TEFLIN 2012







English Language Learning and Teaching in the Digitization Era

Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya 6 - 8 November 2012









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English Language Learning and Teaching in the Digitization Era

Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya 6 - 8 November 2012

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READING BETWEEN AND BEYOND THE LINES

Davy Budiono & Antonius Gurito

ABSTRACT

EFL students and teacher candidates may face difficulty in both providing materials and constructing inferential and analytical questions. This article discusses the use of suitable literary texts as the materials for teaching reading comprehension. This article begins with the discussion of the advantages of using literary texts in teaching reading comprehension. It is followed by a short description on how literary texts can be used to develop critical thinking in teaching reading comprehension by training the students to develop the skills of reading between and beyond the lines. However, teachers of English must keep in mind that the communicative aspects of language learning should be kept in focus as individual answers may arise in class.

Key words: literary texts, reading between the lines, reading beyond the lines

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the materials of language teaching, there are always elements of literature for it is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching. In fact, in language teaching, literature can help the students master the vocabulary and the grammar of the language as well as developing the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A number of activities that involve the students' application of these skills can be developed by employing literary works in language teaching.

It was not until recently that narrative literary texts are still considered inappropriate to be used as teaching material. A number of teachers claimed that reading narrative literary texts is wasting time, as it does not display the latest up-to-date information like scientific and popular texts do, while others argued that narrative literary texts bring confusion in understanding the contents or even in finding the subject matter of what the texts are about. Actually, narrative literary texts offer a lot of advantages in reading comprehension teaching compared to other reading materials. Seeing that the current materials for reading comprehension are lacking of literary texts, in this paper, we suggest teachers of English give literary texts a bigger portion. The teachers can use narrative literary works, like short stories as the material in reading comprehension classes.

WHY LITERARY TEXTS?

Stern (1987:47) claimed that literary texts offer many advantages to be used as reading comprehension materials. Linguistically, literary texts can help the students to improve their reading comprehension besides helping them to acquire new vocabularies within the texts. Culturally, literary texts provide the knowledge and understanding of others' cultures within the content of the texts. And personally, literary texts help the students to gain better understanding with themselves as individuals as well as their relationships with the people around them, making them to be more mature and thoughtful readers.

The first advantage of using literary texts is language proficiency improvements. Iser (1978:147) also claimed that all elements of literature, plot, character, setting, and theme, can help the students to promote their reading comprehension. Those elements present special challenges to readers for they are demanded to put into practice their specific reading strategies.

The second advantage is that literary texts are enjoyable. This is in line with the affective theory claiming that learning process would be easier if learners enjoy what they learn. Literary texts are supposed to give pleasure to students because they mainly deal with interesting human issues. High School students will be more interested in narrative passages, for an instance, rather than the scientific ones. When students like what they read, comprehension will be easier to be achieved because unconsciously they will develop reading habit when they enjoy the material.

Literary texts can also help the students understand the culture of the target language and of the native language. The students will be able to understand how different cultures perceive something differently and what values are considered to be universal. Carter and Long (1991:2)

stated that literature expresses the most significant ideas and sentiments of human beings and teaching literature represents a means by which students can be put in touch with a range of expression, often of universal value and validity, over historical periods. Displaying a literary text within a cultural model enables the students to understand and appreciate the differences of cultures and ideologies.

Finally, reading literary texts encourages the students' mental growths. When the students are able to appreciate and understand cultural ideologies, they will realize how they function within their society and culture. The students are expected to be able to formulate their own philosophical concepts based on their experiences. The collective experiences of human beings lie in the literary texts. Brumfit (1979: 119) stated that the process of reading is a process of meaning creation by integrating one's own needs, understanding, and expectations with a written text.

LITERARY TEXTS IN READING COMPREHENSION

According to Mary, Reading is an activity of getting meanings out from printed or written materials. It can be inferred that reading, as an activity of inferring meanings, is a thinking or a cognitive process because, in getting meanings, one is obliged to use his mind (Finocchiaro, 1974:77).

Comprehension, according to Kennedy (1981:41), is the ability of the students to find analyze, understand, and interpret ideas. In comprehending a written text the students have to connect their new knowledge with the existing knowledge and facts in the text.

There are certain factors that have essential roles in reading comprehension. They are the understanding of the vocabulary and the understanding of the main ideas. When these factors are fulfilled reading comprehension will progress smoothly as the students will not find any difficulties in relating their new acquired knowledge with their background knowledge.

Literary texts are written works of art. That is how the discussion on the context of interpretation of literary texts, unlike ordinary reading text where there is only one possible interpretation to be found is polyinterpretable meaning that there is no single meaning for the interpretation from a single literary text. An interpretation of a literary text may differ from an individual to another. The difference in interpretation is caused by individual perception and experience that influence in understanding a particular context. Of course, there is only a single meaning in a literary text's plain sense or what is written literally, but there is plurality of meanings in its implications or what is beyond the text.

READING BETWEEN AND BEYOND THE LINES

Reading between and beyond the lines means trying to understand what is meant by something that is not written explicitly or openly in the text. Reading requires some basic skills. One of them is the ability to find out what the text is about, what the writer is saying, and the reason he says so. The answers to the first two questions have to be correct and the reader has to make some analysis in answering the third question.

To find out what the writer is saying in the text, three levels of reading can be observed:

- 1. Reading along the lines
- 2. Reading between the lines
- 3. Reading beyond the lines

Reading along the lines is the earliest and is practiced by beginners. Bottom up or top down technique can be applied depending on the level of the students' language mastery (competence). When the level is low, bottom up is applied in which noun clusters, sentence patterns and subclauses are analyzed. When the level is intermediate ideas of the reading materials can be immediately dealt with lower level reading classes like Reading I and II and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) materials to non-English departments practice reading along the line most of the time.

The name of reading between the lines is misleading. In fact, there is only a blank space between the lines, but the term is used to show that some idea is not directly or explicitly but it is understood. Sensitivity is highly needed for this kind of reading which is quite suitable for higher level reading classes like Reading III and IV.

Below are sample quotes from several literary texts used in reading classes:

Quote 1: The child in school

The facts and the ideas in the palm can be traced back indirectly. It is time for the poor school boy to go home. The nature is so inviting. He would like to play. Unhappy feelings can also be identified in the use of the language.

- Quote 2: If things were better

The socio-economical condition of the speaker is indirectly concluded from the fact that which he was having "supper" he was surrounded by flies. He tried to be friends with the flies by promising to invite them to share his meals when "things were better".

Quote 3: O moon, why must you...

The speaker has not been able to sleep the whole night became of neighbor's "chirping" music on his fence. But what makes him frustrated is that probably he does not have the courage to confront his physically superior neighbor. Instead, he turns to the moon to complain.

- Quote 4: For Anne Gregory

Being young and inexperienced, Anne Gregory has a foolish notion that a young man falls in love with her "for myself alone" and not for "my yellow hair". To find that out, she wants to dye her hair from blond to relatively ugly colors such as brown or orange. But the cruel reality is that only God loves you for your personality not your physical beauty.

Reading between the lines is also done when a lecturer is explaining a text. Interpreting phrases and sentences and expressing the ideas contained in other words, phrases, or sentences are in fact reading between the lines. Of course, there is a limit: our interpretations or explanations can not "trespass". They should still be relevant to the meaning of the text. This "explication du texte" is frequently conducted by teachers of literary courses, especially narratives.

A dissatisfied wife may say about her husband: "My husband is a buffalo" to express her frustration. She does not mean literally. She wants her listeners to go "beyond the lines". Her husband is still a human being, but he has important qualities of a buffalo, such as being lazy, dirty, fat and stupid. However, she does not imply that her husband is having "horns'. The listeners should be intelligent enough to transfer only relevant qualities from the buffalo to the husband. A buffalo can impossibly be a husband. When we come across something impossible it must be a figure of speech, a symbol. We must find the meaning behind the literal word. We must go beyond the words meanwhile bearing in mind the main qualities of the figure of speech (lazy, dirty, fat and stupid). So we come to know the husband (the unknown) through the buffalo (the known). In fact, understanding a figure of speech is like "exploring the unknown through the known".

- Quote 5: I wish that my room had a floor

The first line suggest that the room does not have any floor, through there is a door for which the speaker does not so much care. A room without a floor is something impossible, something not understandable. When we come across with something impossible we have to look out. It must be a figure of speech or a symbol. We have inevitably to leave the literal meaning and go into the realm of figurative meaning. In other words we have to go beyond the literal line.

In the above poem the speaker says further that "this crawling around without touching the ground (the floor) is getting to be such a bore". He is fed up by the fact that his life has not been based on the floor. The floor then is quite easily interpreted by the reality of life".

How do we arrive at the interpretation of the floor as the reality of life? Because both have the same basic characteristics: both are concepts we can stand steadfastly on.

Quote 6: A decade

There have been a lot of misunderstandings concerning the terms imagery and figure of speech. An imagery is used when we express an abstract idea (e.g. intelligent) with a concrete term (straight As). A figure of speech, on the other hand, is also an imagery

(concrete) which is quite well-known to the reader or listener and of which the function is to explain the unknown through the known. Let us take for example a figure of speech taken from one of Joseph Conrad's novels: the face of the Chinese ship owner looks like an ancient lemon." We have here "the face of the Chinese ship owner", which is unknown to us and "an ancient lemon" which is known to us. We will try to get some pieces of information of the lemon such as oblong, wrinkled, unhealthily yellow, cheap, sour and transfer only the relevant qualities to the face of the ship owner. So we have a relatively clear picture of the face: a yellowish, oblong and wrinkled face of a Chinese ship owner. If we also transfer "cheap" and "sour", we are said to have no imagination.

In the poem A decade: A husband says that, ten years ago at their wedding, his wife looked as beautiful as red wine and as sweet as honey and when he kissed her his mouth burn with sweetness. In short, the husband was bewitched by his wife's physical beauty and sweetness.

That was the situation ten years ago, now she is like morning bread, meaning yesterday bread. We do not enjoy morning bread. We take it for granted just satisfy our hunger. But morning bread is, in spite of the fact that you hardly taste it, completely nourishing.

When the process of reading beyond the love is finished we set the following set of ideas: a marriage which begin with fascination (red wine, honey) should develop into psychological satisfaction and happiness (smooth, pleasant, completely nourished)

Quote 7: Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening.

When reading along the line is applied on this poem, only a very simple story is obtained. A man riding a horse stops in the middle of the wood to enjoy the fascinating beauty of nature. But it is cued, the lake nearby is frozen and it is "the darkest evening" of the year. The man seems to be unreasonable to stop "without a farm house near". The horse, on the other hand seems to be more reasonable. He shakes his bells as if asking whether it is not a mistake to stay there. The woods are still lovely and bewitching. But suddenly the man realizes that he has promises to keep and miles to go before he gets home.

This simple story which is obtained from reading along the lines is the literal meaning of the poem. Is the meaning of the poem that simple?

In this story, the horse does not seem to be a real horse; he seems to have some human qualities. He thinks it is queer to stop without a farm house near. Therefore, he shakes his it is queer to stop without a farm house near. Therefore, he shakes his it is queer to stop without a farm house near. Therefore, he shakes his harness bells "to ask if there is some mistakes." The horse turns out to be more intelligent than the man. So we might say that the horse is a symbol of common sense. If the horse is a symbol, the man, the woods, the promises and the miles are symbols too, and the result of reading beyond the lines is: A tired man wants to rest and enjoy life, but his common sense tells him it is not the right place or time to retire since he still has many duties to carry out and many years to live. The result of reading beyond the lines is called figurative meaning because we get the meaning by interpreting the figure of speech.

CONCLUSION

Using the literary texts as the materials in reading comprehension brings many advantages to the students. Firstly, it will make them improve their reading comprehension skills. Secondly literary texts introduce foreign cultures' aspects and ideas to the students. Finally, literary texts can develop the students into critical readers.

As the interpretation of literary texts stem from culture differences, it is imperative to the teacher that the students need additional guidance in getting the messages from the texts. However, the teacher should respect the individuality of the students' responses to a literary text. As the students build ease and confidence in their ability to read a literary text, they will gain useful knowledge that contain universal humanity values that can be applied in their lives.

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