A Wide-Based Approach to the Development of Literature Course

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Abstract

In this article it is argued that currently popular approaches to the teaching of literature are too narrow in their focus and do not do justice to the stimulating content of literary texts. In particular, learners are not shown how to develop an authoritative personal response to texts. For this reason, the teaching activities generated by language-based approaches need to be situated within a broader-based approach takes account of the different elements in a text that generate meanings and response. A number of categories for text analysis and exploitation are suggested as a framework for course development. The categories draw upon both language-based and text-based insights. It is argued that this approach can create conditions that will enable learners to perceive, and react to, the writer's semiotic intentions.

Introduction

Nothing could better reflect the present upsurge of interest in teaching literature in the EFL/FSL environment than the simultaneous publication of editions of widely-read journals which are largely given over to the topic. The fact that one was a UK publication: *ELTJ* Vol. 44/3, July 1990, and the other a US one: *English Teaching Forum* Vol. 28/3, July 1990, confirms the degree to which literature has been taken up by the international language teaching community. This situation renders redundant any further rehearsal of the arguments for justifying literary content in the context of English language studies (see Gwin, 1990 for a useful summary). Literature - a metaphor is perhaps contextually appropriate - has been granted citizenship status in the community, as the range of theoretical and practical articles in the above-mentioned journals makes clear. Furthermore, the rapid proliferation of coursebook titles is testament to the actual market demand for literature courses (for

example: Carter & Long, 1987; Clarke, 1989; Duff & Maley 1990; McRae & Pantaleoni 199; Tomlinson, 1989).

Current Approaches

Now, while it is true that literature is definitely considered to be worthy of inclusion as subject content for language and teacher training courses, what is still far from clear is the best approach for its exploitation. The recent trend towards courses based on approaches derived from linguistic models, or the desire to expand students' cultural background by exposing them to a wide variety of texts, reflecting different historical periods, movements and genres, threatens to undermine the very basis for using literature in ELT: the potential of literary texts to provide study material that is of tremendous interest and appeal, and the eagerness of learners to engage in activities that will enable them to locate and articulate their own personal responses to texts. Furthermore, this learner engagement in the

process of releasing meanings in texts has immense benefits from the point of view of developing language competence.

Imaginative Approach

One can currently distinguish three main lines of approach to the development of literature courses. The first, well-represented by the ideas of Collie and Slater (1987) and Ibsen (1990), sees literature as an excellent launchpad for development of a wide range of imaginative activities, that can promote both students' ability to relate and respond to the text, and the development of their language skills. To take just one example from the wealth of ideas put forward by Collie & Slater (1987) : dramatic highlights of a story, or novel, can be exploited as a basis for creative writing, in which students are required to write conversations between characters that do not actually occur in the writer's text, but relate to the dramatic situation as it has been developed. Alternatively, learners can be asked to imagine that they are a character in the text, and write a letter to another character, describing dramatic scenes or events which that character was not directly involved in. Another popular idea is to use the context of the literary work as a basis for developing role play or drama activities, where students take the part of characters from the fiction in a new, imaginative setting. Alongside these creative ideas for exploiting the literary work, one finds recommendations for using more routine questioning techniques to check students' basic understanding of the story, though even this work can be given a creative twist by requiring students to read different sections of a text and then piece together the events in a jigsaw group activity.

While not wishing to suggest that these types of activities will not aid students' ability to become interested in the fictional world of the text, or develop their language skills in an engaging and creative way, one cannot avoid the feeling that this line of approach somehow avoids the central issues that pertain to any meaningful treatment of literary content. A text must be analysed if readers are to be allowed to interact with it so as to arrive at an informed individual response, and understand the way in which it has been crafted by the writer. An approach that is so purposefully tangential to the substance of the experience of literature, in terms of lack of text analysis, is inevitably going to be frustrating for teachers and students. If a course is to foster some minimum level of literary engagement, then it needs to focus on the semiotic intentions of the writer,

as expressed through various aspects of the text, and the readers response to the text in the light of their cultural and personal experience.

Second Approach

The second line of approach to literature courses is to devise activities which promote greater interest in the actual literary texts themselves. Courses like Reading Literature (Gower & Pearson 1986) do create more of a connection between activity and text content. However, a closer scrutiny of the range and nature of activities in these courses reveals an overriding concern with development of language skills, and the utilisation of activity types derived from straightforward language teaching courses, where subject content is rather arbitrarily defined. At the same time, the sheer diversity of literary texts which are either covered, or to which the activities outlined are supposed to be related, necessarily severely limits the possibilities for students to proceed beyond a superficial reaction to the texts. At times it seems that the underlying agenda of such courses is not really to develop students' response to texts, but rather to present literature as a kind of cultural artefact. The subtext of these courses is that it is incumbent on anyone who aspires to a high level of knowledge of the language to develop a historical overview of the development of English or American literary genres, literary movements and the major classic authors and their works. Many would see this guided tour approach to literature as being alarming, not only in terms of its cultural implications, but, more importantly, in terms of the experience of literature that it produces.

Careful text selection is the key to producing an interactive literary experience for learners who are not fully proficient in English. Exposure to a considerable variety of texts effectively closes down the possibility of learners making a personal response to literature. If texts chosen make too great demands of students, because they are unfamiliar with the contexts drawn upon, the archaic syntax/lexis employed or the themes explored, then the level of treatment through activities is bound to have little correspondence with the real functionings of the text in semantic terms. This situation can be avoided by judicious text selection that makes possible a progression from simple language-based activities to more sophisticated levels of text treatmet. If a literature course is to justify its name, then it must create conditions for a depth of learner familiarity with texts, which leads to knowledge of the various

levels of conscious and unconscious meaning stored in a writer's text, and the methods by which the writer has built up fictional representations of human experience. Interaction does necessitate commitment and involvement. It cannot be achieved by racing through a vast array of texts. As indicated above, with second language learnes it is essential to choose texts according to the criteria of the learners' level of language competence, their familiarity with particular cultural themes, and their interests and personal experience. Since a text is recreated with each new reader, such criteria cannot be ignored if students are ever to build up strategies for accessing their personal thoughts about literary texts.

Stylistic Approach

The third line of approach to the teaching of approach to the teaching of literature does focus more concentratedly on particular texts. However, the points of reference for text examination are almost exclusively derived from linguistic or language teaching models. The literary text is of interest in terms of its syntax, grammar, lexical patterning and special discourse features. As the activities in a coursebook like *The Web of Words* (Carter & Long 1987) make clear, the stylistic approach is centrally concerned with the way in which the language system is exploited in literary discourse. Awareness of language features, not the learners' ability to respond to a text in the light of their knowledge of language, the world and the patterning of the text's meanings, is the principal aim. As Brumfit & Carter, (1986:20) admit, the stylistic approach can only help to lay "... a basis for a fuller, understanding, appreciation and interpretation." Other commentators like Short and Candlin (1986) and Carter (1986) reinforce this view that the stylistic approach cannot deal in any full sense with the experience of literature, but only build up a sensitivity to the charaterstics of literary language in relation to language use in other discourse realms. So though such textual elements as the narrative structure and lexical collocations will be highlighted by the approach, this is carried out with a view to deepening knowledge of language, rather than developing a number of categories to access individual response to the writer's intentions. Carter (1986:110) makes this plain:

"... the use of linguistic models enables us to work on the literariness of texts rather than on texts as literature."

The need for a wider approach

It seems, therefore, that the lines of approach

currently being adopted to the development of literature courses are too narrow. They do not produce the kind of engagement and analysis, which both the stimulating content of the appropriately selected texts, and the willingness of students to make personal responses, demand. Of course, the insights and methodology of language-based approaches must be included in any wider framework for text analysis; but equally the work of such seminal figures as Barthes (1974) who has looked at literature from a semiotic perspective so as to better understand the dynamics of the process by which a reader assigns meanings to particular texts, cannot be ignored. Even at a fairly rudimentary level of text engagement, a methodological framework needs to reflect the multiple layers of signification in the text. Such an approach, as will be seen below, can provide the learners with a variety of ways in which to analyse a text. By developing an awareness of the levels at which a text speaks, the learners will be able to access the writer's conscious and unconscious intentions, and relate the writer's fictional representations to their own experience, schematic knowledge and system of values. A wide-angled approach, that reflects the experience of the literary content, as well as the insights from linguistic models, also makes possible a far wider spectrum of activities that can be utilised in a literature course.

Categories for text analysis

The following categories for text analysis could be used as the basis for developing a literature course in relation to prose fiction:

1. the plot and sub-plot structures;

2. the key dramatic scenes in the fiction;

3. the success of the story in creating interest/ suspense;

4. the presentation of the characters and their relationships;

5. the major themes of the text;

6. the writer's narrative techniques;

7. examination of the writer's language and the crafting of the text;

8. the writer's semiotic intentions;

9. the reader's response to the text.

It will be noticed that several of these categories overlap with the areas of focus in other approaches. A category like writer's language will inevitably draw on

the kind of analysis encouraged by the stylistic model. Similarly, analysis of the creation of suspense will parallel the attention of Collie & Slater (1987) to text highlights. However, the breadth of the category framework ensures that activity on a particular aspect of a text will also form part of a larger process of text treatment. Furthermore, this framework provides both learners and teachers with a methodological structure for developing creative, text-rooted responses.

Initial phase

At the early stages of a course, it is highly probable that students who have little background in reading literature. or whose level of language proficiency demands skills development activities, will not be ready to be exposed to a course developed out of the framework outlined above. For these students (and they may represent the majority in many institutions), there must be a phased introduction to literary activities. In this initial phase, low-level sensitization to the basic constituents of the experience of a literary text and some of the most obvious features of the writer's style are combined with activities that use textual interest as a means to develop language skills. The following categories can be used to structure this course phase:

1. activating students' relevant knowledge and personal experience;

2. understanding the basic facts in the text;

3. making predictions about the plot and subject matter;

4. making inferences about the setting and characters.

5. simple character study;

6. examination of the most obvious characteristics of the writer's style;

7. exploiting the literary content and context to develop language skills.

This initial phase will therefore prepare the learner for the more extended and focussed category analysis in the second phase of the course. The actual depth of treatment of categories in both phases will depend to some extent on the text chosen. Some texts may, for example, give greater prominence to relationships between characters than the twists and turns of an intricate plot. However, this problem can be overcome through a balanced selection of texts, since all categories need not be trated in equal depth in each unit of a course. Generally speaking, modern texts will be more suitable for language students since they feature contemporary forms of expression and interaction. Also, as already mentioned, they generally provide more interesting and comprehensible themes and settings.

Sample activities

The limitations of this article prevent the presenting of texts and materials that can illustrate all the afore mentioned framework categories. However, in the appendix some activities which appear at the beginning of the initial phase of a course are presented. The activities relate to the opening three paragraphs of a short story by John Cheever: The Hartleys. It is hoped this sample gives some indication of the possibilities of a wide-based approach to literature course development.

The Author

George Murdoch is a British Council Adviser to the Department of English Education in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He is working on the development of a new BEd syllabus and is writing materials for the literature modules of this course. He has previously worked in Oman, Kuwait, France, Iran and Morocco. He has written a number of articles on course and materials design. George Murdoch holds an M.A. in Literature from Cambridge University and an M.A. in Language and Literature in Education from The Institute of Education, London University.

APPENDIX : SAMPLE MATERIAL

Extract from 'The Hartleys' by John Cheever. (Paragraphs 1-3) (text Appendix Page v)

Warming-up

Before you read the extract, decide if you agree or disagree with these statements:

1. Holidays are always the happiest times in people's lives.

2. Holidays often create tensions and arguments among members of a family.

3. It is good for a child to be very attached to his or her parents.

4. When a couple run into relationship difficulties, they should try to recreate the good time they enjoyed together in the past.

5. The concept of holidays is universal to people of all cultures.

Text Reading

Read the extract from the short story, 'The Hartleys'.

Basic Facts

Complete the following statements related to the text.

1. The Hartleys came to the inn by_____

2. The daughter is_____years-old.

3. This is Mr. & Mrs. Hartleys_____stay at the inn.

4. Mrs. Hartley and her daughter were very_____when they arrived.

5. _____met the Hartleys on arrival.

Plot

Arrange the following list of jumbled plot events into the correct fictional time order.

1. Mr. Hartley signed the inn register.

2. The Hartleys arrived at the inn after their journey from New York.

3. They ate supper.

4. The Hartleys had a very difficult car journey.

5. Mr. & Mrs. Hartley stayed at the inn for the first time.

Inference/Character Study

Answer the following questions. Give evidence from the text to support your answer.

1. Where is this story set?

2. What season is it?

3. Why do people come to the inn at Pemaquoddy?

4. Who do you feel is the most dominant member of the Hartley family?

5. Which character seems to be presented most sympathetically by the author?

Prediction

After reading the first three paragraphs of 'The Hartleys', which of the following summaries of the story development seems most probable?:

1. The Hartley family have lots of amusing adventures.

2. There are a lot of arguments between Mr. & Mrs. Hartley.

3. The Hartleys have another wonderful holiday.

4. A tragic accident takes place.

5. Ann Hartley develops into a junior ski champion.

Vocabulary Development

a)   *Complete these word molecules by writing words in the circle that you associate with the word in the centre. The first one is completed as an example.*
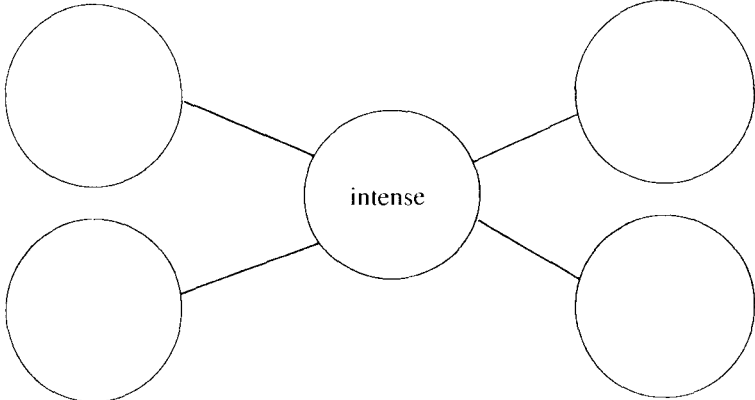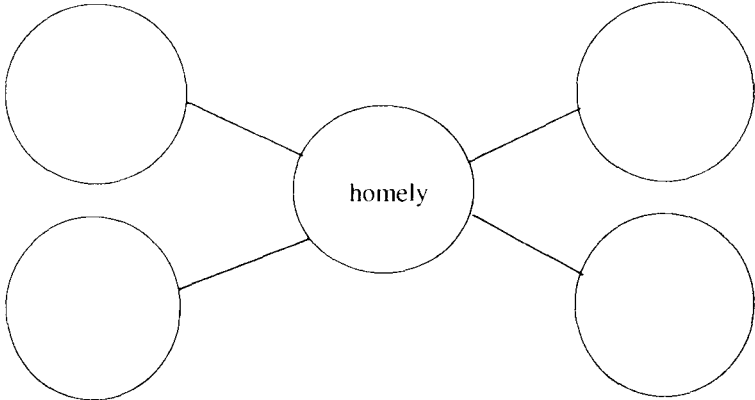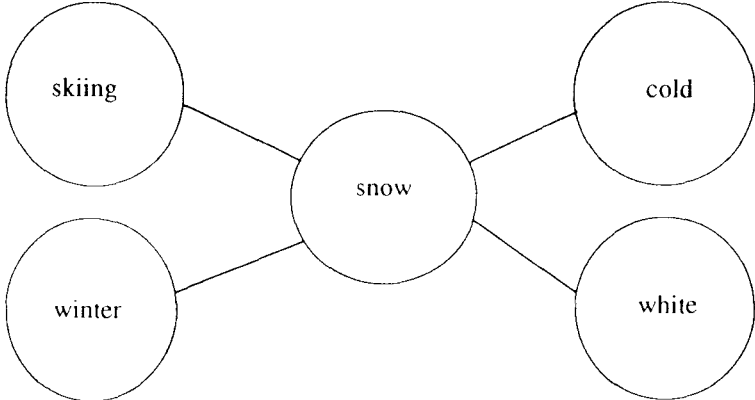
b)   *Make a list of words or phrases in the text that describe people's feelings. Then add as many words as you can to the list.*

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Imaginative Extension

Using your own imagination, write a short dialogue (not more than 10 lines) which takes place between the Hartleys during their drive to the inn.

Writer's Language

1. Underline all the verbs in the first pargraph of the extract. What tense is used most frequently by the writer? Do the verbs used describe mostly actions or static conditions?

2. Does the writer use long sentences? What effect is created by the length of the sentences in the last eight lines of the paragraph?

3. What information do we know about the Hartleys after reading the first three paragraphs of the story? If Cheever had wanted to make our relationship with the characters more intimate, what information could he have provided?

4. Which verbal phrase makes us doubt the surface impression of one of the characters?

5. Mark the pronouns in paragraph 3. How do they contribute to the writer's easy-to-read style? What other features help the reader to process this text easily?

THE HARTLEYS

MR. AND MRS. HARTLEY and their daughter Anne reached the Pemaquoddy Inn, one winter evening, after dinner and just as the bridge games were getting under way. Mr. Hartley carried the bags across the broad porch and into the lobby, and his wife and daughter followed him. They all three seemed very tired, and they looked around them at the bright, homely room with the gratitude of people who have escaped from tension and danger, for they had been driving in a blinding snowstorm since early morning. They had made the trip from New York, and it had snowed all the way, they said. Mr. Hartley put down the bags and returned to the car to get the skis. Mrs. Hartley sat down in one of the lobby chairs, and her daughter, tired and shy, drew close to her. There was a little snow in the girl's hair, and Mrs. Hartley brushed this away with her fingers. Then Mrs. Butterick, the widow who owned the inn, went out to the porch and called to Mr. Hartley that he needn't put his car up. One of the men would do it, she said. He came back into the lobby and signed the register.

He seemed to be a likable man with an edge to his voice and an intense, polite manner. His wife was a handsome, dark-haired woman who was dazed with fatigue, and his daughter was a girl of about seven. Mrs. Butterick asked Mr. Hartley if he had ever stayed at the Pemaquoddy before. "When I got the reservation," she said, "the name rang a bell."

"Mrs. Hartley and I were here eight years ago February," Mr. Hartley said. "We came on the twenty-third and were here for ten darys. I remember the date clearly because we had such a wonderful time." Then they went upstairs. They came down again long enough to make a supper of some leftovers that had been kept warm on the back of the stove. The child was so tired she nearly fell asleep at the table. After supper, they went upstairs again.

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