to their teacher. For such a purpose it is possible to think of thrillers, or romances, or else choose frankly controversial or polemical texts, bearing in mind that shorter texts usually lend themselves better for intensive study. In the final analysis the teacher's objective is to get the students to develop their own skills, make them aware of what they are doing and interested in doing it and doing it better. The purpose is to provide students with the techniques for approaching texts of various kinds to be read for various purposes, in order to develop their reading skills as much as their ability to understand and eventually analyse and appreciate the sheer "literariness" of a text.

So much for these general recommendations concerning the rationale behind text selection and the goals to be achieved. What of text study itself now?

It is true to say that the study of a text does not begin and end in class. It may be divided into two important stages. The first involving activities prior to coming to

class; and the second stage would be the actual intensive study of the text in class. This study may be pursued after the regular formal sessions through home tasks to be set for students.

— **Prior to coming to class:** the teacher would make sure that the text to be studied has been read at home and some form of succinct guided preliminary research (teacher guided in the early stages) carried out by students, involving useful background information likely to inform their study of the text and enhance their overall appreciation of it.

This research, could be made to bear upon the author's life, his or her works, time and concerns; in more general terms about the political, socio-economic, cultural and philosophical context within which this author has written.

If for instance a passage from a novel by Dickens is being studied, then some research on the so called Victorian period is needed, with special attention to be paid to the Factory System, the Poor Houses and the general philosophy of Utilitarianism.

If a Lawrence text is under study, the students research would be made to bear upon late Victorianism or the Modern Period and the First World War, and what the latter has brought about in terms of social and cultural changes.

For writers like Orwell and Osborne, 20th century attitudes towards Nationalism and the Cold War are more relevant. These again are mere examples; they could be multiplied at length. The teacher would orient the students towards specific research tasks. So much for the background research and other activities that ought to be carried out prior to coming to class.

— **In class** the teaching session may be structured in 5 essential phases:

A/ "Warming Up "or" Brain Storming" Activity.

B/ Text Comprehension: itself divided into several stages.

C/ Productive Skills.

D/ From Comprehension to Analysis and Interpretation.

E/ Productive Tasks.

A/ Let us begin with the "**Warming UP**" exercise. If say a text happens to be an extract from a novel by D.H. Lawrence it is suggested the teacher would simply write down in the middle of the board the title of that novel, or the name of D.H. Lawrence or perhaps more provocatively some such title as **Lady Chatterley's Lover**. This should, hopefully, trigger instant reactions or questions about D.H. Lawrence's birth and death, his other works, his style and possibly his concerns and his attitudes towards traditional late Victorian moral values. This is a mere example of how a warm up activity could be devised. This example could be codified in some way and made to suit other texts by other authors from other periods and genres. This attempt is in my mind part and parcel of a communicative approach to literature teaching. If properly conducted it seldom fails to fulfil its objectives, i.e generate responses around the text studied or its author with the main focus on the author and theme with snowball effects. An activity which helps involve everyone in the class.

B/ **Text Comprehension:** This part of the lesson can itself comprise the following activities or exercises.

1 – **Silent Reading** of the text for skimming purposes performed in class for the first 5 or 10 minutes of the session the goal of which is:

- a) To identify the main ideas of the text i.e focus on global comprehension.
- b) To number parts of the text i.e focus on form and structure – anatomy and typography of text.
- c) To capture atmosphere of the passage. Followed by a

2 – **Reading Aloud** exercise performed by the teacher and by a few students in alternative turns, time permitting. An exercise which serves additional purposes:

- a) Correct pronunciation.
- b) Encourage good “chunking” of the text and by the same token offers the teacher a good opportunity to check students’ reading speed, pitch and emotions which convey the reader’s interpretation of the piece.
- c) Help capture tone of the passage.
- d) Involve everyone in the story.

In drama this type of reading is particularly successful when conducted in the form of exchange of parts to be read or performed. It gets easier to check the students’ reading speed, pitch and emotions. In poetry the declamation of short poems can serve the same purposes.

3 – **Intensive Reading** or “scanning” i.e reading for detail, its purpose being:

- a) To elicit from students questions and answers related to the actual comprehension of the text: the “What” type of questions.
- b) It is also meant to sharpen the students’ sense of the language used in the text through problems of vocabulary usage (e.g synonyms vs antonyms) the emphasis here being on the “denotative” aspects of the diction used.
- c) It also helps students develop their “word attack skills” or how to tackle unfamiliar lexical items by using morphology of words, inference from context, or by using a dictionary (Nuttall, pp.31-2).

It now seems to me of paramount importance, once the different stages of reading have been completed to set the students to

C/ **Productive Tasks** such as:

- To give a title (or a different title) to the passage.
- To summarize the story (vocabulary extension exercise).
- To make prediction of what is likely to happen next.
- To imagine another ending to the story.

D/ **From Comprehension to Analysis and Interpretation** or how to develop “text attack skills” which is the process of interpreting a text as a whole, using all clues available, including cohesion and rhetorical structure (Nuttall, chapters 7 and 8).

The Comprehension phase of the session is meant to focus the learner’s attention on particular cognitive skills which would anticipate both the form and the contents of the text. (Abbot, p.89).

Its purpose is to elicit from students questions on the Hows and Whys embedded in a

text. In other words it emphasizes the passage from language usage to language use; it marks the passage from text to discourse, from the functional to the aesthetic aspect of language, dwelling more markedly on the “connotative” dimension of language in a text.

In “Interpretation” the students are meant to:

- infer from the passage (i.e. read between lines).
- infer from the passage the context in which it was written.
- draw conclusions.
- recognize the writer’s purpose and attitude.
- recognize the relationship between the main ideas and their expansion (Abbot P.89).
- follow the different stages of an argument i.e “rank” statements according to formal dramatization within the passage.
- focus the learner’s attention on particular cognitive skills related to form and content, structure and ideas (Abbot, p.89).
- appreciate the rhetorical, technical and stylistic effects (i.e the text “literariness”) – their use, effect and purpose.
- assess input of stylistic specific terminology, and figurative speech etc...

At this stage, it is to be noted, the teacher should know what his objectives and priorities are and gear students towards recognizing particular cognitive skills and get them to show their competence in producing one or various skills. This brings us to the last phase of the session which is another set of productive skills.

E/ Productive Skills:

They could be made to bear upon the text’s

- language and style
- its historical and socio-cultural context
- its “literariness”.

At this stage it is worth recalling that it is better to allow the text to suggest what activities and exercises are most appropriate to it. In other words never impose in advance a definite exercise on a text.

Besides there must be a variety in the range of exercises bearing in mind that a balance should be struck between leaving the students without any help and on the other hand, as some say, “squeezing the text dry” (Grellet, p.10).

In general terms productive skills would consist in:

- Rewriting the passage (or a dialogue) from a different point of view.
- Commenting on the type of analogies, metaphors, allegories or parable used, and what effects they are meant to produce on the readers.
- Using all clues contained in the passage (stylistic, technical etc) writing an essay on the skill and craft of the author.
- Selecting information from a passage to support a particular point of view.
- Extracting from the passage the most important information for a particular purpose.
- Extending and complementing information given in a passage by personal research. (For other more complex activities see Teacher’s Guide to Reading and Thinking in English Book 4).

It is the teacher's responsibility to grade these activities in order of progressive difficulty. Essay writing for instance, if there is to be such an exercise, should come last in the list for the many demands it makes on the learner.

What has just preceded is a somewhat schematic view of an English literature class for 1st year students. What must be borne in mind is that quite often parts B and D vis Comprehension and Interpretation often overlap and interlace as I have already implied.

What also needs to be said is that the overall approach if it is to be thorough and bring out to attention and appreciation all aspects of the text is to be an eclectic integrated approach combining with varying degrees of emphasis the 3 following approaches depending on the nature of the text studied, the immediate needs of the students, and the teacher's objectives.

1 – The Language Based Approach: which focuses attention essentially on language usage and use in the text. This approach attends carefully to the words on the page but there is some danger if we stop there, and leave out much of the “ideology” embedded in the text, the positioning of the writer, etc...

2 – The Information of Historical Based Approach which focusses on the writer, his life and the general context within which he lived and worked. This approach has the clear advantage of relating text to context. Even in the eyes of Language Based Approaches proponents it is a conventional but very valuable and necessary approach to literature study.

3 – The Personal Response Based Approach which draws attention on the reader's own response (intellectual as much as emotional) to the text. It gives the reader a free rein (within limits imposed from text) to his interpretation. In poetry I believe, this intuitive and impressionistic appreciation can find more easily its way into intellectual and emotional experience.

The three approaches combined are a way to bridge the gap between the so called “Aesthetic” and “Sociological” approaches to text and open the way to “literary competence” which is the literature teacher's ultimate goal. It should be stressed however that for the specific needs of First Year Students the Language Based Approach with its emphatic insistence on language structures and language use would be in many cases the most valuable approach.

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