

UNCERTAIN PLACES: CHALLENGING AND APPROPRIATING TEXTS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests some basic pedagogical principles which should be borne in mind when dealing with non-native students of English literature. They are presented as consistent with the various changes of paradigm concerning the nature of text and the reading process which have taken place in the last decades. The paper offers models, for developing critical awareness and for describing the reading process, which spring from the author's working definition of text. The concept of translation is examined in its potential benefits as a learning strategy connected with the idea of creative re-writing, and a related checklist of classroom activities is suggested.

KEY WORDS

Language, literature, text, pedagogy, reading.

RESUMEN

El artículo sugiere los principios pedagógicos básicos que deben tenerse en cuenta en las relaciones de enseñanza/aprendizaje con estudiantes de literatura inglesa cuya lengua nativa no es el inglés. Estos principios se presentan como consecuencia lógica de los cambios de paradigma que tanto el concepto de texto como el proceso de lectura han experimentado en las últimas décadas. El artículo plantea modelos para el desarrollo crítico de la lectura y para una adecuada descripción del proceso lector que emergen de la definición de texto propuesta por el autor. Asimismo, se explora el concepto de traducción en relación a sus beneficios potenciales como estrategia de aprendizaje en el marco de los ejercicios de reescritura creativa. Finalmente, se sugiere una lista abierta de actividades de clase en consonancia con los planteamientos expuestos.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Lengua, literatura, texto, pedagogía, lectura.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article propose les principes pédagogiques de base à considérer dans les rapports enseignement/apprentissage avec des étudiants de littérature anglaise dont la langue d'origine n'est pas l'anglais. Ces principes découlent logiquement des changements de paradigme qu'ont subis les dernières décennies aussi bien le concept de texte que celui de lecture. De la définition de texte avancée par l'auteur, résultent des modèles pour le développement critique de la lecture et pour une description pertinente du processus qui lui est propre. Le concept de traduction est lui aussi exploré, en raison des avantages potentiels qu'il offre en tant que stratégie d'apprentissage dans le cadre des exercices de réécriture créative. Une liste ouverte d'activités de classe est enfin présentée, en corrélation très étroite avec les hypothèses défendues.

MOTS-CLÉ

Langue, littérature, texte, pédagogie, lecture.

When they are in the position of lacking full linguistic competence in their L2, readers share a general tendency to develop an attitude of over-deference towards texts which are presented to them as holding the status of "literature". Too often we have accorded certain mystical privileges to the term Literature (this is usually seen in university departments where teachers of literature become the theologians of English Studies who deal with big theoretical issues while lesser teachers, that is teachers of language or composition, are left with the job of parish priests in carrying out the routines of daily practice). In the case of students of a foreign language this preconception is further reinforced by the traditional assumption that the teacher's job has to do with hermeneutics, that is to say, that it is for the teacher to produce the right interpretation of the sacred texts. The combined effect of this prejudice results in students approaching texts of foreign literature with a depressing attitude which consists of doses of over-deference and passivity in equal parts. In these circumstances our pedagogical interaction, which should be directed at producing TEXT-ASY, is likely to produce TEXT-ICIDE which is the sure sign of frustration in teacher and student alike.

This is a point which should be extended beyond the foreign language classroom since it is at the very heart of a common and general concern in education. Years ago Robert Scholes (1985, p. 16) put it

in terms which have become more and more relevant with the passing of time:

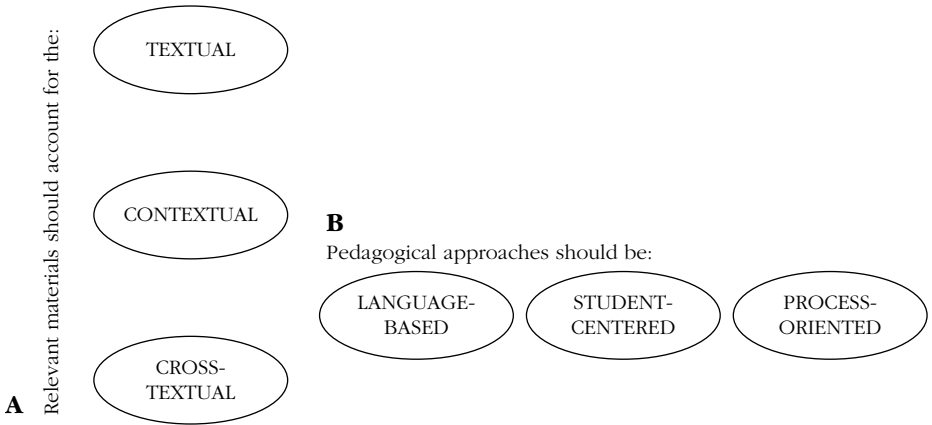
In an age of manipulation when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts.

To oppose the harmful effects of reverence, over-deference, and passivity before literary texts in a foreign language we should activate, as much as possible, the potential for awareness which should be, to begin with, both linguistic and literary. Linguistic awareness and literary awareness are instrumental in developing the kind of awareness that matters: critical awareness. The “challenging” and the “appropriating” of my title can only be met with critical awareness. To achieve this crucial aim I propose a model that accounts for two interrelated axes which define the field of our concerns. Axis A follows what Pope (1995) has called the “three movements and moments of intervention” and focuses, ultimately, on the relevant materials for classroom practice. Axis B follows suggestions by Carter (1991, p. 11) on what he considers the relevant pedagogical concerns in classroom interaction (see diagram on next page).

When confronting a literary text in a foreign language one should bear in mind these six focal points if we want to equip students with the means to “open up” the text and make it their own. It might not always be easy to account for all of them but we should intend to activate as many as possible in our presentation of texts. Text awareness is the vital step leading to critical awareness and it might often be enough to focus on “language” and “context” to turn the reading of a certain text into a meaningful exercise in critical understanding.

But to account for the other three focal points (cross-textual, student-centred and process-oriented), more is needed. If we really want students to assert their power over the texts rather than become passive consumers of canonical literature a shift of emphasis is needed. What I propose is to see our discipline in terms of “Textual Studies in English” rather than “English Language and Literature”. In our situation, what is probably required is a new project, the change of direction in English studies which Scholes (1998:103) has defined as a reconstruction of our syllabi away from a canon of texts and toward a canon of methods. In other words, most texts will do if we apply to them ped-

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THE READING OF LITERARY TEXTS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE



agogical approaches that put the student at the centre and are used as a springboard for engaging the learner in an active reading process.

But, how can this set of perceptions be turned into strategies for literary studies? How can we engage students with critical and creative practices consistent with the assumptions mentioned so far? My modest proposal is that we should involve students in creative re-writing (which implies “doing” things to texts, changing them, *trans-lating* them in some way or another) as the most effective way of confronting, challenging and ultimately appropriating what is initially presented to them as “literature in a foreign language”. Our submissive reader of English literature can then become a critical reader of textuality in English. And climbing this further step is where the crucially educational role of literary studies lies in our curricula. In doing this, we may have offered our students some guidance in learning how to understand their world and survive in it and, hopefully, they should end up better equipped to criticise it and try to improve it.

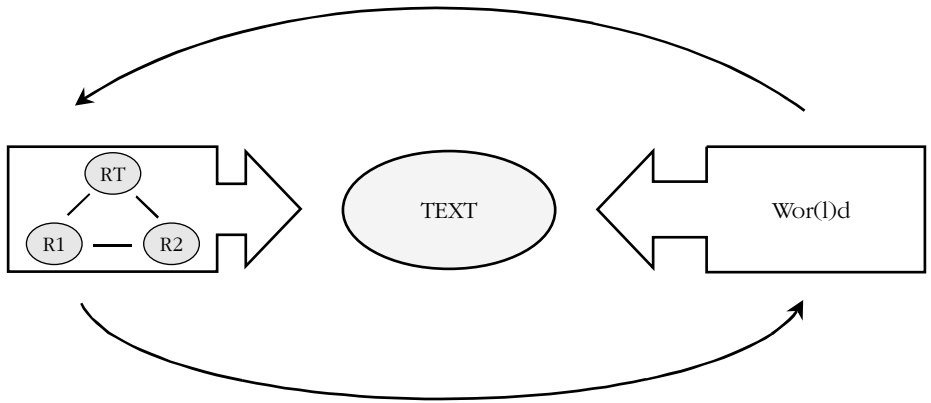
Having set up the ultimate aim in teaching English literature to EFL students in these terms, it is necessary to work on the basis of some “working” definition of the very concept of Text, which has become central in our current perceptions of art and literature at the end of a long debate on the nature of what McRae (1991, p. 5) has called “representational” language. Cunningham (1995, p. 5) has reassessed this ontological issue suggesting that the shifts in emphasis can be traced

back following significant formulations of the same underlying question and mentions Tolstoy's *What is Art*, Sartre's *What is Literature?*, Jakobson's *What is Poetry?* as precedents leading to the recent concerns expressed by Derrida's or Ricoeur's in the key question: *What is Text?*. Cunningham's discussion helped me in finding a working definition of Text which has proved a useful and inspiring memo for my own classroom practice. It is the following: "Text is an uncertain place where words and worlds converge in human quest for meaning". This definition is, in fact, a reminder of the "stuff *words* are made on" and their particular communicative potential: words refer to worlds but new words create new worlds –new realities– in a dual process which is characterised by a constant interaction between textual rhetoricity (the language devices which are placed *inside* the text) and historicity (the referential links which place the reader *outside* the text).

There is now a broad consensus in addressing the issue of text along similar lines. It is, I believe, part of what would now be considered by most as the dominant paradigm in literary theory. The third of a series of stages which started with a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the XIXth century), was followed by an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism 1920s), and has given way to a marked shift of attention to the reader (Recent decades). Pedagogical approaches mirror developments in literary theory and the essential change can be formulated as a shift from teaching as an exercise in hermeneutics whereby the teacher interprets/reveals meaning to the learner, to teaching as an interactive process involving teacher, text, and learner, whereby meaning only becomes relevant as a result of active negotiation.

This set of assumptions is, I believe, consistent with the model which I developed in the early 1990s in order to describe The Reading Process and which is at the basis of the proposals I will make in connection with classroom practice when teaching literature to students whose first language is not English (see diagram on next page).

This diagram tries to represent the various interactions involved in the process of reading in a classroom situation. It shows, first of all, the basic interaction between reader and text but allowing room for the several, and probably different, readings (responses, interpretations) that will occur. The teacher's reading is supposed to interact with the students', but it is given some pyramidal prominence in order to indicate s/he's expected to stimulate personal responses but also to avoid



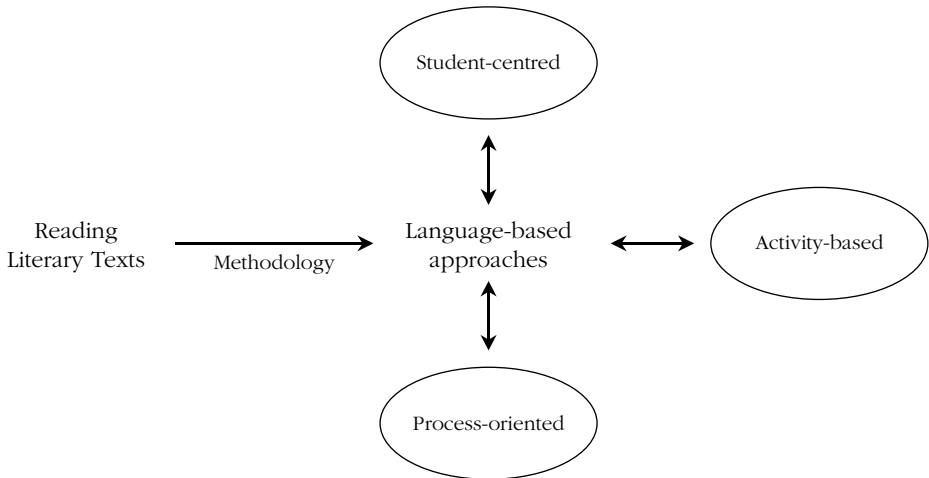
absurd interpretations that cannot be based on reasonable evidence from the text.

All the readings, including the teacher's are included in the same arrow to show how they do depend not only on the actual wording of the text but, to a great extent, on their knowledge of the world which will account for a lot of assumptions, preconceptions and expectations about the very text. But the relationship which is established between readers, text and the world works two ways, and hence the two arrows. The lower one signalling how the readers' perception of the text is, as it were, "filtered" by their previous knowledge or experience of the world and the upper arrow suggesting how it is precisely through text and reading that we shape our perceptions, our growing awareness, of the world and hence the brackets in "world", a concept we basically apprehend through "words".

If we look at the practice of teaching through an analogy with the practice of cooking I would say that we, the cooks, have to start whatever dish with the same two basic ingredients: text and student. These are our two areas of intervention. In the Textual area we have to promote awareness connected with three different levels of competence: linguistic, pragmatic, and literary competence. This initial intervention can be greatly reinforced by providing students with clues and resources from other areas. That is, by moving from the Textual to the Contextual and Crosstextual. To discuss what is implied by these two concepts is beyond the aim of this paper but a detailed account of a case in point for classroom practice can be found in Berga (1999). The relevant point, though, is that one realises the extent to which artistic creativity is connected to the exercise of re-writing in literary tradition

by simply gathering the diverse contextual and crosstextual materials about a given text. As Lodge (1992, p. 98) put it "...intertextuality is the very condition of literature (...) all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not." If every new text has inevitably a pre-text, every creative re-writing brings about a fuller understanding of the pre-text and new layers of meaning are added to the new version of the product. It is with this awareness of what is rooted at the very core of artistic creativity that we –teachers and students alike– may feel more confident in following methodologies based on what Pope (1995) has appropriately called "Textual Intervention".

But let us now consider the second basic ingredient in our cooking: the student. If we are to be consistent with all the theoretical assumptions stated so far we have to put the student at the centre of the whole process, side by side with the text. In other words, our methodologies have to find ways of matching our textual concerns with the concern for giving students their due role as active readers. I have always found very useful the following diagram in which I tried to summarise Ronald Carter's (1991, p. 11) clear and perceptive views on this issue:



Now, teachers bearing in mind all these assumptions and concerns will find imaginative ways in developing pedagogically sound strategies in their classrooms. But the sort of technique which I found most satisfactory in accounting for all the theoretical rationales I have outlined

in this paper can be explained in these terms: what we actually do in a classroom situation has always been a question of **Transmission** and **Transaction**. To open up texts, to let students assert their power over them and to challenge and appropriate those texts, to let them be active readers critically aware of the processes involved in producing literature, to make them feel that it is “their” responsibility to negotiate and construct the meaning of those texts... In order to account for all of these engaging possibilities we have to encourage a third process, a third T,: **Transformation**. To appropriate a text, to read deeply into it, readers of literature in a foreign language have traditionally resorted to my fourth T, **Translation**.

Translation has been the obvious way, for foreign readers, to enter a text and it is, no doubt, a powerful and most useful exercise in reading. But in the area of our concerns Translation should be seen as just one of the many manifestations which derive from the more general concept of Transformation. In my experience the most effective way to see how a text works is to change it in some way or another. The very act of doing something “to” a text establishes a dialogic situation. And, after all, some degree of transference is always needed in any human communication. As George Steiner (1998, p. 49) has put it “a human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a message from any other human being”. We live “between” languages (even inside our “own” language) and Steiner simply carries the argument to its logical conclusion when he states that “a study of translation is a study of language”. It is in the process of consciously changing a text that we become fully aware of what the original contains. This is what Jorge Luis Borges (1976, p. 89) was hinting at when he wrote that “*Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción. (...) La traducción parece destinada a ilustrar la discusión estética*” (“No problem is as completely concordant with literature and with the modest mystery of literature as is the problem posed by a translation. (...) Translation seems destined for aesthetic discussion”). And this is closely related to Robert Frost’s famous definition of poetry: “Poetry is what gets lost in translation”. In translating between languages –that is in creative re-writing– deep reading occurs and out of this intense dialogue between writer and reader a new text is born. There is no doubt in my mind that this creative strategy produces a critical awareness which allows students to challenge and appropriate literary texts on their own terms.

The concept of Translation is to be seen, therefore, as a learning strategy, a technique in Re-Writing with no mechanical meaning attached to it but with the full consciousness that any translation implies an act of creative re-writing. That is why I like to point out the several operations which are open to us from the initial drive of translating (carrying something from one place to another as implied in the Spanish “*trasladar*”) from one language to another: **Version... Con-version... Di-version... Per-version?**

I shall conclude with a checklist with activities adapted from Carter & Long (1991) and Pope (1995; 1998), both, seminal works in considering the benefits of rewriting exercises in teaching literature. They are presented as exercises in *translation* and have proved, in actual practice, most stimulating and effective in reaching the goals I set myself in teaching literature to non-native speakers of English. They are applied in this case to a course on British Drama and I call them “Some Ideas for Creative Writing (Re-Writing) and Commentary”:

ALTERNATIVE SUMMARIES AND THE ARTS OF PARAPHRASE

Summarise the play in a variety of ways so as to draw attention to different aspects of its preoccupations or construction. For instance, a series of summaries varying between a phrase, a sentence, 50 words, and 100 words can be very revealing in establishing what you consider progressively more or less central in terms of themes, events, characters, strategies, etc. Alternatively you might “paraphrase” the text drawing on critical discourses: Marxist, Feminist, Psychological, Post-structuralist, Post-colonialist, etc.

CHANGED TITLES, STAGE DIRECTIONS, OPENINGS

Intervene in these areas of the play so as to disturb and reorient them. Aim to cue the reader (or the audience) for a slightly or very different reading (or performance): one with slightly (or very) different expectations as to centre of interest, characters’ point of view, etc.

ALTERNATIVE ENDINGS

Alter the ending of the play so as to draw attention to some option not explored or in some way foreclosed. Go on to explore the reasons

why such an ending was not desirable, advisable or possible in the text at its initial moment of production. Then consider why you, in your moment of reproduction, opted for it. Notice that this is an opportunity to explore historical differences and not simply express personal preferences.

PRELUDES, INTERLUDES AND POSTLUDES

Extend the play *before*, *during* or *after* the events it represents so as to explore alternative points of departure, process of development, or points of arrival.

NARRATIVE INTERVENTION

Change some *turning point* in the play so as to explore alternative premises or consequences. Consider ways of re-framing the action so that the very process of narration is reoriented (e.g. by adding another character).

TURN DRAMA INTO NARRATIVE

Rewrite the play as a short-story, as the personal diary of one of the characters, as a newspaper report, etc.

IMITATION / PARODY

Rewrite a scene in the characteristic style and form of a particular author, director, period or genre: Osborne “in the manner of” Churchill, etc.

HYBRIDS AND FACTIONS

Recast two or more related plays/characters in a new textual mould so as to produce a compound. Combine conventionally *fictional* materials and *factual* information to produce a *hybrid* –a piece of *faction*.

WORD TO IMAGE, WORD TO MUSIC, WORD TO MOVEMENT, WORD TO GRAPHIC DESIGN, WORD TO...?

Verbal text can be revealingly transformed into another medium, sign-system or mode of communication and expression. Translation into

another medium always entails a *Transformation*, never merely a *Transference*.¹

AND REMEMBER: “It is always the business of your commentary to make the implications, the failures or shortcomings, of whichever critical-creative process you embark upon explicit and well-informed”.

Following Pope, these are the guidelines I offer to my students as a source for ideas to re-write, to appropriate, the core-texts of the course. In my experience they have always proved useful in activating the three focal points in my Axis B (they are inevitably based on language analysis; students monitor their own means and goals; and they certainly produce powerful insights into the process of literary creativity). Getting involved in these processes, that is in translating between languages, EFL students can negotiate meaning in their own terms and become, therefore, better equipped to explore critically those “uncertain places where words and worlds converge in human quest for meaning”.

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¹ Some of my students once chose to turn Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* into dance and music only. I consider the video they produced one of the most well researched and perceptive “essays” on that particular short story.